



## 'Real jobs at real wages' sought for Alabamians with disabilities

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MONTGOMERY, Alabama – An advocacy group for the disabled called for the state to phase-out what it called isolating and exploitative workshops and instead spend state dollars helping people with intellectual disabilities to get "real jobs."

Ellen Gillespie, executive director of the **Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program**, said the workshops, where people with disabilities are grouped together to do work, are supposed to teach job skills. But in reality, she said, they become a "dead end" where people might spend years doing menial work for less than minimum wage.

"Telling people who have worked hard all week and people who do not understand money that they should be proud that they are getting a paycheck, in my opinion, is exploitation," Gillespie said

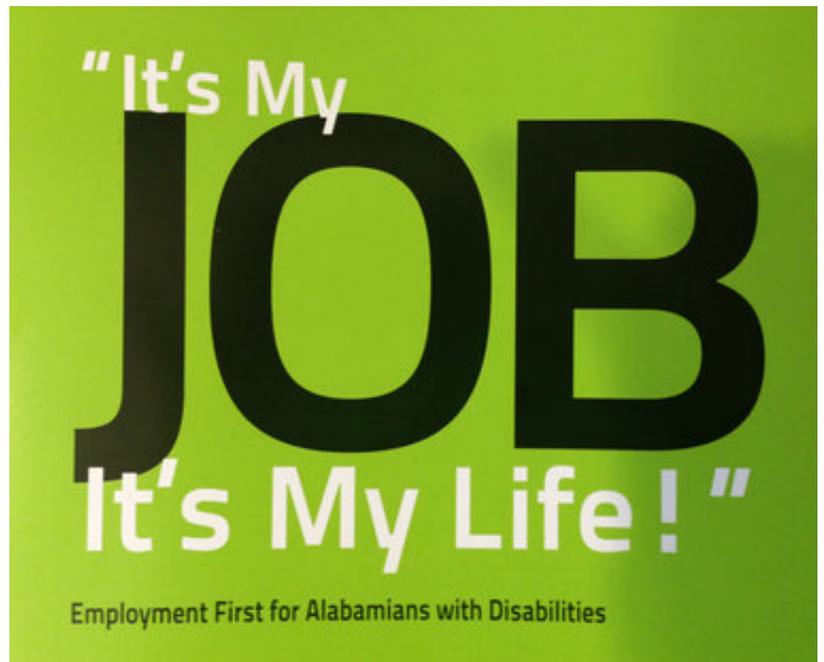
"We can do a lot better than this. We need to follow the model of other states who have proven that people with disabilities can get the jobs if they are provided good support," Gillespie said.

Gillespie said services like job coaching, placement assistance and transportation -- that help people gain private sector employment -- are a smarter way for the state to spend its dollars.

Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch said the state is already moving in that direction.

"It is exactly in line with the effort we have been making for over a year now," Reddoch said.

Reddoch said the federal government is ending financial support for such sheltered workshops, but he said



A report by the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program calls for the state to end workshop programs for people with disabilities and instead pay for services that help people get a "real job."

it's also "the right thing to do."

Courtney Tarver, the state's associate commissioner for developmental disabilities, said 4,500 Alabamians with intellectual disabilities are in some sort of day service, in either a workshop or school-like setting.

Many of them can obtain jobs with the proper support, he said.

"About three years ago we started reshaping the services ... We have seen some successes. It's not going as rapidly as we would like," Tarver said.

Tarver said the department hopes to phase out the workshops by October 2015.

James Tucker, ADAP's litigation director, said Alabama has ranked at the bottom for helping people with disabilities gain employment.

"The money we are spending needs to be spent differently and smarter," Tucker said.

Alabama has closed all of its institutions that housed the developmentally disabled in favor of community settings. Similarly, people with disabilities should not be segregated into the workshop settings, Tucker said.

The U.S. Justice Department got involved in an Oregon class action lawsuit challenging the sheltered workshops. One of the plaintiffs in that case was a 48-year-old woman who said she earned approximately 40 cents an hour at a workshop where her tasks included folding bags, packaging gloves and putting bits into slots in a tool holder, The Oregonian reported.

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