

BUSINESS

FOCUS ON BUSINESS

New rules could close sheltered workshops

Families of disabled people fear a safe haven may be lost.

By Matt Campbell
Kansas City Star

Leslie Winkler stacks nozzle mechanisms for spray bottles in a box. Six per box, just so, over and over again. At other times she might be putting labels on bags of coffee. All day.

Winkler does this three days a week in a warehouse in an industrial park in suburban Kansas City.

Barb Winkler is grateful that her 33-year-old daughter, who has Down syndrome, has a place to go and be productive, even if she earns only \$1.85 an hour at the JobOne sheltered workshop.

"You want them to optimize their potential and do everything they're capable of doing," Winkler said of people with disabilities.

The question is whether this warehouse is the best way to do that.

The future of such places — sheltered workshops that pay subminimum wage to workers with various disabilities — is uncertain in light of a new Medicaid rule and a new law signed in July. Based on a 1999 Supreme Court decision, the two actions confirm the government's commitment to integrate people with disabilities into the larger community as much as possible.

That's a big federal finger pointed at sheltered workshops, which by definition isolate workers with disabilities.

The Civil Rights Division of the federal Department of Justice took



Leslie Winkler, 33, repackages plastic sprayers 12 to a box during a shift last month at JobOne, a sheltered workshop for adults with disabilities in Independence, Missouri. The future of such places is uncertain in light of a new Medicaid rule and a new law signed in July. TAMMY LUNGBAD/KANSAS CITY STAR

Rhode Island to court and this spring secured a settlement that will overhaul that state's sheltered workshops. Other states, including New York and Oregon, have chosen to phase out the workshops completely without waiting to be sued.

The dust has not settled on interpretations of the new Medicaid rule, said Matt Fletcher, the associate executive director of InterHab, a trade association of 45 service providers for people with disabilities in Kansas.

But that's not stopping CDF Training Services of Ottawa, Kan., from putting its sheltered workshop building up for sale.

(It plans to continue to offer other services for disabled people.)

The new law aims to get youths with disabilities fresh out of high school into competitive jobs, earning at least minimum wage, rather than just routing them to a sheltered workshop and likely an adulthood outside a normal standard workplace.

It stirs anguish among many families of disabled people who fear a productive sanctuary might be lost.

JobOne employs 73 people, many of whom came there directly after high school. Jones said a lot of the employ-

ees could be successful in the open job market, but most could not. They each receive an annual review that assesses whether they could try the transition.

The outside world is not always inviting. Jones cited a JobOne employee who got a job at a fast-food restaurant only to be let go when management changed. He came back to the sheltered workshop.

Sara Muleski of Kansas City, who has autism and a seizure disorder, went to work at a JobOne shelter right after high school. Now 24, she sorts pill bottles and is bored. She would like a job outside the shelter, perhaps work-

ing with animals.

Her mother, Liz Muleski, thinks she could handle something more challenging and is generally supportive of the new push away from sheltered workshops.

"But for some people,

I feel a workshop is the best place for them to maybe gain some work skills," Liz Muleski said. "Sara was so naive and so susceptible to someone taking advantage of her right out of high school."

About 450,000 people nationwide work in sheltered workshops or participate in segregated day programs. About 60 sheltered workshops operate in Kansas, employing about 5,000 people. About 90 workshops in Missouri employ about 7,500 people.

The Supreme Court ruling, known as the Olmstead decision, was based on the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Justice Department in 2009 launched an aggressive effort to enforce compliance.

The point of the law is "to abolish the low expectations that have kept people with disabilities out of their communities for decades," Jocelyn Samuels, an acting assistant attorney general in the Civil Rights Division, said in April in announcing the push.

But many parents and guardians people with disabilities fear that without sheltered workshops, their loved ones will languish. They will have nothing to do and fewer social interactions.

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