

CONGRESSIONAL KEYNOTE
SENATOR TOM HARKIN
CORPORATE DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SUMMIT
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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“GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT INCREASING EMPLOYMENT FOR
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES”

Thank you, Randy for that kind introduction. I am happy to be here with so many leaders from the business community who are committed to hiring, retaining and promoting workers with disabilities at every level of your business.

I remember working with the Chamber 21 years ago to get the ADA through Congress, and more recently to get the ADA Amendments Act passed in 2008.

I want to start by taking this opportunity to thank publicly Randy Johnson and Mike Eastman from the Chamber for your hard work on the ADA Amendments Act, a critical piece of legislation that restored

protections to millions of Americans whose rights had been compromised by a series of problematic Supreme Court rulings.

Randy and Mike, with the support and encouragement of Tom Donohue, sat down with disability advocates and worked out legislative language that formed the basis for the bill that I was proud to champion with Senator Hatch and Congressmen Steny Hoyer and Jim Sensenbrenner.

It is great to see Congressman Sensenbrenner here today as well.

Last July we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the signing of the ADA. I remember well that hot July day in 1990 when President Bush gathered thousands on the White House lawn to witness that historic event.

For me, having grown up with my deaf older brother, Frank, the opportunity to play a leadership role in crafting the ADA in the Senate was a real highlight of my Congressional career.

Like a lot of people with disabilities in his generation, Frank experienced a combination of discrimination and low expectations and it took some time for him to find a job that suited him. I remember when

he finally found a job to his liking. He got a job at a manufacturing plant in Des Moines – a good job at Delavan Corporation. Mr. Delavan decided he wanted to hire people with disabilities, and so my brother went to work there.

It was a great job. He became a drill press operator making nozzles for jet engines. He took enormous pride in his work.

Later on, when I was in the Navy, I remember coming home on leave for Christmas. I was unmarried at the time, as was Frank. So I went with him to the company he worked, which was putting on a Christmas dinner. I didn't expect anything special. But it turned out that they were honoring Frank, that night, because in 10 years at Delevan, he had not missed a single day of work and hadn't been late once.

That is characteristic of how hard-working and dedicated people with disabilities are when they are given a chance in the workplace. Frank worked at that plant for 23 years and missed just 3 days of work, and that was because of a blizzard. He was a loyal employee who did not take his job for granted.

Our goal when we passed the ADA was to create more opportunities for people like my brother to demonstrate what they could do, and not be held back because of fears, myths and stereotypes associated with their disabilities.

I remain committed to doing everything in my power to advance the four important goals that Congress established when we passed the ADA—equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.

In the last 20 years, we have seen great transformation in the accessibility of our cities and towns, our transportation and telecommunications infrastructures, our colleges and universities, and our places of public accommodation.

These kinds of changes take time, and our work is not complete. But there is no question that America is a more welcoming place for its citizens with disabilities and is better prepared to meet the needs of its injured veterans and its aging population than we were in 1990.

As we enter into the third decade of implementation of the ADA, my central priority is improving employment opportunities and

outcomes for people with disabilities. The ADA and the special education laws have combined to produce the best-educated population of people with disabilities in U.S. history. And yet, while the majority of them would like to be working, the shocking fact is that more than two thirds of Americans with disabilities are without a job.

In fact, now that the Bureau of Labor Statistics is reporting regularly on the employment situation for people with disabilities, we have strong evidence that it has gotten disproportionately worse for workers with disabilities in the last two years. According to BLS data, between March of 2009 and March of this year, the size of the disability workforce shrunk by 395,000 workers to about 4.9 million workers.

When this drop is compared with broader labor force trends, you can see that more than one in three American adults who have left the labor force in the last two years have been people with disabilities. That means that, during this recession, adults with disabilities have been leaving the labor force at a rate more than 10 times the rate of adults without disabilities.

This disturbing trend line has not received much attention from policymakers or the public. We need to recognize that it has a huge budgetary and social cost. For example, it has been accompanied by increases in applications for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits, which have grown from an average of 200,000 new applications per month at the beginning of 2008 to an average of close to 250,000 per month by the end of 2010.

This means more people receiving public disability and health insurance benefits, fewer people paying taxes, and a bigger tab for the taxpayers and businesses. It also means a loss of dignity and self-esteem for many adults with disabilities who would prefer to be working but have given up on their job search.

