



**Eric Meyer, LCSW, MBA, President & CEO, Spurwink Services
Testimony for the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
October 25, 2017**

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and distinguished members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Eric Meyer, President and CEO, of Spurwink Services in Portland, Maine.

Long before the closure of Maine's only institution for individuals with intellectual disabilities, Spurwink recognized the importance of connection to community, and began providing integrated services outside the confines of segregated institutions for people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD).

Spurwink began with one house serving eight boys on Riverside Street in Portland in 1960. The developmental needs of the boys could not be met at home or in public school, and the roots of Spurwink were planted. Today Spurwink serves 8,300 people each year through the good work of more than 900 employees throughout the state. Spurwink's mission and vision remain the same: providing exceptional and evidence-based behavioral health and education services for children, adults, and families with disabilities so that they can lead healthy, engaged lives in our communities. Whether it's a preschooler with autism in Saco, a teen with a trauma history in Skowhegan, or an adult with intellectual disabilities in Portland, Spurwink's clients are offered dignity, respect and a chance to build a better future.

We offer special education schools and residential programs in four hubs across the state for children and youth; residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities in southern Maine; and a wide array of outpatient clinical services and supports in homes, public schools, primary care offices, and in the community. At Spurwink our therapeutic model is built on preparing young people with disabilities for a successful transition into adulthood, and for adults with disabilities to live healthy, engaged lives in the community. Our person-centered planning model is driven by the client and their family - creating individualized goals, planning with their team where they'll live, the type of work to pursue - all informing the supports our team will provide to help them meet *their* goals. It is not about Spurwink doing something to or for our clients – it is about Spurwink supporting clients to meet these goals. People with disabilities can and do work, and we believe it is not only the role of Spurwink, but of our country, to support adults with IDD to live meaningful and productive lives in the community.

How do we do this? Through an array of services that help support people with IDD in the community. We serve many young people who are on the cusp of adulthood. They attend our schools, live in our residences, and see our clinicians. But the reality is that between the ages of 18 and 21, many will age out of the safety and security offered at Spurwink. Resources for adult behavioral health care in Maine have been greatly reduced. We have responded to that gap by working hard to prepare students for a successful transition to adulthood. It involves:

- Education, including a high school diploma, GED or college prep
- Therapy & supports to address developmental challenges, promoting family, friends and community connections
- Practical life skills such as budgeting, healthy eating habits, and self-care
- And, pre-vocational training to prepare to be a productive, independent member of the Maine workforce.

While few of our clients go on to higher education, many benefit from learning a trade or skill. Our small engine repair program based at our Chelsea campus gives students an opportunity to work on tractor motors, small boat engines, and snow blowers for local neighbors and businesses. In this experiential learning setting, students learn not only practical skills in small engine repair, but about responsibility, perseverance, patience, and cooperative work. They build confidence in themselves, and that confidence translates to all parts of their lives.

Riley, one of our former students with autism in Portland, started his career journey at in-house school jobs, moving on to community-based training folding laundry at The Cedar's Nursing Home, shelving and alphabetizing books at the Falmouth Library, and preparing orders for distribution at Planet Dog Warehouse. After graduation he successfully worked in the warehouse at Micucci's Wholesale Foods, Inc. His parents shared, "The Spurwink vocational program exposed our son to a range of work environments and responsibilities with the full support of a job coach, which was not available in our public school. He was able to build work skills and confidence thanks to the Spurwink vocational team's experience."

Spurwink does not receive state or federal funding for these pre-vocational programs, yet we are committed to making them available. We believe that it is absolutely crucial that students leave Spurwink with the skills and experience needed to lead healthy and productive lives.

We also believe that makes good economic sense for the state of Maine. It's no secret that recruitment and retention of employees is a major priority area for Maine businesses, Spurwink included. We are the oldest state in the nation and need to ensure our businesses grow. We do this by preparing our young people to join the workforce and offering them appropriate training, which is crucial to economic development in our state. Young people who are employed in appropriate work are more stable financially and less likely to require additional economic supports in adulthood.

Our adult programs support the principle of "aging in place", ensuring that adults with disabilities age in the community safely, comfortably, and as independently as possible. As mentioned earlier, this is particularly poignant given that a sizable portion of the older adult population we serve were at one time residents of the Pineland Center, where people with disabilities were institutionalized in Maine until the early 1990s. We in Maine are proud to now have community options for adults with intellectual disabilities, and Spurwink and other agencies in the state continue to focus on supporting individual needs and desires so that the pendulum of care never swings back to large institutional settings, like Maine's Pineland Center, once housing 1,700 people.

For our adult population, ages 18 to 84, Spurwink provides residential and community supports. Key to our services is solid social support, a home to live in, and having meaningful activities and work. We believe in the importance of self-determination, individual choice, and the dignity of work. Our aim is to increase or maintain an individual's ability to be a successful, contributing, and accepted member of the community. This includes access to continuing education and/or meaningful employment, a place to call home, robust community involvement, and other components of a meaningful life. Without this, there is no community integration. Our services include:

- Community case management providing advocacy and support to help individuals achieve their goals.
- Residential services where caring and committed staff provide support services within a home, helping individuals engage in their communities, develop social relationships, learn daily living and personal care skills such as shopping, doing laundry, cooking and planning menus.
- Community supports that develop life skills and increase opportunities for community involvement.
- And, where employment is the goal, partnering with local agencies and businesses to provide employment supports that help people find and maintain work to move them toward greater independence.

Employment should be an option for all who want to, and can work, and it is never too late to open this door. Robert, 57, has a mild intellectual disability and mental health challenges. He spent many years in a group home setting, and had dabbled in employment, but intrusive thoughts and lack of focus always led to dismissal. Many thought his unrealistic expectations would get in the way of his workforce success. Robert made the decision to move into a Spurwink shared living home. In this new home he began to thrive and developed a stronger sense of self-advocacy. He decided to try employment again, and for months now, he has been working several hours a

week, stocking coolers at a small store. He has done his job well, often offering customers anecdotal comments about the additives of certain carbonated beverages. Despite unsuccessful attempts at employment in the past, he is now considered a valued employee, connected to his community, and a boon to his self-esteem. Let's work together to make community integration, and employment, for people with disabilities the norm in the United States; for people with disabilities, for the strength of our economy, and for the vitality of our communities.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.