

Dear esteemed members of Congress
and staff,

Hello. My name is Greta Harrison, a.k.a. Yassy's mom. I'd like to start with a quote from Studs Terkel: "Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."

To the parent of a child with an intellectual disability—that quote takes on a whole new meaning. Because I have watched far too many youth with disabilities, fall off a cliff after high

school into an abyss of unemployment or gross underemployment, for decades. Depending on which statistic you use—the unemployment rate for adults with intellectual disabilities is around 80%. It is a modern day version of ‘dying’. The quote I just stated uses the word torpor. Torpor means a state of physical or mental inactivity. Think about that. Our educational system is spending billions of dollars educating millions of children with disabilities—with a general result of torpor. That is failure – pure and simple.

The goal of our education system, IDEA to be exact, is to prepare our youth for further education, employment, and independent living. But we are failing

with an 80% unemployment rate, millions of adults on waiting lists for support around the country, many states that still have institutions, and many states that still have sheltered workshops.

Can you think of any other population, or minority, where an 80% unemployment rate would be par for the course? I cannot. Our country, our elected representatives would be up in arms over any other minority in this boat. And please—before any silent voice in your head thinks, “But they can’t...” —please remember those very same things have been said about black people, Hispanic people, Irish people,

gay people and many more marginalized people over the course of history.

I have personally seen the world many people just like Yassy get pigeon holed into—the world of sheltered workshops. Sheltered workshops bring me to tears every time I see them—every single time. We can do so much better in 2018! Yassy has worked hard being fully included in general education classes — harder than I can portray. She has had many rock star educators and we have supported her efforts. It is not easy but we have no regrets. The goal has been the following---fulfilling employment in the community with a living wage and

benefits. We know this will translate to independence for Yassy.

Fast forward to today—a day I never dreamed of. This is an everyday occurrence for you—but for us—the privilege of speaking here is surreal. It seems like an alternate universe, in the very best way. The fact is I had no idea my daughter would have the life she has. I had no idea that Yassy would intern this past summer with the City of Hampton in the Human Resources Department. Almost every day of her experience was full of wonderful happy surprises for me. Like when they included her in staff meetings from week one. Like when they included her in

lunch and learns. Like when they naturally included her in their department socialization—to the point that my shy daughter was joking with them, teasing them, giving them a hard time. Then there were the times the mayor of Hampton, or our city manager interacted with her---enough that they know her now. Times when the city council members I know would tell me they saw her at work.

This internship, the first of its kind with the City of Hampton, set an example for all those who interact with the city, and for other departments in the city.

And isn't that what our government leaders should do? Lead by example. Go where no one has gone before?

This was all made possible by Virginia's new PRE-ETs program which is part of the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services. They made sure that Yassy had job coach support during this internship. They secured this opportunity in HR. They have been there the whole time—to make sure this was successful. They know at the beginning she needs some help—and then as she matures the help fades away.

Let me close by telling you about her last day with the City of Hampton.

Her boss emailed me asking about Yassy's dietary needs because they wanted to give her a going away luncheon with the whole department. I was literally stunned. They were very busy—and had already been so wonderful—that was the last thing I would have expected.

Yassy woke up very early her last day with the worst abdominal migraines she had had in over two years. I gave her gingerale, a prescription, held her, and prayed. She healed quickly and was ready for work early that day. She **WANTED** to get better so badly. You see that is what happens when you are

valued as an employee and as a person.
You have purpose in your life.

Yassy went to work and had a great day. They had the luncheon and Yassy gave the department a presentation about her internship. Her boss filmed it – another pleasant surprise. You can see some of Yassy’s co-workers crying, and you can hear the wonderful emotion from her boss behind the camera. There was nothing but love and support in that entire department. It seems that Yassy’s time in her internship not only helped her—but it truly affected all her wonderful and sweet co-workers. For the better.

They have asked her to come and visit often. This wonderful experience has blossomed into a new internship, sans job coach, in the actual local DARS office. She starts September 28, one afternoon a week supporting the staff and job coaches with her office skills. We are eternally grateful.

If you just remember one thing from this testimony—please let it be the following quotes.

“No one ever rose to low expectations.”

Peter Drucker said: “The future will not just happen if one wishes hard enough. To make the future requires decisions –

now. It imposes risks – now. It requires action – now.”

You can make a difference by providing supports that allow many more individuals with disabilities to become productive, engaged, tax paying citizens.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your time today.