

OPPORTUNITY VILLAGE

U.S. House of Representatives
Education & the Workforce Committee
8/30/11

Mr. Chairman, Congressman Heck and other distinguished members of the Committee.

Welcome to Opportunity Village. My name is Ed Guthrie and it's been my distinct pleasure to be the Executive Director of this fabulous agency for the past 17+ years. When I was recruited to Opportunity Village, I was told that there are only three things that everyone in Las Vegas can support: Runnin' Rebel Basketball, Nellis Air Force Base and Opportunity Village. A lot has changed in Las Vegas in the past 17 years but the support of our community for Opportunity Village and the people we serve has only grown.

Opportunity Village was started in 1954 by a small group of parents of children with intellectual disabilities. We've always been a part of the fabric of Las Vegas. Opportunity Village started about the time Bugsy Siegel arrived in town and before Howard Hughes, and we've outlasted both of them. Another little known fact is that Opportunity Village sewed all the scarves that Elvis gave his loving fans when he played at what's now the Las Vegas Hilton.

Opportunity Village provided assessment, training and employment services to 1,408 youth and adults with intellectual and other disabilities last year. We serve people with all levels of disability and everyone who attends Opportunity Village receives a paycheck every two weeks. Approximately 390 of the most severely disabled people we served in FY-2011 were in therapeutic day training (non-work) programs while over 1,000 people with severe disabilities were in vocational assessment, vocational training or employment programs. Of those 1,000 people over 60% were in community employment or training programs that led to community employment.

At Opportunity Village, we believe in informed choice. We do not believe that "one size fits all". People with disabilities should be offered a range of opportunities. That's why we offer a variety of options from which people with disabilities and their families can choose, consistent with their strengths, interests, and needs.

- The Job Discovery program is a school-to-work transition program that offers students with intellectual disabilities, who are in their senior year of high school, the opportunity to experience five different jobs for nine weeks each. They get the chance to make all the stupid mistakes that most high school students make on their first job and they get to "try on" a career.
- Opportunity Village cleans over 2 million square feet of government and commercial office space and we employ people with disabilities to do the cleaning. Our crew that cleans all 350,000 square feet of the Clark County

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Government Center was just honored by the County Commissioners. You may have used one of the rest rooms we cleaned at McCarran Airport.

- We are the 2nd largest document destruction company in Nevada. People with disabilities at Opportunity Village shred over 20,000 pounds of confidential documents every day.
- We are the postal service for Nellis AFB. We deliver an average of over 1,000 pieces of official and private mail every day. Our people with disabilities have the security clearances to handle all the confidential correspondence.
- People with intellectual disabilities serve over 350,000 meals every year to the brave men and women through our food service contract at Nellis AFB.
- If you notice the art on the walls, this art was created by people with intellectual disabilities. We sold over \$40,000 of their art, some for as much as \$2,500/ piece.
- If you smell cookies baking that's because Opportunity Village bakes over 15,000 cookies per week for the employee dining rooms at the Venetian, the Mirage and other hotel/casinos.
- We package coffee for all the properties operated by Caesar's Entertainment and room amenities for other hotel/casinos. In fact, we have our own "economic indicator" that we call the "chocolate index". We package the chocolates that the housekeeping staff leaves on your pillow and, although the economy is still slow, we are packaging more chocolates than we did last year.

Opportunity Village is a great example of a "public-private" partnership. The building you are in, the Kitty Rodman Event Center, was built as part of a \$44+ million capital campaign. A little over \$5 million was public money but almost \$39 million was from private contributions. Some were from major donors like the Ralph & Betty Engelstad Foundation, Kitty Rodman, Tom and Leslie Thomas, Steven and Karen Thomas, and Joyce Mack but there were hundreds of other donors who contributed too.

Opportunity Village's annual operating budget is also an example of the "public-private" partnership. Approximately 25% of our revenue is from government fees and grants (e.g. Medicaid, RSA Section 110 funds, etc.). About 45% of our budget is contract revenue from baking cookies, delivering mail, cleaning floors, etc. and the other 30% is fundraising income from the people of Southern Nevada.

Opportunity Village also uses the Medicaid Home & Community-Based Services (HCBS) waiver to provide services to some of the most severely disabled adults in Nevada. Federal bureaucrats at the Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) are proposing changes to Medicaid regulations that will deny funding to services like those provided here at Opportunity Village. Please help us safeguard access to these valuable services for people with the most severe disabilities.

