

International Encyclopedia of Rehabilitation

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Sheltered Workshops

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Sheltered workshops are facility-based day programs attended by adults with disabilities as an alternative to working in the open labor market (Martin 2001, Samoy and Waterplas 1992). Work is the main focus of sheltered workshops, with a preference for relatively simple work activities such as assembling, packing, woodworking, manufacturing, servicing, or sewing. In addition, sheltered workshops may offer alternative activities including educational programs and leisure (O'Brien and Dempsey 2004, Visier 1998).

Work in sheltered workshops has different meanings ranging from occupational therapy to actual source of income. The differences in the meanings of work originate from the goals of sheltered workshops, which may range from long-term custody, rehabilitation geared toward transition into the open labor market, or long-term employment. Similarly, the status of adults with disabilities attending sheltered workshops may range from “patients” under long-term custody, to trainees preparing for individual employment, to actual workers (Visier 1998, Whitehead 1979a, Whitehead 1979b).

The range of characteristics of sheltered workshops is reflected in the range of names typically used for their identification, which include special work centers, industries, industrial workshops, affirmative industries, training workshops, vocational workshops, business services, and rehabilitation workshops.

Even when work is the main focus of sheltered workshops, the work environment tends to be different from the one in mainstream businesses. For instance, in sheltered workshops the emphasis is on choosing work activities that fit with people’s skills whereas in the open labor market the emphasis is on matching people’s skills to the production needs (Conley 1973). In addition, hierarchy in sheltered workshops is not based on contractual parameters like in mainstream businesses. Instead, it is shaped by the status of a person as either a consumer or a staff member who supervises consumers (Gersuny and Lefton 1970).

Historical background and current status

Sheltered workshops were first established in France in the 16th century and then, during the 18th century, their presence progressively expanded across Europe and in other parts of the world (Nelson 1971, Noll and Trent 2004, Samoy and Waterplas 1992). Initially they were developed by charities or religious organizations as appendixes to residential facilities. The goals of these institutions included helping the poor, protecting communities from the menace of deviants,

protecting inmates from being taken advantage of by others, and, when possible, rehabilitating inmates (Block 1993, Nelson 1971, Wolfensberger 1974).

The decades after World War II were characterized by the highest increase of sheltered workshops and by the expansion of services to include adults with intellectual disabilities (Kiernan 2000; Nelson 1971; Noll and Trent 2004). For instance, between 1948 and 1976, the number of sheltered workshops in the USA increased from 85 to about 3000 (US Department of Labor 1979). In 2007, an estimated 136,000 adults with disabilities attended sheltered workshop in 42 states in the USA (Butterworth et al 2009). In Europe, in the early 90s, there were about 350,000 adults with disabilities in sheltered workshops. However, most of the sheltered workshops were located in The Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, France, and Germany (EIM, Business and Policy Research. 2002; Samoy and Waterplas 1992). During about the same period, in Australia there were over 900 sheltered workshops managed by 252 service providers (Treloar 2002).

Controversy about sheltered workshops

In recent decades, a debate has developed around whether sheltered workshops should be replaced by employment in the open labor market (Butterworth and Boeltzig 2008, Mank 2008, NASDDDS and ICI 2009, Weikle 2008). Some public administrations and funding agencies have fully embraced this relatively new policy. For instance, in 2007 the state of Vermont (USA) discontinued providing sheltered workshop services replacing them with integrated employment services (Sulewski 2007). Early in the 2000s the state of Washington (USA) established an employment first policy. According to this policy, applicants with disabilities are assisted in finding employment in the open labor market before any other day services are considered (DDD 2004). In 1996 British Columbia (Canada) and in 2000 New Zealand repealed their respective legislation that allowed sheltered workshops to pay workers with disabilities below the minimum wage. As a result, sheltered workshops had to either increase the wages to at least minimum wage or to discontinue their work programs (Butterworth et al. 2007). The following sections review some of the main issues in favor of and in opposition to sheltered workshops.

Issues in favor of sheltered workshops

The advantages of sheltered workshops include that they are safer alternatives to outside employment, they are less demanding for people with disabilities in terms of work and social skills, they provide greater opportunities for fostering friendships, they ensure structure during the weekdays, and they ensure assistance for life without affecting disability benefits.

An ethnographic study involving 16 adults with disabilities in a sheltered workshop revealed that this placement was a better solution compared to competitive employment because of the risks in the outside world. Perceived risks in the outside world included crime, harassment, and work that was considered too challenging (Dudley and Schatz 1985). In another study, about 70 percent of parents and caregivers reported that safety was a major concern, making sheltered workshop the preferred choice. As a matter of fact, about one-fourth of these respondents reported that safety was the most important concern influencing the choice of attending a sheltered workshop (Migliore et al. 2008).

A second advantage of sheltered workshop is the assumption that outside employment requires complex skills and not all people with disabilities can meet such demands (Treloar 2002, Visier 1998). Staff in three sheltered workshops in Northern Ireland reported that the main factors justifying participation of adults with disabilities in sheltered workshops included difficulties of concentration, poor communication skills, problems understanding instructions, and no motivation to work on the part of these adults (McConkey and Mezza 2001).

Another advantage of sheltered workshops is that they provide the opportunity for people with disabilities to develop friendships with others who have similar experiences due to their disabilities (Dudley and Schatz 1985, Weikle 2008). In a study involving about 210 adults with disabilities in sheltered workshop, their parents and caregivers, and staff in these sheltered workshop, about half of the respondents considered social environment in sheltered workshops to be an important factor in preferring sheltered workshops to outside employment. In addition, about one-third of staff reported that social environment was the most important factor influencing adults with disabilities to favor sheltered workshops (Migliore et al. 2008). According to Jordán de Urrías and Verdugo (in press) of the over 90% adults who expressed satisfaction with their work in sheltered workshops, 30% singled out friendships as being the rationale for enjoying work.

