

Thursday, July 10, 2014

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## Congress Passes Bill Limiting Sheltered Workshop Eligibility

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July 10, 2014 Text Size [A](#) [A](#)



Cindy Iames, right, and Damien Ross make less than minimum wage working at Chimes Cafe in Baltimore. (Christopher T. Assaf/Baltimore Sun/MCT)

A bill that would significantly limit young people with disabilities from entering sheltered workshop programs is headed to President Barack Obama's desk.

The U.S. House of Representatives voted 415 to 6 Wednesday to approve the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Included in the bill are major changes to the path from school to work for those with disabilities.

Specifically, the measure would prohibit individuals age 24 and younger from working jobs that pay less than the federal minimum of \$7.25 per hour unless they first try vocational rehabilitation services, among other requirements.

What's more, the legislation would require state vocational rehabilitation agencies to work with schools to provide "pre-employment transition services" to all students with disabilities. And, such agencies must allocate a minimum of 15 percent of their federal funding to help individuals with disabilities in transition under the measure.

While the bill mandates that most young people try competitive employment before they could work for less than minimum wage, there are exceptions for those deemed ineligible for vocational rehabilitation and to allow individuals already earning so-called subminimum wage to continue to do so.

The measure, which was [approved](#) by the U.S. Senate last month, is now on its way to the White House and Obama said he will sign it.

"This bipartisan compromise will help workers, including workers with disabilities, access employment, education, job-driven training and support services that give them the chance to advance their careers and secure the good jobs of the future," Obama said in a statement.

The workforce bill is the product of years of [negotiation](#) on Capitol Hill and was approved with broad bipartisan support.

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who spearheaded the components of the legislation specific to people with disabilities, called the changes "groundbreaking" and said they will "raise prospects and expectations for Americans with disabilities so that they receive the skills and training necessary to succeed in competitive, integrated employment."

Nonetheless, the issue of subminimum wage remains highly contentious within the disability community, with some advocates arguing the legislation does not go far enough while others say moving away from sheltered workshops may simply leave people with disabilities fewer options for meaningful daytime activity.

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