

Subminimum Wage Plan Divides Disability Advocates

By [Michelle Diamant](#)

Disability advocates are split over a proposal in the U.S. Senate that would establish limits on people with disabilities working for less than minimum wage.

The Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee is expected to take up a reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act on Wednesday. Within the proposed legislation is a plan to establish first-ever requirements that must be met before individuals with disabilities could be allowed to work for less than the federal minimum of \$7.25 per hour.

Currently, many with disabilities leave high school and are referred directly to sheltered workshop environments. That would change under what's known as section 511 of the bill. Those with disabilities could only be placed in subminimum-wage jobs if they meet certain age-related requirements and while receiving job training services to prepare them for competitive employment. What's more, individuals age 24 or younger would be required to pursue vocational rehabilitation services first.

"I believe it is critically important that every young person with a disability have an opportunity to experience competitive, integrated employment as they transition from school to adult life," said Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, one of the bill's chief sponsors, in a statement to Disability Scoop.

"Without section 511 in the bill, I am very concerned that another generation of young people with significant disabilities will end up getting tracked directly from school to sheltered settings," said Harkin who chairs the committee where the bill is slated to be considered.

Advocates with the National Down Syndrome Society and the National Federation of the Blind, however, say the bill does little more than provide a checklist for vocational rehabilitation agencies that could ultimately put more individuals at risk for low-wage employment.

"This provision purports to introduce protections to limit the number of youth with disabilities who are placed in subminimum-wage employment, but will have the unintended effect of trapping people with disabilities in dead-end, segregated, subminimum-wage jobs with the blessing of the rehabilitation system," said Marc Maurer, president of the National Federation of the Blind, which is calling for the provision to be dropped from the bill.

The current debate comes two years after a [similar effort](#) to update the Workforce Investment Act [fell apart](#). This time around, however, Senate aides say they have strong bipartisan support and indicated there's a chance that a bill could be on the president's desk before the end of the year.

Groups supporting the proposal include The Arc, Easter Seals, the National Council on Independent Living, the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities and the National Disability Rights Network.

“What this does is create a requirement that vocational rehabilitation providers make an effort to achieve an employment outcome rather than just shrug their shoulders and place people in sheltered workshops,” said Patrick Wojahn, a public policy analyst at the National Disability Rights Network. “It’s a step in the right direction.”