

Testimony: Tara L. Bosserman

Rebounding from COVID-19

Thursday, May 20, 2021

Good morning and thank you to the committee for holding this hearing to discuss the topic of “Rebounding from COVID-19” within our community and specifically the impact on our organization. My name is Tara Bosserman, Chief Operations Officer of the Cambria County Association for the Blind and Handicapped located in Johnstown and Ebensburg, Pennsylvania. I have served CCABH for almost 28 years.

It is important when discussing “Rebounding from COVID-19” to understand our organizations mission and the population of people we serve. CCABH’s mission “is to develop and support an environment for persons with disabilities which promotes vocational and employment training, independence, and community involvement through rehabilitative, recreation and low-vision services, and education for the prevention of blindness. The Cambria County Association for the Blind and Handicapped unites vocational training and a manufacturing business producing quality products, that offer employment for persons with disabilities while ensuring worldwide customer satisfaction.”

The blending of our Rehabilitation services along with a strong manufacturing base of products for both the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the Solar, Electrical and Mining industries affords us the opportunity to employ hundreds of individuals with disabilities as well as assisting countless persons with visual impairments in our community. While my testimony today will be primarily focused on our organizations’ response and subsequent rebound to the challenges of COVID-19, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to highlight work centers such as ours across the state. These work centers employ thousands of Intellectually Developmentally Disabled individuals. Prevocational facilities licensed under 55 Pa. Code Chapter 2390 across the state were mandated in March 2020 to close their doors to individuals with disabilities and those “businesses” were left struggling without a workforce and a workforce struggling without a paycheck. In our case, that was 150 individuals in our vocational program and 100 individuals in our Handicapped employment. Our organization alone, since March 2020 to present, has lost approximately \$1,300,000 in state funding for our vocational program due to State mandates and recommendations (ODP Announcement 20-019 Update, ODP Announcement 20-022, ODP Announcement 20-101 Update, ODP Announcement 20-031) from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our organization understood the States position and decision to protect this vulnerable population and fully complied with all guidelines.

I would like it to be noted for the record that our organization is asking the Policy Committee to conduct another hearing to further explore the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on work centers across the State of Pennsylvania and those individuals they serve.

While closing the doors to our workforce with disabilities was mandated on our organization, closing our doors to manufacturing, and delivering products to our customers was not an option as our business was deemed as essential by state guidelines during the Pandemic in the energy and mining sectors. For several months as much as 75% of our workforce was out due to mandates, requests for layoffs due to fear of contracting COVID and the shutdown of our Johnstown division. Like so many businesses, our organization lacked an emergency readiness plan for a Pandemic. However, with strong leadership and a dedicated staff we were able to quickly implement a plan of attack during this volatile time.

We outlined the following priorities for our organization during the Pandemic:

1. Keep our organization strong so our disabled employees had a place to return to when the Pandemic was over.
2. Make sure all our disabled employees received a paycheck during this time.
3. Make sure we were still supporting visually impaired individuals within our community.
4. Work with our customers and suppliers to ensure their needs were met.
5. Work with our remaining personnel to provide a safe environment.

As we did not have enough personnel to manufacture products in two locations, we closed our Johnstown Division to manufacturing, shifted our remaining staff to our Ebensburg Division, separated essential staff in the event of an outbreak at our facility and restructured our manufacturing to respond to the needs of our customers. Our Sales team contacted all customers, either by phone or email, to discuss their current orders and upcoming needs and shifted delivery schedules as needed due to outbreaks occurring within the industry at mines and solar installations. Our Procurement team contacted raw material suppliers to notify them of our essential business status and coordinate incoming material to keep manufacturing. Then our staff got to work – days, nights, weekends – whatever it took to get the job done. To say they have been extraordinary is an understatement.

To mitigate health concerns for those remaining at work, stringent policies and procedures were implemented focusing on safe practices during this time. Our organization went above and beyond recommended guidelines imposed by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control. Every employee was, and to date, is supplied with face masks, hand sanitizer and cleaning disinfectant at the organizations expense. CCABH's sewing department manufactured face masks for all employees to utilize at work, home and while in the community.

To support Visually Impaired individuals within our community CCABH staff put together a care package containing a supply of food which was dropped off at their home as we were unsure whether food banks would be open. Routine phone calls were made, and aids and appliances were dropped off or mailed as needed.

When posed with the question of how our organization "Rebounded from COVID-19?" I have two responses when answering the question. First, we never looked at our organization as a

company that would need to rebound but focused on what we needed to do to keep it strong? Second, we moved through the process slow and steady, working as a team to get the job done and meeting each challenge one day at a time?

To date:

1. All our disabled employees received a paycheck during this time.
2. Our organization has filled every order that we have received prior and during COVID-19. While some orders were delayed during this period, CCABH worked with every customer and we are back on track and up to date with all shipments.
3. We have lost no employees that were working during this period in our organization due to COVID-19. However, since March 2020, 4 employees have succumbed to COVID-19. None of those employees were actively working at the time.
4. All but 8 of our disabled employees have actively returned to work. Some with a limited schedule due to social distancing guidelines.
5. Approximately 60% of our employees have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

Challenges our organization continues to face:

1. Limited work schedules of disabled employees at our Ebensburg location due to transportation guidelines with social distancing. This will continue to affect our funding this fiscal year and most likely next fiscal year.
2. Re-introducing our CPS program and getting back out into the Community safely.
3. The changing evolution of managing the Sales force due to changes in travel and the Trade Show industry.
4. Continuing to connect with customers and suppliers.
5. The fact that COVID-19 is still here and the unknown.

In closing, I want to thank the Policy Committee for allowing my testimony on this subject and to recognize the exceptional work of our staff and employees throughout this unprecedented time.