



FOCUS, Inc.

Family Outreach Center for Understanding Special-Needs, Inc.

FEB 11 2014

February 6, 2014

The Honorable Representative Kurt Olsen, Chair
House Committee on Labor & Commerce
Alaska State Legislature, Room 24
Juneau, Alaska

RE: HB 211 "An Act relating to the education and employment of individuals with disabilities"

Dear Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing this letter to express FOCUS Inc.'s support of HB 211, "An Act relating to the education and employment of individuals with disabilities."

FOCUS Inc. is dedicated to the rights of people experiencing disabilities to live full meaningful integrated lives within our community. These individuals should be able to work and live as independently as possible.

FOCUS Inc. has found employment for several individuals in the Eagle River Community. The individuals participating in the FOCUS, Inc. Supported Employment Program have found inclusive employment opportunities in a variety of vocational settings including retail, maintenance, professional offices, and entertainment. We offer those motivated to become employed and sustain employment a variety of customized employment opportunities meant to benefit both the employee and the employer. By basing employment planning on a person centered model instead of falling back on sheltered enclaves service providers are able to both foster independence for the individuals but also give them support and an outlet to pursue interests and dreams many would think "impossible."

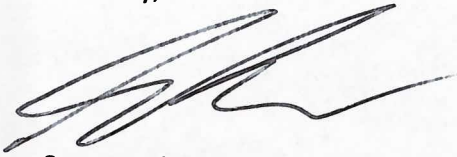
Through the discovery process we are able to identify passions of the individual and use this as a starting point for the vocational process. A young man who experiences autism and mental health challenges but with an encyclopedic knowledge of film is a perfect fit for the movie theater culture. However, that same individual, when placed in group employment situations with no personal buy-in was not only unsuccessful but his frustration often presented itself through aggressive behaviors directed at his peer group. In a customized environment behavioral issues have all but disappeared.

Another individual has a long history of trouble with maintaining benefits due to confusion over reporting part-time earned income. By transitioning such individuals into self-sustaining long term, full time employment they are able to not only be a contributing and vital member of the community but able to bypass benefit issues by enabling self-sufficiency instead of state or federal funds dependence.

Although some individuals may require long term supports, funded through new or traditional resources, by placing those experiencing a disability in inclusive environments the employment itself can become more meaningful and support can be minimized. An individual still receiving the services of a job coach through FOCUS, Inc. is now able to sustain a 34 hour a week position with only 10 hours a week of support. This position allows him to live independently as well as gives him natural social outlets instead of limiting his interactions to paid staff.

HB211 will improve the lives of individuals experiencing disabilities and enrich our communities as a whole. Through respect, dignity and integration all of our lives are improved. For these reasons, I ask that you approve HB211.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Decker', with a stylized, flowing script.

Steve Decker
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