

I have worked with Missouri sheltered workshop/extended care employment facilities since approximately 1993 and, prior to that, reported on their activities for several years as a newspaper editor.

I see a tragedy on the horizon because people I would otherwise admire seem to have locked into a series of assumptions that contain fundamental misconceptions about workshops and the people they serve.

First, it's important to understand and experience realities most of us never see. Workshops are home to individuals with vastly different abilities who are often lumped into a single group. For many of them, their priorities are health insurance and challenges like socialization. Likewise, it's important to see firsthand the joy workshop employees show coming to work, being with their friends and coworkers – some of the most important benefits workshops deliver.

Especially for those with the most severe disabilities, options outside of workshops are limited. Some are not able to express themselves well or require careful monitoring for health risks which are experienced by many in this group. For these and other reasons, many, even most, of these individuals are not going to find other employment if workshops are closed. Wal-Mart and similar businesses are not going to hire thousands of them. Small businesses, except for a relatively few “angels,” won't either.

Here's a test: conduct a survey of your own company, ProPublica, the Kansas City Beacon or similar organizations. Make an honest count of how many workers are employed who have an IQ under 70? 50? 35? If you honestly want to replace workshops with private employment, that's where you must start, not some hypothetical “they” who will suddenly provide them with jobs. Most parents of people with disabilities understand that – which is why they helped found workshops in the first place.

Your online questionnaire said some states have closed their workshops, although you say nothing of outcomes, especially objectively collected, verifiable data. Have you sought a comprehensive and accurate count of how many people with developmental disabilities were employed in those shops before closure? And how many are employed elsewhere now? Most of all, how many are now employed long term? I've seen workshop employees honored after 30, 40 or even 50 years employment. Will they get that security elsewhere? In a population where change can be traumatic, shouldn't that be considered?

Many workshops operate community or “supported” employment. These are great, and such employment is a critical option for every employee with a disability. But many also need help getting there and a “parachute” if it doesn't work out.