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## **Introduction**

Good morning.

There are 33,185,550 small businesses in the United States. Small businesses employ 61.7 million Americans, totaling 46.4% of private sector employees. Across the country, they are closing because they can't staff their operations.

There were approximately 7 million people with intellectual or developmental disabilities in the United States in 2019. Of those, 19% or 1.4 million people received at least one long-term support or service in addition to case management and 80% of them are needlessly unemployed.

My name is Iva Walsh. I am the mother of four adult children including 25-year-old Maeve, who lives with Down Syndrome. Since Maeve's birth I have spent my life heavily involved in education and advocacy, paving the road not only for my daughter but for others with intellectual and developmental disabilities, hereafter referred to as IDD's. I have fought for every educational opportunity I could get for Maeve and have dedicated my life to continuing the discovery and creation of opportunities that will make Maeve a successful person and a productive member of society.

I was forced to become a small business owner because other business owners were unable to provide a workplace in which Maeve and others like her could succeed. When she was an early teen, we began a business called Maeve's Pretty Face in which we, with Maeve's active participation, created beauty lotions and soaps, manufactured them, packaged them and sold them.

In 2003, Maeve was the very first child with a developmental disability to ever attend Margaretville Central School where she graduated with a certification of completion in 2016. When Maeve finished her formal education at school it became apparent that we needed to do more; not just for Maeve but for others who have IDD's in the rural Catskill Mountain region of New York State.

So, I opened Maeve's Place, a small dine-in or take-out coffee shop serving breakfast and lunch and selling retail gift items in Pine Hill, NY. We outgrew our first space and expanded with a new shop in Phoenicia, NY. Today Maeve's Place employs 9 employees, 2 of whom are individuals with learning and developmental disability. We are connected with dozens of agencies in the region and seek others with IDD's who are eager to be trained for and accept jobs in our region.

Our coffee shop presents an array of job opportunities including kitchen support staff, Handling prep work, slicing ingredients, making juices, baking, and portioning using a scale. Counter work includes processing sales, handling money and customer service. Our employees take care of price labeling, keeping inventory, and also branding our paper to go bags and food containers.

I was asked to speak directly about the vital and growing workforce for people with disabilities and to examine the role that entrepreneurs and employees with disabilities play in the workforce. What can we do better? What do we need? How can we empower employees with disabilities in the workplace?

In my experience with Maeve and my experience as an entrepreneur, I have discovered the incredible benefits of working with people who have IDD's. I have also discovered the daunting obstacles that prevent most employers from engaging these people in their operations and I can tell you how you could eliminate some of those obstacles and help these people become productive members of a society in desperate need of qualified and dedicated workers.

## **Testimony**

Maeve's Place coffee shop is located in Phoenicia, a small hamlet of 300 people, in Ulster County of New York State. About 120 miles north of NYC in the Catskill Mountains. Our story begins when we moved up here in 2003, where Maeve joined Margaretville Central School to start her education at 5 years old. Maeve was the first child with Down Syndrome to ever enroll into our school district. As a team, we worked very closely with the school to make sure Maeve's

education was as mainstream as possible and always pushed for her inclusion. She received a certificate of completion from MCS in 2016 at 18 years old.

Our entrepreneurial mission began while she was in school trying to plan ahead for her future. What do we do once the school bus stops coming? Where will Maeve work? Which job opportunities are available and accessible to her? Which skills has she learned during school which are applicable to joining the workforce? Will she succeed and will she feel fulfilled in life?

And that's why we're here. If our kids can imagine themselves in the workforce, then why can't the workforce imagine having them? Earning your own way promotes self-esteem, independence, and all-around growth. There's a feeling to be had when you know that "I make my own money."

But the obstacles to work for both the employer and the employee are immense. There is a huge gap between school and starting a job for people with an IDD. For example, most high schoolers of the typical population experience work during weekends or summer jobs. People with an IDD do not have the same opportunity to do so. Employability skills should be taught and practiced at school before they go out into the world. They do not get to learn and experience many real work skills until and if they are hired somewhere. Most people struggle not only with the opportunity to work but also with access to transportation due to the fact that many people with an IDD do not/cannot obtain their driver's license. Particularly in a small area like ours, public transportation is extremely limited.

Once an individual with an IDD graduates/finishes school they will begin to look for a job coach to help them navigate around their work needs. A job coach helps smooth the way from employment application to successful tenure by working with the individual on a regular basis. Unfortunately, job coaches are limited and not every individual will receive access to one. This is where businesses, owners, and employers play a role in offering work opportunities.

There are approximately 7 million people in the United States who have an intellectual or developmental disability with as many as 200 million on a global level. Of that population, 80%

who are of working age are unemployed. People with an IDD who are in the working 20% are employed under limiting conditions. Often times they are in positions with lower than minimum wages, limited customer exposure, receiving less work hours, and/or have asset and earned income limitations. They must learn skills for a job which may not have been adapted or modified for their disabilities along with navigating in a world with limited accessibility to information and aid. With a lack of pre-vocational work training and knowledge of available aid, this presents the employer with the task of fair hiring and long-term investments into their employee.

Under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, employers of workers with disabilities may receive a special certificate from the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division to pay less than the federal minimum wage. However, it puts no limit on how much less. A report in 2020 from the US Commission on Civil Rights showed that Americans with disabilities working at 14(c) certificated employers received less than half the federal minimum wage. At this wage rate, it makes no sense to overcome all the other employment hurdles out there.

Another obstacle to navigating a work life includes weighing out the options of working for an employer vs losing their supplemental security income. Keep in mind, there is a combined limit of how much SSI an individual receives plus their wages without losing their SSI.

