



My name is Mike Nelson, I live and work in Greeley Colorado. I strongly support SB16-077, Employment First legislation. I work at Arc Thrift Store. Over the past two years, I switched from the Home and Community Based Services Supported Living Services (SLS) Developmental Disabilities Waiver to the HCBS Elderly Blind Disabled Waiver (EBD).

I had to switch because I was offered a promotion and I could not take it without losing my Medicaid eligibility. Right now Medicaid Buy-In is only available in some waivers. At first I felt intimidated by my providers because I was not using their services anymore. I went to a segregated school but I actually had great transition services and went from an internship to a real job, paying livable wages with real benefits at University of Northern Colorado.

When I transitioned to adult services, I had all my choices taken away. Someone took over my checking account, told me where to live and then I was trapped in a sheltered workshop for 12 years because those were the only "employment services" I was offered. I remained stuck in services with no choices for 25 years. It was awful! If you had goals and dreams, it ~~was~~ didn't matter because you had to fit into the services. You got in trouble if you spoke up, you got written up if you had any voice at all and of course you did not make any money. The entire process was stupid because your Individualized Plan only included the services they could provide and decisions were made based on my disability. Services weren't based on my capabilities, my education, my dreams and goals. I felt like they were in control. If I didn't like their decisions about me or wanted something else, I had to make a formal complaint through the Human Rights Committee. I felt like the entire thing was designed to keep me in services and not living independently.

I am now on HCBD-EBD, Consumer Directed Attendant Supports and Services (CDASS), so I can choose my own home care aides and all of the responsibility for case management falls on me. I get a little help from the Area Agency on Aging and the local Independent Living Center, in getting the resources I need to meet my goals and live independently.

I am on Medicaid Buy-In, so I have the ability to save money from my earnings. The transportation for people with mobility impairments in Greeley is ridiculous, now I can save up for an accessible van of my own. I also want to save up for taking care of my parents, they are in their 80's now and I want to be able to help take care of them. Since I have been on Medicaid Buy-In I can make a lot more money. I no longer need Section 8 or Food Stamps. My goal is to get off of Social Security Disability Benefits altogether.

Even though "the system" intimidated me, I didn't lose anything, they kept trying to frighten me and I gained so much. And now I get to decide how the money is spent. I've been out for two years, they told me all of these lies, but I get what I need now and it is my choice. I have co-workers who have no clue what is available to them and they won't listen. Some people have pre-employment services and they don't earn any money working at the same store! Why?

We should stop a system that segregates us and puts us in sheltered workshops or non-paid vocational skills. This is wrong and providers will just keep referring people with disabilities to their services because not everyone has all of the information and is willing to make that leap of courage. Those choices should not exist, they make it too easy to exploit people who don't know any better and are scared. We should have the same kind of opportunities for employment as other people. We should get services based on what our skills and dreams and career goals are, not be limited by what waiver we are in based only on our disability. People with disabilities want to work and we deserve the same opportunities as everyone else!