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Testimony in Favor of an "Equal Rights for the Handicapped" Constitutional Amendment before the Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Constitutional Study Commission - by Gene O'Neil, Executive Director of United Cerebral Palsy of Greater St. Paul, Inc:

The objective of my testimony is to point out to you some of the areas of discrimination that a handicapped person faces when he tries to find a job and how this discrimination can be lessened by adoption of an "Equal Rights for the Handicapped" Constitutional Amendment.

Discrimination in employment of the handicapped is something I have noted in my present capacity as Executive Director of United Cerebral Palsy of Greater St. Paul and also previously in my career, when I worked for several years in the private employment agency business.

What is discrimination in employment for the handicapped? It certainly is not discrimination if the handicapped job-seeker is not professionally or vocationally qualified to do the job. Nor is it discrimination if his handicaps truly prevent him from performing the job in a capable manner. But if the handicapped person is qualified and capable to do a job, there are several reasons given for the rejection of his employment application which are discriminatory. Typical examples include the following:

First - The Employer points out the obstacle of a few steps into the area where the handicapped employee would work, even though the prospective handicapped employee may be able to climb those steps, almost as fast as a non-handicapped employee.

Second - We would like to employ a handicapped person but our employee insurance carrier would object, when in fact, the insurance company is frequently not even asked if there would be a problem with insurance coverage.

Third - Our other employees might be upset working around a handicapped person.

Fourth - The handicapped employee might suffer an illness or accident on the job, even though the probability of this may be far less than the same things happening to older company employees.

Fifth - We just don't hire handicapped persons.

Now if these examples of typical employment application rejections of the handicapped are frequently rather flimsy ones, what is the real reason for these rejections? I think it is a feeling of uncomfortableness that many able-bodied people feel in the presence of handicapped people. Perhaps they don't want to be reminded of the harshness and difficulty that life places on some. Maybe a handicapped person raises within the able-bodied the fear that they may be disabled sometime in the future. Whatever the reason for this uncomfortable feeling that the handicapped may arouse in the employing person, it will soon be forgotten once the handicapped person is busy on th job. When employees get to know and work with the handicapped person, they will tend to overlook and even forget about disabilities. If we could just get the qualified disabled employee through the employment door he would

in most cases prove his worth to his employer.

I think the adoption of an "Equal Rights for the Handicapped" Constitutional Amendment would help provide the legal foundation and therefore the impetus, for employers, and for state and local human rights committees, if needed, to open wider the door of employment for the qualified disabled employee.