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April 23, 2015

Dear Representative Johnson:

On behalf of the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), I write to offer our strong support for your bill, H.R. 1795, the "Promoting Opportunity through Informed Choice Act." NCIL is the longest-running national cross-disability, grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. Founded in 1982, NCIL represents thousands of organizations and individuals including: individuals with disabilities, Centers for Independent Living (CILs), Statewide Independent Living Councils (SILCs), and other organizations that advocate for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities throughout the United States

NCIL will lead a celebration of the Americans with Disabilities Act 25th Anniversary this July. The ADA at 25 celebrations would be so enhanced with the Congress passing this bill before July 26, 2015.

This timely legislation seeks to provide all Social Security disability beneficiaries with real time, accurate information about their benefits situation so they can make educated decisions when they plan their participation in the workforce. Specifically, H.R. 1795 would require the Social Security Commissioner to make online tools publicly available through the website of the Social Security Administration that can assist all disability beneficiaries to assess the impact of earnings on the individual's eligibility for, and amount of, benefits received through Federal and State benefit programs.

These online tools, developed successfully within some states because of the real connections between state and federal benefit systems, are not currently available to all disability beneficiaries. We also note the relevant, state-centric research in this arena showing that when this population is employed, major federal-state partnerships such as Medicaid save money. The online tools would provide disability beneficiaries with critical information before, after, and during consultations with government offices and/or direct service providers, would minimize the spread of misinformation about employment benefits, and would reduce costs when expanding the availability of information services to many more people than today.

NCIL believes H.R. 1795 is a one of the steps we need to modernize the federal disability programs. Center for Independent Living (CILs) across the U.S. work with and support many disability beneficiaries who do not return to work; we support each of them on their unique paths to live independent quality lives in the community. Some experts estimate that more than 10% of current disability beneficiaries could engage in employment when the proper supports and tools are readily available, like those set forth in H.R. 1795.

Recent national surveys of disability beneficiaries, as consistently reported in Mathematica Policy Research studies, indicate that 40% of Social Security disability beneficiaries are interested in working; the vast majority of these Americans are not returning to work in part due to the numerous obstacles and complex disincentives that they encounter within these programs. Benefits and work risk management for tens of thousands of Americans has come to mean a predictable path to secure poverty. This has to stop.

Congress must work harder and require federal agencies to make it easier for beneficiaries who want to work to do just that. As a word of caution from NCIL's prior experience in this arena, this will not come to pass without your Committee's ongoing oversight.

Thanks to your leadership on this issue, and your willingness to improve beneficiaries' access to information, NCIL supports the speedy passage of H.R. 1795, the "Promoting Opportunity through Informed Choice Act."

Please contact me should you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kelly Buckland". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kelly" being more prominent and the last name "Buckland" following in a similar style.

Kelly Buckland, Executive Director