

Montgomery County councilman pushes for more hiring help for disabled people

Special authority would allow for direct hiring of qualified applicants

by Kate S. Alexander, Staff Writer, *The Gazette*. Published June 19, 2012.

Authority to draft legislation allowing the county to directly hire qualified applicants with disabilities for Montgomery County jobs could go to voters this November.

Montgomery County Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg has proposed the council place on the November ballot a charter amendment that would give it the ability to legislate preference to persons with significant physical or cognitive disabilities — such as blindness, deafness or autism — that substantially limit one or more major life activities, he said.

In 2010, the council passed legislation that gives veterans and people with disabilities who are in the highest pool of applicants preference when applying for an initial position in county government, expanding opportunities for people in county government with significant non-cognitive disabilities.

Amending the charter would allow the council to expand that preference beyond the highest rated to other qualified applicants, Andrews said.

“It’s important for the county government to do everything feasible to expand opportunities for our residents who have disabilities, who could be contributing their talents to public service but often face barriers,” he said.

Competitive hiring systems often are designed in such a way that applicants are compared and contrasted in areas where it is difficult for people with disabilities to compete, said Susan Ingram, executive director of Community Support Services Inc., a Gaithersburg-based nonprofit that works with people with developmental disabilities.

“When we do not have a diversified workforce, we are diminishing our effectiveness as a general rule,” Ingram said. “So the disability community is the last group that has really not been acknowledged as having that same kind of importance in terms of workforce.”

The word disability itself connotes that an individual is unable to do something, she said.

“This is not a made-up kind of prejudice,” she said. “But it is a matter of education, educating all government managers as to how do you work with this sector of the population so they can contribute what they know how to contribute.”

In April, Montgomery County's unemployment rate fell to 4.8 percent, its lowest so far this year, according to data from the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

Of the estimated 515,765 individuals in Montgomery County's labor force, 15,402 employed individuals have a disability while 2,159 unemployed individuals have a disability, according to 2010 American Community Survey 3-year Estimates data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Of those not in the labor force, 11,488 have a disability, according to the data. The data included civilian noninstitutionalized persons ages 18 to 64 years.

"The unemployment rate for people with disabilities by any and all measures far exceeds the general unemployment rate," Andrews wrote in a memorandum to the council. "In order to help reduce the high unemployment and underemployment rate for people with disabilities, Montgomery County has taken a number of important steps to expand opportunities and be a model employer. Now, we need to take this next step."

A June 2008 Office of Legislative Oversight report, "Hiring Persons with Disabilities: A Review of County Government Practices," offered four recommendations, of which the county has adopted many components.

Andrews noted that the county already has taken steps to expand opportunities for people with disabilities, including the hiring preference legislation approved in 2010.

The county also established a customized employment public intern project in its Health and Human Services Department that provides opportunities for people with significant cognitive and developmental disabilities. Those positions must be limited to two years or less.

However, the council has not yet taken up OLO's fourth recommendation, which was that the council explicitly discuss and decide whether to pursue a charter amendment enabling it to establish a special hiring authority within the merit system for hiring persons with disabilities.

According to its current merit system, the county government cannot hire qualified people with significant disabilities directly into certain positions, unlike the Federal Government under its Schedule A Special Hiring Authority system.

The current Charter Commission has been provided with substantial information about the issue, but does not plan to make a recommendation to the council or County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) before the August deadline to place a charter amendment on the November ballot, Andrews said in his memo.

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