



The Mental Health Association Excellence in Employment Awards Wednesday, October 18, 2006

Remarks of Kathy Krepcio
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Good afternoon. I want to congratulate this year's award winners. It is an honor to be here with people who have accomplished so much personally, as well as professionally. You are an inspiration to us all.

I'd also like to thank the Mental Health Association in New Jersey for its outstanding work — over decades — in helping the children and adults in our state achieve better mental health. What you accomplish every day in advocacy, education, training — and in connecting people with jobs — makes a tremendous difference for many thousands of New Jerseyans every year. Thank you Carolyn and your Staff and Board for your great work — because through your work, New Jersey is coming closer to recognizing that people with mental illnesses can do all the things other citizens can do. Marry, raise children, practice their religion, vote and, of course, hold gainful, meaningful and personally rewarding employment.

And that's where our paths converge. Like you, we at the Heldrich Center on Workforce Development at Rutgers want to level the playing field. We want to help break down barriers to work that exist for people who want to work in real jobs in their community.

It is at this point in a speech that most people tell a joke or a funny anecdote. Frankly, I could not think of anything amusing to say about a subject that I feel so passionately about — the right and ability to something as basic as work.

Work plays such an important role in American society. For many of us, it defines who we are. It gives us a sense of purpose.

Studs Terkel said, "*Work is about daily meaning as well as daily bread...for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.*" And for people with mental illnesses that daily meaning — that 'sort of life' can come from the security and self-sufficiency of a stable, fulfilling job.

A job means more than just a paycheck to someone with a disability. A job means personal independence. It means being and feeling needed and having a place to go.

It means the ability to care for oneself and one's family, to own a home, and enjoy life in general. A job means that people with a disability can define themselves.

But we also know that there are significant challenges to employment for people with disabilities.

Data from national health surveys tell us that employment rates are **much lower** among persons with a mental illness than among the general population. The estimated employment rate for adults with a mental illness range from 15-20% for those with a severe disorder to slightly over 50% for those with any mental disorder.

Research also tells us that working-age Americans with a disability are more likely to live in poverty than other Americans. And, poverty rates for people with at least one disability are more than twice as high as for those with no disabilities. Added to this problem are today's national income support policies — policies that are built on the obsolete premise that people with disabilities cannot work — and must rely on others for support. And while the public dollars to support people with disabilities are growing exponentially, it is growing at a rate that's likely to be unsustainable when the baby boomers retire and start to draw Social Security and Medicare benefits.

The low employment rate and persistence of poverty among people with disabilities, combined with public policies that exacerbate rather than help solve the problem, presents a fundamental challenge to successfully getting people with disabilities into the workplace.

But there are others challenges as well.

I'd like to speak briefly about some of these challenges and tell you what the Heldrich Center is doing to promote the dialogue about these obstacles to work. I'd then like to suggest some strategies for the future.

This year, the Center began a new discussion series called the *Heldrich Conversations*. It features one-on-one intimate discussions with national leaders from business, organized labor, journalism, and government. For our first conversation, we invited Tom Donohue, President and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Here are a few of the things Mr. Donohue had to say about people with disabilities in the American labor market.

First, he spoke about an educated and skilled workforce and how vital it is to the future competitiveness of American business. His members have made clear to him that education and training are top dollar-and-cents concerns for businesses from coast to coast.

He also said that finding and keeping good workers are among the greatest challenges facing businesses in the 21st century. His words are echoed by hundreds of business people in New Jersey. For the past two years, the Heldrich Center has surveyed New Jersey employers about their highest priorities. Their number one challenge and concern was getting and keeping good workers.

He also talked about people with disabilities as a source of qualified workers — a source — he said — that is too frequently overlooked. He said that this pool of workers represents one of the largest groups seeking employment in today's market — some 9 million unemployed Americans with a variety of disabilities.

Unfortunately, many employers don't know about this pool of qualified workers. And even those who do...don't know how to reach them or have reservations about the costs and challenges of hiring and keeping them.