The task falls onto small business owners like myself to adapt, think creatively, and lay down the path to change this. No one gave me a manual on the best way to tackle these issues. As an employer, there is no power point presentation outlining incentives for me to hire someone with an IDD. There is no cleared path for protocols on hiring and retaining your employees with IDD. There are biases in the hiring process from employers because they do not know the correct questions to ask, or what is available to them as an incentive such as a work opportunity credit.

Understandably, employers will pro & con each prospective employee. It is no surprise that many uneducated and inexperienced employers will have a stigma and predisposed judgment of individuals with IDD. Cost, efficiency, repeated training, and lack of on-hand job coaches for those who need them play a heavy role in the end decision. Many do not realize that making work available and giving the opportunity to those with an IDD is a win-win situation on many fronts.

We opened the coffee shop in 2017 with the sole purpose of giving Maeve a place to work and hoped that it would gain enough traction to be a place of employment for others in her similar situation. A few short years later, COVID-19 turned everyone's world upside down. During the midst of it all, we changed locations and reopened in late 2020. As a small business trying to survive during those years with increasing operating costs, increased costs of goods, and having a very limited work force it was not easy. Knowing that our mission would be to give employment opportunity to those with IDD's I had to consider every application coming into the door. Is the prospective employee able and willing to work? Is this an appropriate work environment? Will the success of the business be compromised or balanced for continued mission fulfillment? It is a daunting task.

While the obstacles to employing the IDD's can be daunting, the benefits are great for those who persevere. Statistics show IDD employees are grateful to have their jobs and demonstrate high work quality, motivation, attendance and loyalty that is second to none. What kind of worker is an individual with an IDD? I can speak to this directly from experience and will touch on some of my favorite and most valued characteristics of an employee who has an IDD. Employees who are happy in their jobs are likely to stay in those positions for much longer than their non-disabled peers. A 2018 study found that companies that hired adults with disabilities improved their employee retention and reduced turnover. Employees with an IDD tend to have increased focus and attention to detail, higher enthusiasm, great customer service and engagement, and amazing attendance that stems directly from their appreciation for routine.

Maeve has been a part of the business for the entirety of the process. From painting walls, stocking inventory, taking and executing orders, and participating heavily in the kitchen. Her prominent growth cannot be ignored. Maeve has learned professionalism, the meaning of money, where money comes from, and how to be a fully functioning coworker with her peers.

We are partnered now with the ARC of Hudson Valley in their pre-vocational training program. Once a week 3-5 individuals ranging in ages from 20 to 40 years old in need of work experience and exposure come to our shop. They have the opportunity to learn and practice different tasks of our operation. This includes anything from in-kitchen prep to customer service.

We have been told that we are the only partner location which allows the ARC individuals to process sales, manage money, and to use the cash register. For example, our POS system has been designed to be user-friendly for people of any ability. We have modified the POS system with people like Maeve specifically in mind. Modifications include but are not limited to picture dominant screens, simplified options or customizations, and clear food order printouts in the kitchen which allow for easier navigation, concise communication, and cleaner execution. In comparison to large companies and chains, we do not have the same accessibility to multiple and new technologies such as self-ordering kiosks or screens all over the store to aid our employees. The partnership with the ARC pre-vocational program benefits more than just the individuals enrolled in the program. Our small upstate community experiences exposure to different people with different disabilities. It benefits everyone as we all become more knowledgeable to the adversities and solutions that people with IDD's face. In our shop diversity is not only appreciated but also celebrated.

We have to stay creative and mindful as to which things we can modify and adapt. We make sure to expose everyone to different tasks and then build on their strengths to find the most appropriate job for them to do. I don't even like to use the term "disability," I prefer "ability" instead. We all have different abilities and there are many doors to be opened. We have the keys, we just have to find out which keys fit into which doors.

Government has a role to play in removing obstacles to achieve success. To move forward with progress in this area, small businesses and rural communities need more tools in place to be able to collaborate and support this effort. These would include internship opportunities, direct, affordable transportation access that can actually get a person from home to job and back. We need reforms of government bills, and incentives to employers. Internship opportunities such as the Project SEARCH program of New York City, which is a one-year employment preparations transition-to-work program that combines classroom instruction and career exploration through on-site internships are helpful. A program like this would be a vital addition to our area. Currently, it covers only the immediate NYC five boroughs.

Another helpful tool to enrich the workplace of individuals with IDD would be the prohibition of issuing new 14(c) certificates allowing the working individual to earn the same wage as their peers. Passing the “Transformation to Competitive Integra Employment Act” would help individuals to transition into the mainstream workforce and end segregation.

Finally, the employers need the correct tools to hire and employ people with IDD. The hiring process has already begun to shift. Employers are changing their hiring practices and are considering a candidate’s unique skills rather than searching for someone to fill a broad list of requirements. A common modification to this process can be video resumes where the applicant can effectively emphasize their strengths and the skills which they can bring to the job. Employers are starting to realize that an individual with an IDD is often times a stellar example of an employee.

In closing, I’d like you to consider how important your job is to you. Our jobs define us, make us whole, and give us purpose. This should be achievable to every individual with all different kinds of abilities. To have a dream job should be available to everyone. Our society benefits when everyone has access to employment. I believe respect, opportunity, and inclusion for people with IDD are the three pillars needed to end segregation in the workforce and have growth in our community. Together, with government action, we can overcome the obstacles and enjoy the benefits, one cup of coffee at a time.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today, I would be happy to entertain any questions you may have.