

Cynthia Cushing
Readfield
LD 2166

Testimony before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
By Cynthia Cushing, Community Case Manager
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RE: LD 2166, An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students With Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee and esteemed colleagues; thank you for the work that you do for our state, and for allowing me to share my testimony today. My name is Cynthia Cushing and I am a case manager for adults with developmental disabilities as well as a Master of Social Work student at the University of Maine. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 2166, An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In my work with adults who have Developmental Disabilities, I have found that many, when they know they will be leaving high school, want to continue their education; they want to go to college. They enjoy learning, and don't want their education to end. However, because they are on disability and only have their monthly check to live on, they are not able to pursue programs such as STRIVE University in Portland, Maine. Even with scholarships and other opportunities, which are limited to applicants, the cost is too high for someone who must rely on less than \$900 per month to live. As we are seeing currently with issues of financial aid, asking someone who has so little in finances to take out a loan is not feasible.

This is only one of many barriers a high school student who is about to graduate, and who lives with developmental disabilities, faces. They need to work with the Social Security Administration to apply for their own supplemental social security (SSI) benefits; as soon as a person turns 18, the check that has been going to their parents is stopped, and the individual must apply for their own check. This is a rigorous and tumultuous process, and almost always includes at least one denial of services. Due to the difficulty with applying for SSI, adults with developmental disabilities must rely on assistance from someone else, preferably with legal expertise, to navigate this application. Pine Tree Legal, which provides assistance to folks in these situations, is inundated with these requests, and cannot respond to them all. As a case manager, I work to help those individuals on my caseload who are in this situation.

In the time it takes to graduate and receive services for living independently, including SSI and waiver services for residential services and/or community programs - avenues which help a person feel like a true and beneficial part of their community, many high school graduates with developmental disabilities end up sitting on their parents' living room couch or in their bedrooms playing online games to while the time away. By the time services are successfully in place which, as I stated previously, can take a few years from graduation, a high school graduate with developmental disabilities may no longer be interested. Why? Because they have, for the last two years, been able to live at home and play games online, and they have found that this isn't so bad. In fact, it's a lot easier than trying to engage with a world that doesn't understand or accept them.

Having access to postsecondary education immediately out of high school allows a person with developmental disabilities to continue to learn and to stay engaged with society in a meaningful way. It encourages them to remain visible to society, and to feel like a viable member. Passage of LD 2166 would encourage continued involvement in society for our developmentally disabled folks; it would promote paths which are fruitful for the individual, as well as for society.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to provide this testimony today; I will end with this: According to T. Sannacandro in a 2019 write-up for Think College

Fast Facts, adults with developmental disabilities who were able to attend postsecondary education institutions were more than twice as likely to graduate with a paying job, which means that they required an average of almost \$100 per month less in supplemental social security (SSI) benefits than those who did not receive postsecondary education (Sannacandro, 2019).

Reference:

Sannicandro, T. (2019). The effect of postsecondary education on employment, income, and SSI for people with intellectual disabilities. Think College Fast Facts, Issue No. 24. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion