

Testimony of
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Office of the Governor
House Financial Services Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee
Hearing on
Diversity Includes Disability: Exploring Inequities in Financial Services for
Persons with Disabilities, Including Those Newly Disabled Due to Long-Term
COVID
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Good afternoon, Chair Beatty, Ranking Member Wagner, and Members of the Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee. My name is Caroline Sullivan, and I am the Executive Director of the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, the education and workforce nonprofit in the Office of the Governor. I am honored to have been invited by Congressmen McHenry to talk about a program that addresses the barriers to employment for individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

My organization is a business-led nonprofit that focuses on work-based learning. We believe that these experiences are critical for students and young adults, yet many programs such as internships and apprenticeships, do not include individuals with disabilities. This is true for individuals who

have the education and skills to do the job, but face barriers in getting and keeping that job because they are autistic.

The number of autistic 18-year-olds transitioning from high school to adulthood is expected to increase from 1 in 150 young adults in 2012 to 1 in 44 in 2028, based on data from the Center for Disease Control. Yet compared to other disabilities, young adults with autism have the lowest rates of participation in employment.

There is an urgent need to develop programs for competitive employment for autistic adults. The interview process, onboarding and, and group dynamics of jobs demand high levels of social communication skills that most individuals with autism find difficult. And many employers want to include autistic team members, but do not know how to support them for success.

In 2018, we designed a paid, internship/on-the-job training program for individuals with autism spectrum disorder by working with the NC Division Vocational Rehabilitation and other partners to identify supports and align systems. Linking North Carolina with Innovative Talent or [LiNC-IT](#) makes the connections between employers, higher education, and government

services to provide opportunities for early career autistic professionals and develop a neurodiverse talent pipeline for NC employers.

Some large corporations have launched programs to help autistic candidates with the interview process, but many candidates need more support after the interview. This is what makes LiNC-IT so unique.

Seventy-one participants have completed or are currently working in LiNC-IT internships. More than 90% of participants who have completed the program are now in full time positions averaging above the median starting wage in the state, many in jobs that pay substantially higher wages. Prior to participation in the program, all were either underemployed or unemployed.

We are fortunate that North Carolina is a leader supporting individuals with autism. Thanks to the UNC TEACCH Autism Center, started 50 years ago and a model for other programs around the world and the Autism Society of NC, we have service providers with expertise in supporting individuals with autism in the workplace. They provide the job coaching services which are funded through Voc Rehab.

The team works with the employer to identify positions and pre-screens potential interns who have the skills needed for the job. Then they support the intern and employer during the interview process. The job coach works

with the intern and their manager during orientation, onboarding, and throughout the internship. They work with the employers on accommodations for the intern and help with wrap around supports like transportation.

At its core, LiNC-IT is focused on systems change -we work with employers to become more inclusive on a larger scale. We speak to groups of employees, help establish employee resource groups, and participate in company-wide events. UNC TEACCH is developing an online training for employers to train every team member to how to support co-workers with autism.

But true inclusion is not just getting that first job; it's also helping team members advance in their careers. Last year, one of our first interns who now serves on the LiNC-IT Collaborative asked if we could develop a program support career advancement. In April, Governor Cooper announced the Career Advancement Resources for Employees on the Spectrum (CARES) initiative to provide eligible state employees up to five hours of career coaching. We hope this can also be a model for other employers to support their neurodiverse colleagues.

We have partnered with large and small employers – 31 and expanding across numerous sectors, such as the financial industry¹ We are also rapidly expanding into state government. We currently have interns in four state agencies and departments and are in the process of placing interns in an additional three departments.

When I talk to employers, I stress that this is a talent acquisition strategy. The staggering unemployment rate for autistic adults is not just a barrier to financial stability for them, but a missed opportunity for employers to find a great source of talent.

As a mother of a child on the spectrum. I am proud to work in a state that supports and values individuals with autism. I encourage all public and private employers to develop programs like LiNC-IT, and we are happy to be a resource. Thank you.

¹ LiNC-IT has partnered with many financial institutions in North Carolina. Credit Suisse was our second employer and has been very successful in hosting LiNC-IT participants in their apprenticeship program and were so impressed with the work of the interns quickly moved them into full time employees. Fidelity Investments hosts LiNC-IT interns in their summer program for college students. Wells Fargo hired a former NCBCE LiNC-IT intern and Bank of America hired another former LiNC-IT intern.

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