Let me give you a couple of examples of how the community supports Opportunity Village:

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- Everyone who has spent a holiday season in Las Vegas knows the Magical Forest. Opportunity Village owns one of the few pine forests in the Mojave Desert. We planted hundreds of pine trees at our West Oakey campus and every year we decorate them with millions of lights. We own two small trains as well as a carousel. We need 75 volunteers a night to run the Magical Forest and every year thousands of people volunteer and tens of thousands pay to see the trees, ride the train and eat the funnel cakes. Through the efforts of our volunteers we raise over \$1 million per year.
- Have you ever seen a sea of ten thousand people dressed as Santa Claus? Well, if you are in Las Vegas on the 1st Saturday in December, you'll see thousands of Las Vegas dressed in Santa suits to participate in the "Great Santa Run", a 5k that raises over \$300,000 each year to benefit Opportunity Village.

I could talk about Opportunity Village all day but the purpose of this hearing is to highlight local solutions to strengthen job training programs.

People with intellectual disabilities have an unemployment rate of almost three times the rate for the average person. So, if the unemployment rate for average folks in Las Vegas was 13.8% in June, 2011, then the unemployment rate for folks with intellectual disabilities was over 40% and it's been that way all year.

Opportunity Village paid almost \$3.9 million in wages to people with intellectual disabilities in FY-2011 and we estimate that people with severe disabilities placed in competitive employment after receiving services at Opportunity Village earned another \$2.3 million last year.

Opportunity Village found community employment for 111 people with severe disabilities in FY-2011. Our research shows a reduction of \$5,000/year in welfare, Medicaid, food stamps and other benefits for every person that we place in community employment. People with disabilities gain independence and self-esteem from working, and they reduce their dependence on other benefits, which saves taxpayers!

You can help us build on this success by:

- **Allow Greater Flexibility with RSA Section 110 (Basic Grants):** Opportunity Village uses Rehabilitation Act section 110 funds to provide assessment, training and placement in community employment for people with severe disabilities. Nevada, like many States does not have the State tax revenue to leverage all the federal dollars that are available, so people linger on waiting lists for services. Encourage RSA to allow private agencies (and individuals) to contribute the "State match" so people don't have to wait for services. Instruct RSA that a placement of an individual on an AbilityOne contract or "state-use" contract is an acceptable "closure". In addition, please do not adopt amendments to the Rehabilitation Act that limit opportunities and choices currently available to persons with the most significant disabilities, including work experiences in mobile work crews.

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- **AbilityOne:** The AbilityOne program allows Federal agencies to purchase goods or services from community rehabilitation programs (like Opportunity Village) without going through the competitive bid process so long as 75% of the people working on these contracts are people with severe disabilities. Encourage Federal agencies to make better use of the program. For example, encourage designated subcontracts for AbilityOne when the Department of Defense awards “base operating contracts” to large contractors. Another example would be to encourage Federal agencies to use AbilityOne when they are contracting for custodial, grounds maintenance, or other services on leased space.
- **Section 14(c):** Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act allows community rehabilitation programs (like Opportunity Village) to pay individuals with severe disabilities less than the minimum wage if their disability impedes their productivity. In 2009, over 430,000 people with severe disabilities throughout the US received a special minimum wage; over 700 of those individuals were at Opportunity Village. Every one of the individuals served by Opportunity Village receives the dignity and self-respect that comes from earning a regular paycheck. If the federal government had to subsidize the wages for the almost 727 people at Opportunity Village who make less than minimum wage so that they could make at least minimum wage, it would cost the federal government approximately \$6.7 million per year. This is not the time to ask the federal government to subsidize \$6.7 million per year in wages to people with disabilities. Section 14(c) enables these individuals to receive the tangible and intangible benefits from working. Please oppose any and all efforts to eliminate or phase out this important provision of law. People with the most significant disabilities deserve the opportunity to work and they are counting on you to preserve this opportunity.
- **The Importance of Jobs for People with Intellectual Disabilities:** People with intellectual disabilities want to be able to live, work and play in our/their community. We need to assure that they have good quality services to enable them to succeed. If you look at the Opportunity Village logo, you’ll see one person offering another person a “hand-up”... not a “hand out”. Please help us help them. Opportunity Village and similar community rehabilitation programs throughout the country are doing great things for people with intellectual disabilities (and the families who love them). They deserve your support.

Mr. Chairman, That’s the end of my comments. I want to thank you for accepting our hospitality and listening to our concerns.