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Sheltered workshops are desperately needed

I am writing concerning the plans in Albany to eliminate the sheltered workshops in New York State. I am sure state legislators have given this some thought. But just as we have moved from using the terms "mentally retarded" and "mentally challenged" to the more acceptable term of "special needs," the problem still exists. It is also no different in utilizing the sheltered workshops. The needs have not changed.

My daughter, Mary Ellen, is 52. She recently received her 30-year award from Allentown Industries. She was so proud of this certificate you would have thought that she won an Academy Award. She carried it and showed it to anyone who offered her "congratulations." I don't know what her production level is or was. I only know that this workshop gives her purpose and goals to meet every day. To think she might lose this positive and encouraging opportunity makes me feel very discouraged.

We have spent many years teaching our "special needs" children how to learn many skills and overcome prejudices. To think she might lose the opportunity and challenge of going to work every day is just frightening. Many of us parents are in our 70s and 80s, and no longer fighting the battles – but here we go again. We are very proud of our children's achievements and their desire to go to work and feel responsible.

The idea that they could be involved in competitive employment is a pipe dream. They would not and could not be accepted on a peer level. They certainly can learn many things, but not all things. They need challenges that are solvable but realistic.

Mary Ellen is a miracle. At birth we were told: "Put her away. She will not live to see her third birthday." Now, at 52, she has overcome challenges in many ways. She talks about her many friends at the workshop. She says her supervisor "works very hard. We have to help her a lot." This is her perception when she is asked to "work harder."

Our children will always be like little children even though they have grown and learned many things. We are proud of all of them for being the responsible people they have become. They are people first and statistics later. They should not have to compete with funding to repair roads or pay politicians' salaries. Where are our priorities?

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