March 10, 2022

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin

U.S. Senate

709 Hart Senate Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Baldwin:

I am an employee of Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—a nonprofit organization providing meaningful and sustainable employment to people who are blind through the federal AbilityOne Program. I have been legally blind since birth, and have struggled most of my adult life to find full time work even though I have a college education and ran my own child care business for 12 years.

When my children reach their teen years, I closed down the business and sought training assistance through the Wisconsin DVR to gain the computer skills I needed to work outside my home. Although the training was wonderful and I had many years of relatable experience, I couldn’t find a job. DVR never told me about Beyond Vision or any other organization that provides jobs for blind adults.

Finally in 2013, a friend told me of a full time opportunity in the Customer Care Center at Beyond Vision. I started in an entry level position, and within 6 months was promoted to Team Lead. Over the past 8+ years I have been employed here, I have received ongoing leadership and professional development training and have been given increased responsibilities.

If my DVR counselors had been aware of these opportunities, I could have entered the work force much sooner and would have had the ability to improve our family’s financial situation--maybe even have been in a position to help my kids with their college expenses.

Given the important role you have played in Congress to support individuals with disabilities, I am writing to bring to your attention an important federal issue that has had a direct and negative impact on job opportunities for disabled individuals like me.

Unfortunately, despite overwhelming evidence of the AbilityOne Program’s success in its mission of creating jobs for individuals with blindness and significant disabilities, a controversial interpretation of the Workforce Invocation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) has resulted in many state VR agencies refusing to refer qualified applicants to job openings with nonprofits that participate in the AbilityOne Program, including those here in Wisconsin.

This refusal has had a strong negative impact on people like me who already experience hurdles to everyday activities and especially to meaningful employment. In order to address the impacts of this WIOA interpretation — which compounds the already prevalent obstacles those of us with disabilities face — I urge Congress to explicitly require that state VR agencies provide applicants with all the information available to them regarding appropriate job options, including jobs offered by nonprofits participating in the AbilityOne Program. This change would eliminate this approach of blanket denials that currently prohibits many state agency employment counselors from providing applicants with the ability to make a truly informed choice — adding insult to injury for those of us who often already feel that our voices go unheard.

I truly appreciate that you understand the importance of enhancing the ability of individuals with blindness and significant disabilities to obtain employment. If you have any questions, please reach out directly to Jim Kerlin with Beyond Vision (jkerlin@beyondvision.com).

Sincerely,

Mary LaPointe