Dr. Roy Grizzard could have faced those challenges on the job had he worked for a less enlightened employer. Grizzard, who President Bush appointed to be the **first** federal Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy, was an educator when he lost his vision at the age of 38. But his employer — a school district — accommodated him and supported him on the job. Later, as the head of Virginia's voc rehab service he pushed *that* state to the forefront in the area of disability employment.

Last month, in the second of our *Heldrich Conversations* series, Dr. Grizzard shared his observations on people with disabilities in the workforce. Here's some of what he said:

He sees unlimited opportunities today for connecting people with disabilities to work, and with ever emerging medicine and technical breakthroughs, he sees great hope for the future.

He also said that reaching out to employers is a critical strategy. With 35 million aging American employees expected to stop working in just the next six years, people with disabilities can help replenish the nation's pool of qualified labor. He added that businesses would be wise to understand this, as well as recognize the significance of the \$1 trillion in annual spending among people with disabilities.

However, he also acknowledged problems with current federal policies, where people have to choose between working and benefits. He recognized that we have a national policy climate that appears to actively encourage people to seek disability payments rather than a regular salary. And, change has been slow in Washington.

Both of these *Heldrich Conversations* — with Donohue and Grizzard — have given us a better sense of the national picture. And the New Jersey picture mirrors what is happening nationally.

In two forums — in 2003 and 2004 — the Heldrich Center looked at the New Jersey experience in eliminating the barriers to work that exist for people with disabilities.

In the 2003 symposium, entitled *Restricted Access to Work*, a number of themes emerged, including: Employer Reluctance and Fear of Increased Costs, Work Disincentives, Service and Support Fragmentation, and Accessibility to Work Issues.

The 2004 symposium, called *Moving People with Disabilities to Work*, looked at the supports and services that can help people with disabilities succeed in the workplace. Again, a number of major themes emerged, including:

- the need to embrace work as a value and as a part of recovery...and an **important component** of public policies and program practice;
- the need to give people with disabilities — and their parents — early access to career education and information about work — to help them envision a life in which work is a critical activity;
- the important and prominent role of Family, of Caregivers, of Vocational and Social Service providers to support someone's desire to work, and how overcoming fear (of change, of making a mistake, of losing public income support), and developing positive attitudes toward employment are important to getting and sustaining a job;
- the need for more coordinated and better access to employers in the state; and
- And, the need to work together in order to achieve change.

Clearly, we've had a lot of people thinking about how we can get more people with disabilities into the workplace — from Mr. Donohue in the business world, to Dr. Grizzard in the federal government, to all of us here in New Jersey who recognize that more needs to be done.

For us today, the questions are: what do we know now and what can we do to break the barriers to work that exist for people with physical and mental disabilities?

What can *we* do to ensure that people with disabilities — with mental illness — enter — and succeed — in the workplace?

Clearly, we face many obstacles, but as it's been said: *If there's a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere.*

So let me draw a few conclusions from what the Heldrich Center has learned:

First, it has long been recognized that mental illness is a major cause of disability — accounting for about one-quarter of the disability in the world. Yet, research shows that many people with a mental illness are able to sustain some level of employment and want to work *and* that work can be an important part of recovery.

Second, people with disabilities are underrepresented in the workplace. In surveys with employers, only 26% say they have knowingly hired a person with a mental or physical disability. Yet, in the past several years, America's top companies have begun to focus on solving their talent shortages by embracing diversity initiatives and creative hiring techniques that zero in on an ever expanding pool of diverse workers — including people with disabilities.

Third, the barriers to work — especially for people with poor social networks and little economic resources — are substantial. They include the frustrating roadblocks characteristic of today's labor market and workplace that can make getting a job hard — and keeping a job even harder. The barriers are complex, and include dealing with the personal motivation to work on the part of individuals...to grappling with the influence of low expectations and stigmas about mental illness...to overcoming the current penalties the public financing system attaches to the earned income that supports people with disabilities.

