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Changes coming to 'sheltered' programs for workers with intellectual disabilities

Workshops will need to comply with federal standards for job experience, preparedness

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Published: Sunday, January 26, 2014 at 11:00 p.m.

For decades, people with intellectual disabilities in Alabama have often sorted hangers, stacked boxes and done other repetitive work at "sheltered workshops" for minimum wage — or less. In return, the workshops received funding from Medicaid.

But that's about to change, not only in Alabama, but nationwide.

At the end of 2014, the federal government will institute new, rigorous requirements that will require sheltered workshops to provide work experience or job training. Instead of people with disabilities being segregated from society, doing repetitive jobs for low pay, the goal is for people to determine what kind of work the people like to do and offer them the training so that they can get out in the world and work with everyone else, said James Tucker, associate director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program.

"If a person with a disability wants to work and wants to obtain skills to try to work, then provide training," Tucker said. "Don't baby-sit them and call it sheltered work."

About 4,000 to 5,000 Alabamians with disabilities work in sheltered workshop programs, Tucker estimates. Instead of providing job training, many sheltered workshops are a deadend, according to the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program.

The Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, a federally funded advocacy group for Alabamians with disabilities, recently released a report demanding that segregated work environments like those at sheltered workshops end, and that the state enact policies that support employment in the general workforce as the first choice for people with disabilities.

It's a move that the Alabama Department of Mental Health is already making, said Jim Reddoch, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Last week an "Employment First" bill was proposed in the state House of Representatives and Senate.

"The goal is to get more into regular jobs in the community and to enable them to earn at least minimum wage," Reddoch said.

The push relates to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead decision, which found



Photo provided by Alabama Department of Mental Health

Gov. Robert Bentley swears in Jim Reddoch as commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health. Reddoch says the Alabama Department of Mental Health is already getting more people with intellectual disabilities into regular jobs in the community.

that unjustified segregation of persons with disabilities constitutes discrimination and violates the Americans with Disabilities Act. A federal court in Oregon recently declared that the Olmstead decision also makes sheltered workshops illegal, Tucker said. As a result, Medicaid funding for vocational training in sheltered workshops will end.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health has known for about two years about the shift, and has been working to help get individuals the coaching and training they need to start their careers, Reddoch said.

"We have been met with some opposition with those who have established and sizable workshop operations, and from parents of people who go to those programs," Reddoch said. "But we have put together a multi-state task force including the Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Education and ADECA to come up with different ways we can help to move people from the sheltered workshop environment, and we know that not every single person in a sheltered workshop environment can take on a job in the outside world."

Vocational training is being instituted and job coaches are available to help individuals discover what their strengths are and what can be translated into a job that they could perform.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health has also sponsored a Project Search, in which high school seniors who have disabilities are put in a host agency — normally a hospital environment — and given jobs. The students have mentors to help them in their experience. The Alabama Department of Mental Health also has a pilot program in Scottsboro where participants who previously worked in sheltered workshops spend their day at a work site learning job skills with a goal of eventual employment, Reddoch said.

There are pre-vocational services available, which help people learn what is expected on the job, like how to dress, pay attention and perform specific skills, said Vicky Turnage, director of Ability Alliance in Tuscaloosa.

There will also be supportive employment, a type of job coach to assist them on the job, and job developers who go out and help people with disabilities find jobs. It's a change in mindset, Turnage said.

"In terms of folks first coming into ADMH, it's about exploring work as a first option, rather than going into the structured workshop," Turnage said.

For people with disabilities who don't want to work, there are day habilitation programs and other opportunities, Reddoch said.

"We aren't abandoning anybody," Reddoch said. "We aren't moving as fast as we think we should, but we are making progress."

Although day habilitation programs won't be as affected by the Medicaid changes as sheltered workshops, there is a move to discourage even those programs because they tend to be segregated when it comes to people with disabilities, Turnage said.

That concerns Jerry Pike, founder of Eagles' Wings. Eagles' Wings is not a sheltered workshop, but instead a day habilitation program in which participants learn how to cook meals, how to make a bed and do laundry. Clients take art classes, participate in a choir that performs in local churches and nursing homes, and help distribute food through Meals on Wheels.

Pike said that outside employment isn't a perfect fit for all individuals with disabilities, and that there needs to be another option besides staying home.

"That's my concern — that one fix doesn't work for all," Pike said.

Of the 20 individuals that Eagle's Wings serves, some of them have tried to work in the community, but decided they didn't want to work, Pike said. Many of the clients also have specific medical needs and need a nurse nearby, he said, and sheltered workshops wouldn't take them because of their medical conditions.

"Most of our individuals were sitting at home, they had no programs, no where would take them," Pike said. "We helped fill those voids."

The Arc of Tuscaloosa also offers a day habilitation program for people with disabilities, along with two employment programs: supported employment where people find competitive, community-based jobs, and a pre-vocational program that is classified as a sheltered workshop, said Ryan Delfin, executive director.

In the pre-vocational program, individuals work in-house on contract based jobs, and also go out in "mobile crews" to local businesses to provide window-washing and janitorial services, Delfin said.

"For people who want jobs, that is the goal," Delfin said. "What we want to do is achieve their goals."

The federal Medicaid changes will likely affect the Arc's sheltered workshop employment program. But the Arc will change to meet whatever requests are made, Delfin said.

"Whatever the requirements are, we will certainly meet them," Delfin said.

Palk Enterprises, which is classified as a sheltered workshop in Tuscaloosa, could not be reached for comment.

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