Comments by Joan D. Harms for DDAWNY legislative breakfast December 5, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity this forum provides consumers, family members, and advocates to express their worries about the closure of sheltered workshops across New York State. Sheltered workshops provide a vital support mechanism for persons with developmental disabilities like my son Bob Edwards whom you just heard speak about his personal concerns.

When Bob was born in 1966, there were few if any services for children with developmental disabilities. It was the parents and advocates of those children who fought for and won state provided services to benefit their children. New York State eventually lead the way with exemplary programs in education and vocational services. Many states have followed, and\or copied those innovative services. Some of those same parents are in this room today. Unfortunately, many of us do not have another lifetime to fight for appropriate programs for our developmentally disabled loved ones. Sheltered workshops have satisfied the needs of our children for many years. We urge all the legislators in this room today to assure us they will continue to do so in the future.

Sheltered workshops provide an excellent alternative for a population unable to function in society without intense supervision and guidance. They provide levels of support based on individual needs. In my own son’s case, during his 25 years of dedicated service at Allentown Industries, he has a history of failed community job opportunities. Even with the assistance of an onsite job coach, he was unable to successfully accomplish simple tasks like, wash dishes at a local restaurant, work with a cleaning crew at a local mall, fold diapers at a diaper service, stuff envelopes for an advertising company or serve food properly at a well-known food chain. He failed because he was either unable to follow more than a two-step direction or he made poor choices when left to his own devices. He also failed because he was unable to utilize public transportation if available, to or from a job.

Under their interpretation of the Olmstead decision passed by Congress in 1999, The New State Office for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) proposes to close all sheltered workshops in New York State within the next six years. The agency feels these workshops are held in non-integrated settings and provide sub minimum wages. That interpretation will cause 8000 persons with developmental disabilities who are currently employed in workshops across New York State, to be out of work. OPWDD proposes that 4000 of these people will be engaged in jobs in the community paying minimum wages within the next 3 years. However, no failsafe system is being put in place for those persons who will never be able to be gainfully employed, like my son Bob.

I ask you to consider what the future will hold for these 8000 developmentally disabled persons without sheltered workshops? Will they each endure the travesty of an empty room and the monotonous drone of a television set for their remaining days? Could this happen simply because uninformed decisions will be made by uninformed policy makers who don’t understand the issue?

 I implore you to make your voice heard in the legislative chambers to prevent OPWDD from closing sheltered workshops in New York State. This sensitive and disturbing issue must be resolved. I speak for hundreds of parents of persons with developmental disabilities who are willing to work diligently alongside each of you to carry out this extremely important task.

Thank you,

Joan D. Harms