Of course, the list could go on and on but let's say that nearly all the barriers we could list are *solvable*. We know from listening to business and government leaders that they **can** do their part and help. And we know that the mental health association and others community groups are already engaged in creating change.

So let me suggest some seven strategies for where we can go from here.

We must communicate the simple facts about mental illness and employment. Research suggests that people with mental illnesses want to work — and many are working. Yet, at any point in a person's life, mental illness can present challenges to working that, with the right supports, can be overcome.

We must work to offer real opportunities that match the needs of business with the interests and capabilities of individuals. We have far too many people (this includes teachers, parents, job counselors as well as consumers) who aren't aware of options and opportunities — and the range of jobs and employment available to people with the proper skills. And we have many employers in growth industries throughout New Jersey that can't find qualified job candidates. We must do a better job of understanding what employers need, and matching them with people with the skills who want to work.

We must do a better job of making the business case that investing in workers with disabilities is a sound business decision. When employers discover that workers with various disabilities have comparable performance and retention ratings to those of employees without disabilities — especially if the job matching is right — they see that hiring, retaining, and promoting these workers can have a positive impact on their bottom line.

We must also work to change attitudes about work and disability, since attitude, motivation and expectations are important for helping people with any disability, including mental illness, to work. Research suggests that negative attitudes held by vocational and mental health providers about a person's ability to work remains a significant barrier, as does the negative stigma associated with mental illness that unfortunately influences employer decisions regarding hiring or keeping someone on the job.

We need to redirect current resources and practices to what research says works. We know that supported employment programs are much more successful at securing competitive employment for persons with psychiatric conditions than traditional vocational programs. Yet, this model still remains relatively uncommon nationwide.

We need to undertake system reforms that can replace today's obsolete policies that foster dependence with policies that promote economic self-sufficiency. We need to demand changes in state and federal programs and policies that right now force people to choose dependency and poverty at the expense of working and independence. Lawmakers and government officials need to know that we think **work** should be an essential option available to individuals. Right now, the mental health and disabilities service systems in New Jersey have **not** truly embraced work as a principle.

Finally, we must work with employers to develop new approaches to ensuring a person's success while on the job. Let's challenge the State of New Jersey and other public sector employers such as school districts, our university system and municipal government — collectively the largest employers in the State by the way — to set an example for the business community and demonstrate leadership in some of these efforts — efforts that might include:

- Recognition, through the implementation of more robust and strategic human resource practices in the areas of recruitment and retention, that people with physical and mental disabilities can be viable employees and an important part of the workforce. Instead of ignoring them — how about employing them.
- Support of, and accommodation for, education and skills training for first-time workers and for workers already on the job who are coping with a disability. This includes putting in place workplace policies that provide **rewards** for managers and supervisors for hiring, retaining and supporting people with disabilities — and education to increase their understanding of the symptoms of mental illness.

- Allowing for job sharing, part-time work, unpaid leave days and more flexible work arrangements because consumers are not always able to hold full-time positions.
- Creating better access to assistive technology and ongoing mental health services as well as other supports through more flexible benefit plans, stronger employee assistance programs, institution of wellness programs on site, or through partnerships with community-based and faith-based agencies.
- And finally, implementation of a strong ongoing public awareness campaign that emphasizes the work capabilities of people with disabilities. A campaign that helps employers recognize an available and largely untapped labor source, and helps **all of us to see that diversity in the workplace includes people with physical and mental disabilities**. You know, advertising and marketing work on the principle of repetition — repetition of a clear message. We need to constantly get this message out.

It's been said: *"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."*

I believe that we must begin now to promote greater discussion and encourage more public awareness.

We have an opportunity to better educate businesses about a pool of workers who can help their bottom line.

We have an opportunity to work toward a time when every person with a mental or physical disability is offered a pathway to a job.

Most important, we have an opportunity and an obligation to work together for change.

The Heldrich Center stands ready to work with the New Jersey Mental Health Association and others to ensure that tomorrow's workforce will include more and more people with disabilities in jobs that guarantee them a full measure of all New Jersey has to offer.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today.