As leaders who know what it takes to open employment opportunities for workers with disabilities, you have the power to turn these numbers around. Together we can address this last major barrier to equality. Today's summit is a great opportunity for you to come together and say that we can do better... to say, as we enter the third

decade of the law's implementation, that now is time to get serious about the economic goals of the ADA.

If we work together, I believe we can set a realistic goal of increasing the number of adults with disabilities participating in the labor force from 4.9 million, today, to 6 million by 2015. Expanding the disability workforce by more than one million workers in four years is achievable if we get serious about making it happen.

President Obama took an important step last July to make sure that the Federal government leads by example, signing an executive order requiring the federal government to hire 100,000 additional workers with disabilities by 2015. Let's remember that the federal government represents less than 2 percent of the U.S. workforce. If we can get similar commitments from State and local governments and the private sector, we can easily exceed the six million worker threshold.

I am encouraged by the terrific leadership of companies like Walgreens and CSC, which are represented here today. When Randy Lewis, Walgreens's Senior Vice President overseeing their distribution centers, testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and

Pensions Committee last month, he pointed out that setting firm goals was helpful in producing results for Walgreens.

They announced in late 2007 a goal that 10 percent of the workers in their distribution centers nationwide would be people with disabilities by 2010. Last summer, after coming close to reaching that threshold, they decided that they would double that goal to 20 percent in the coming years.

CSC also set a public goal of hiring 100 workers with disabilities for information technology and professional jobs in partnership with Bender Consulting Services, a disability-owned company that helps them find the talent. Thanks to their proactive efforts, CSC has reported that 11 percent of their hires in the U.S. alone for the last fiscal year were people with disabilities.

To reach the goal of six million people with disabilities participating in the workforce we need to follow these leaders and make a broad commitment. If every company in the room today sets a goal as to where you want to be by 2015, that is a compelling statement that you are serious about employing, training, retaining and promoting people

with disabilities in your workforce. You can demonstrate a commitment to finding talent in a rich and under-used talent pool.

I'm not talking about picking an arbitrary number and treating it like a quota. I'm talking about establishing a benchmark that makes sense to you and your business—one that you can meet and then work to exceed.

Let's look at the Walgreens example. The Walgreens commitment started at two new distribution centers, and grew over time to become a company-wide initiative. As Randy Lewis noted when he testified last month, "Along the way, we discovered ... the impact our commitment to employing people with disabilities has had on our work environment and on each one of us. As you walk through [these new distribution centers], there is a sense of teamwork, common purpose and mutual respect unlike we had ever experienced. We set out to change the workforce but instead we found *we* were the ones who were changed."

In my role as Chair of the Senate Committee overseeing primary and secondary education, higher education, workforce development and vocational rehabilitation, I am prepared to support your goals by

promoting policies that will result in larger numbers of workers with disabilities who have the education and training to be successful in your companies.

For example, as we reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I am working to make sure that the overall goal of graduating students who are “college and career ready” applies with equal force to students with disabilities. Also, in our work on the Workforce Investment Act reauthorization, we are inserting language to make clear that vocational rehabilitation needs to prioritize working with students with disabilities while they are still in school to help them prepare for and explore competitive, integrated employment.

These are just a couple of elements of what will be a multi-year and multi-pronged initiative for me. I want your ideas and I am asking for your collaboration so that our policies are producing real results on the ground--real results that become jobs for people with disabilities and a strong, talented and loyal workforce for businesses. If there are federal policies that are getting in the way of your efforts, I want to hear about those too so we can do something about them. Making a real impact on

disability employment numbers is one of my top priorities and will remain so as long as I am in the Senate.

We have worked closely together in the past—on the original ADA and more recently on the Amendments Act.

It is time again for the business community, the disability community, and bipartisan champions in Congress to make our communities stronger.

It is time to reach for a goal that will shrink the disability benefit rolls and will take advantage of a large and diverse talent pool.

It is time to make it possible for more Americans with disabilities to experience the dignity that comes with a paycheck.

It is time to help over one million new workers with disabilities enter the labor force.

I look forward to working with the Chamber, the U.S. Business Leadership Network, and all the companies represented in this room, to strengthen the American economy and make your companies more

successful by inviting more Americans with disabilities to experience the economic self-sufficiency that comes with having a job.

Thank you.