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Wisconsin Risks Losing Jobs for People with Disabilities in 40 Counties

Unfunded expenditures in state budget like raise in minimum wage may ironically result in job cuts

Madison, Wis. - Each year, more than 300 people with disabilities maintain 137 rest areas and waysides across 40 counties in Wisconsin, providing quality services to travelers and tourists, while also giving individuals work experience to achieve greater independence, contribute to the tax base in their community, and learn transferable skills for positions within private industry.

After 22 years, the program that provides these jobs through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation risks placing people on the unemployment lines due to unfunded expenditures such as increases to the minimum wage and loss of rental income from the closure of tourism centers for travelers.

The Rest Area Maintenance Program (RAM) provides meaningful jobs and income for individuals with disabilities who may otherwise require additional state services at taxpayer expense. "The RAM Program equals jobs for people with disabilities who provide a real service and consequently have money to spend in their communities," said Tom Packard, Director of RAM Program Operations.

"I am a man with a disability who needs to provide for my household. I depend on this job and work hard on a daily basis. This job helps me to feel like a man and I really enjoy what I am doing," said William Arndt, a Columbia County RAM employee. "I take pride in my work, and I really like being a part of my community and having the ability to help out."

The RAM Program needs \$1.6 million for the 2009 - 2011 Wisconsin state budget to be added to the \$205,934,300 Governor Doyle has recommended for "highway maintenance, repair, and traffic operations" (page 233 in AB 75). Adding this money to the WisDOT budget will enable the Bureau of Highway Operations to keep facilities open to the traveling public and will preserve jobs for more than 300 people with disabilities.

The RAM Program is not eligible for federal stimulus money because the disbursement rules only apply to shovel-ready jobs and construction, whereas, the RAM Program is a maintenance contract through the WisDOT.

"This isn't going to be easy. When people with disabilities lose their jobs, they feel the same anxiety and depression as able-bodied people do, if not more so because some think they must've done something terribly wrong and were fired, instead of this being a tough economy," said Donna Reinerio, President of Highline Corp. in Hurley, Wis. Highline services Iron, Vilas and Ashland County rest areas and waysides.

"On the other hand, the sense of self-worth and dignity that comes with cashing a hard-earned paycheck, interacting with the public, and wearing a RAM maintenance uniform is priceless to our workers in a way able-bodied people may not feel as deeply about," added Reinerio.

Ironically, not only will jobs be lost as a result of federal or state raises in the minimum wage; the closure of rest areas, waysides, and welcome centers coincides with the launch of a state-wide branding campaign to attract tourism dollars.

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Rehabilitation for Wisconsin is a statewide, nonprofit association based in Madison, Wis. Its members include more than 50 organizations dedicated to addressing the employment, residential and community support needs of people with disabilities and economic disadvantages.

The RAM Program was created in 1987 by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT). WisDOT contracts with 24 community rehabilitation centers to provide janitorial, facility repair, maintenance, lawn services, and snow removal for rest areas and waysides. All RAM contract bids follow Wisconsin purchasing guidelines and State Use Laws. Contracts are reviewed annually for fair market value and to ensure work specifications meet WisDOT standards. Rehabilitation For Wisconsin manages the program.

Wages earned by RAM employees total more than \$2.3 million annually and contribute greatly to the tax base of rural Wisconsin counties.

“It’s important to stabilize the viability of this unique employment program for people with disabilities and help support the good work that’s being done through community rehabilitation centers,” said Thomas Cook, executive director of Rehabilitation For Wisconsin. “We believe Wisconsin could be a model state to help develop programs like this nationwide.”

Rehabilitation For Wisconsin is working with Congressman Dave Obey and Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin’s staff to find a long-term funding solution for the RAM program similar to California’s Transportation Department Street and Highway code 226.5, which allows for joint economic development of rest areas to fund state highway operations.

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