Another reason reported in favor of sheltered workshops is that they offer consistent assistance throughout the week and for virtually the entire adult life span. Sheltered workshops typically are open five days a week throughout the year, even in the case of a recession. When there is no work, consumers engage in non-paid activities, take classes, or participate in leisure activities (The Urban Institute 1975). In addition, although waiting lists may delay placements, once consumers are accepted in sheltered workshops they are unlikely to ever lose their positions. Also, placing individuals in sheltered workshops is much easier than finding them jobs in the open labor market because placement is more predictable (Conley et al. 1995).

Concerns about sheltered workshops

The main concerns about sheltered workshops revolve around four issues: working conditions, limited transition into open employment, non-compliance with international standards, and lack of self-determination.

Although sheltered workshops engage in production and operate as businesses, workers with disabilities in sheltered workshop do not get the same level of protection standards available to workers in the open labor market. For instance, a survey involving 5,000 adults with disabilities in sheltered workshop in 24 states in the USA revealed that, on average, adults with disabilities in sheltered workshop earned \$101 per month, based on an average 74 hours of work per month (NCI 2008). In a study carried out in Spain and based on 60 workers from 20 sheltered workshops, about half of the respondents reported dissatisfaction with the low wages paid at their sites (Jordán de Urrías and Verdugo in press). Lower wages are possible even in countries that have minimum wage regulations because typically sheltered workshops can apply for exemption from such regulations. As a matter of fact, adults with disabilities who work in sheltered workshops typically do not have employee status and negotiation power (Gersuny and Lefton 1970, Whitehead 1979a). Some argue that poor compensation in sheltered workshops is the result of substandard performance on the part of consumers. In response, some claim that

obsolete technologies and lack of management skills on the part of the leadership in sheltered workshops are the main reasons for insufficient revenues and, therefore, low wages (Whitehead 1979a, Whitehead 1979b). The lack of worker protection in sheltered workshop may also extend to health and safety standards. A report based on inspections in 10 sheltered workshops revealed that workers with disabilities in sheltered workshop would benefit from better ergonomics, monitoring of exposure to chemicals, and documentation of injuries and illnesses (Lenhart 2000).

A second concern about sheltered workshops is their lack of success in assisting adults with disabilities to transition into the open labor market (Biklen and Knoll 1987, Jordán de Urríes and Verdugo in press; Taylor 2004). Several authors agree that the transition rate from sheltered workshops to open labor market is very low and may range from under one percent to about five percent (Beyer et al. 2002, EIM, Business and Policy Research 2002, Samoy and Waterplas 1992, US Government Accountability Office 2001, Zivolich and E. 1991). A possible reason for the low transition rate is that work in sheltered workshops is not challenging and, therefore, people with disabilities do not acquire the skills needed in the open labor market (Fitzsimmons et al. 1974). In addition, adults with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities, have difficulties transferring skills across different work environments. As a result, training that takes place in sheltered workshops has little meaning for outside employment (Gottwald and Pendyck 1997, OECD 1994, Rogan and Hagner 1990). As a matter of fact, employers may resist hiring someone from a sheltered workshop because of the stigma associated with such background (Fawcett 1996, Harrison 1976, Strategy Unit Report to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005). Finally, transition from sheltered workshops into the open labor market is in conflict with the need for sheltered workshops to retain the higher functioning workers. Skilled workers are an important resource for sheltered workshops if these production centers are to meet the demands of the contracted work and generate sufficient revenues (Nelson 1971, Samoy and Waterplas 1992).

A third concern about sheltered workshop is that they do not meet international standards promoting integration of adults with disabilities into society. Although initially sheltered workshops were accepted as alternative day programs for adults with severe disabilities, the international organizations have always emphasized employment in the open labor market as the preferred outcome. For instance, since 1944 the International Labor Organization (ILO) has recommended that people with disabilities be trained with other workers and obtain equal employment opportunities. A number of other international documents supported full integration of adults with disabilities in society, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in 1971, or the most recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (O'Reilly 2003).

Finally, some raise concerns about the possible lack of self-determination to which adults with disabilities in sheltered workshops are subjected. An ethnographic study involving 16 adults with disabilities in a sheltered workshop revealed that about a third of participants wanted to work outside the sheltered workshop. Moreover, most of the respondents had very little or no exposure to outside employment to make an informed decision (Dudley and Schatz 1985). Another study involving 275 persons attending three-day centers in Belfast revealed that up to one-third of the participants would have liked to work outside sheltered workshops. These proportions were higher among people who had had previous work experiences in the open labor market

(McConkey and Mezza 2001). Similarly, Jordán de Urríes and Verdugo (in press) found that about 40% of the 60 adults with disabilities from 20 sheltered workshops in Spain wanted to leave the program to learn new things and make more money. In yet another study involving 210 adults with developmental disabilities in 19 sheltered workshops in the USA, the majority of adults with disabilities (74 percent), parents and caregivers (67 percent), and staff in the sheltered workshop (65 percent) thought that work outside of the sheltered workshop was the preferred choice or at least an option. Only 14 percent of adults with disabilities and only about one-third of parents and caregivers and staff believed that work outside the sheltered workshop was not the preferred choice (Migliore et al. 2007).

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