

I understand the frustration many feel when they hear of employees with disabilities who receive low pay, although it's misleading to ignore the many workshops that average minimum wage or higher. It's also important to remember that many shops that have lower average wages are in small, rural communities where job opportunities are extremely limited, sometimes nonexistent. Most importantly, those averages are also affected by the high percentage of employees who have severe disabilities. They simply can't pursue some jobs and more complex challenges.

And this last issue is what I think most of those outside workshops miss: For many with severe disabilities, workshop employment is not so much a traditional job as it is a day habilitation program where they receive vocational, social and other training – AND get a paycheck. Basically, they're being paid to learn.

There are other issues. Many employees with disabilities receive Social Security payments which would be jeopardized with higher workshop or other community employment pay. Again, the salary often isn't critical, but if they earn more than allowed, they can lose their health insurance, which is frequently a life-or-death issue for a group that often experiences physical health challenges.

And finally, throwing vulnerable people into widespread competitive employment at private businesses can involve other risks. I have known people directly and heard of others with disabilities who have been assaulted, including sexually, while in the community, including at competitive "community" jobs. Any location can be risky, but there's a reason that the parents – who in most cases were the founders of Missouri workshops – called them "sheltered."

All of this can be confusing and certainly is not intuitive, but making broad generalizations or blanket assumptions is worse. I recall one television "investigative report" that used as an example of workshop "failures" a visually impaired woman in another state. Although she was of obviously high intelligence, she was assigned to a workshop where she was clearly underemployed and underpaid. Her case was a tragedy, but it told nothing about how Missouri workshops operate for people with developmental disabilities. It promoted a wrong and dangerous impression. It's equally wrong to force people with moderate and severe disabilities to live with the same decisions as high-functioning people with disabilities.

We could solve all of this with a tax increase earmarked to support employment services for people with disabilities, including subsidizing wages with carefully crafted policies to avoid risking Social Security, health insurance and other supports. At one time, I even dreamed of a one-eighth of one percent sales tax in Missouri, like this state's conservation tax, that would support mental health and developmental disability services. Today, I don't see that happening for several generations, if ever. But until there is something substantial to guarantee employment for all people with disabilities, and especially those with the most severe disabilities, then even well-intentioned steps that aren't based in reality will cause a nightmare for many of the most vulnerable among us. We should always seek improvement, but we should be like the medical profession as well: first do no harm.