

EXHIBIT 11
DATE 2-16-15
451

February 16, 2015

Shelly Dowdle
704 Church St
Belgrade MT 59714
406-595-1122

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Shelly Dowdle and I live in Belgrade. I am the mother of two sons who have both been diagnosed with autism.

My oldest son, Bryan, is 22 years old. He was born with kidney failure, autism and developmental disabilities. At age 5 he finally received a kidney transplant and was able to stop his need for dialysis 12 hours every night.

Starting at age three, Bryan received special education services. School made a huge difference in his life. He began to speak, he began to interact with others and play appropriately. He even tried to eat a few new things by mouth. Bryan was tube fed much of his nutrition throughout his childhood due to kidney failure.

Bryan had to graduate at age 19. There were almost no transition services and there was nothing waiting for him after he graduated. It was like the door was slammed shut on his future on that very day.

He is unable to manage his life sustaining medications for his transplant or follow instructions from his doctors. He cannot handle his finances independently and he cannot drive.

Although he was placed on the waiting list with Vocational Rehabilitation at age 17 ½, he did not get to the top of that list until five years later. Some people end up waiting many many more years than that. Bryan was lucky that several people dropped off the list and they hired several new job coaches. Without those two things, he would have been waiting at least 12 years.

Over those three years between graduation and finally having help from a job coach, Bryan's social skills deteriorated significantly. He plays video games and watches TV. He is bored and isolated. He no longer wants to interact with others and has stopped participating in Special Olympics. One positive is that he has a job coach, he works 2 hours a week in a job he enjoys, but he could do so much more.

Having the chance to stay in school until age 21 could have helped him learn the skills he needs in life. Maybe he would not avoid people, maybe he would not have regressed in his communication and social skills.

As a mom, I can only do so much. I don't have the skills or resources to teach him what he needs in a way that he is able to learn best.

My younger son, Jackson, is 9 years old. If this bill passes and he is able to continue his education until age 21, he could avoid many of the struggles his brother has faced and will continue to face.

We all want the best for our children. We want them to develop to the best of their ability, to get a job that means something to them, be happy and give back to their community.

Young adults like Bryan could offer so much to the rest of us. They just need some extra time to explore their options and learn how to achieve their goals. They may not be applying for an ivy league school, but with a few extra years, they can learn how to care for themselves more independently, how to make a phone call or take a message, how to fill out a bank deposit slip. Skills that we take for granted can make the difference between a person like Bryan living in a group home, or living in an assisted living apartment, or even his own apartment in the future!

Thank you for considering this bill and I hope my testimony has helped to show you how things are now and how they might be if this bill is passed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shelly K Dowdle". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Shelly Dowdle