

Remarks by Senator Tom Harkin  
Annual Meeting of the Consortium of Citizens with Disabilities  
Hall of the States  
January 16, 2014

Thank you for that kind introduction, and for this invitation to address your annual meeting. I want you to know how much I have admired and relied on the great work the Consortium has done over the many years we have been partners. Your own efforts have played such a vital role in helping me to accomplish big things in the field of disability rights over these past 40 years.

As I was looking back, I realized that the creation and development of CCD and my tenure in Congress almost perfectly overlap. You were established in 1973 and I began my service in Congress just two years after that. And here we are, four decades later, having collaborated on IDEA, the ADA, reauthorizations of the Developmental Disabilities Act, post-secondary education programs for people with disabilities, many assistive technology efforts, the Community First Choice option, and so many other legislative efforts to make a reality of the principles and goals of the ADA.

So it is an honor to be able to address this annual meeting during my last year as a Senator. I am here to say thank you. I am also here to say that our work is not done. You and I still have a big agenda to accomplish – this year and into the future.

As I look around, I see so many wonderful friends here—Katy Beh Neas, your current chairwoman, of course and many others. I know if I start to name folks I will miss someone.

Here, today, I see old friends; valued colleagues; those who have fought hard and long to achieve the goals of the ADA and to make its vision a reality. It is great to think about past accomplishments, and the partnerships that have made those accomplishments possible.

But aside from friends, there is something else I see in this room, too. That other thing I see is possibility. I see the future in this room. Because all of you, your knowledge and your aspirations, point to the future of disability policy, disability services, and how people with disabilities will be treated in the years to come.

We know that the future holds struggles and setbacks. That's the way it has always been in the fight for disability rights. We know the struggle for equality, access and opportunity is far from over. We know that, in this town, nothing is ever "settled" – there are always those who seek to roll back the rights and gains of people with disabilities. We know we need to continue this fight.

For instance, just this week, we witnessed an outrageous attempt in Congress to weaken Social Security Disability Insurance. A Republican proposal would have reduced those benefits if a person receives unemployment insurance.

As I and other members of Congress fought this week to defeat that bad idea, many of you in this room came to the rescue—T.J. Suttcliff of The Arc of the United States, and Rebecca Vallas of NOSSCR (nos cur), I'm talking about you especially! And many others have also helped with this fight.

There are still so many areas in which we need to continue the fight – with and for -- people with disabilities.

And that's exactly why I seized this opportunity to show up here, where over 120 disability organizations are gathered. I want to share with you some of my ideas about continuing our fight for disability rights and full opportunity for people with disabilities.

You asked me to bring you some challenges and goals for the future. I could spend all afternoon detailing my to-do list. But I have whittled my list down to five top priorities. Here goes:

**First**, and possibly foremost, you know that employment of people with disabilities has been a focus of mine throughout my career, but especially during the past four years. In April 2011, I suggested we set a goal to get six million people with disabilities in the workforce. That goal has proven to be difficult to achieve, but we can't let the difficulty of a goal discourage us. Work is the lynch pin to independence. It is what makes all other things possible, and we need to keep our focus on expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities. So I ask you to stay focused on that goal.

**Second**, we need to continue to work to change the institutional bias in our current Medicaid policy; we need to continue to promote community living. Over the past 20 years, we've seen a huge change in how states spend their Medicaid dollars. More money now goes to home and community-based efforts than goes to institutions. But we still have the bias. Home and community-based services are still "exceptions" allowed through waivers. We need to make community living the default, and institutional care the exception.

The Community First Choice option in the ACA will help to make this goal a reality. But we need to get more states to adopt the program. So far, Oregon and

California have adopted the program, and I ask you to push and get more states to take advantage of the CFC option.

**Third**, we need to increase the high school graduation rate of students with disabilities, and to expand their options for post-secondary education. High school graduation is a gateway to other options for people with disabilities. Policies that limit the ability of a student with a disability to earn a diploma – for example, blocking access to the general education curriculum, or lack of services and supports to be successful in school – are all forms of discrimination that we need to fight against.

Right now, over 25 states have a high school graduation rate for students with disabilities that is less than 60%. That is just unacceptable. It keeps the door closed for so many young people. Let's pledge to work to increase that rate for all states.

**Fourth**, a goal that should go hand-in-hand with increasing graduation rates is to increase efforts by vocational rehabilitation programs to focus on transitioning youth. If young people, the folks I call the ADA generation, are going to be successful, they need to be engaged in experiencing the possibility of post-secondary education and careers. We need our VR services to be focused on working in conjunction with high schools, and making sure that young people get the experiences necessary to be successful as they make the transition from IDEA programs and supports. My efforts to get WIA passed this year will address some of these issues, and I need your support to get WIA over the finish line.

And my **fifth** charge is this: Let's pay greater attention to identifying disability as early in a child's life as possible. Our wonderful IDEA Part C program was passed in 1986, a couple years after I came to the Senate. It was

finally fully implemented in every state in 1993. But we still hear stories of children with autism or fetal alcohol syndrome or fragile X or a developmental delay, who are not identified until well into the early childhood years.

And we have seen states cut back on their early intervention services, making eligibility for early intervention much more difficult. Let's call for a reinstatement of a robust early intervention system in all 50 states, and for early screening practices that will identify developmental delays as early as possible, particularly for those children living in underserved locations.

Friends, *those* are the five priorities I urge you to embrace. That is the "possibility" for the disability community that I see in this room. Employment, community access, education, transition services, health promotion, and robust early intervention.

And I know that folks here could identify many more areas that are also important:

- the passage of the ABLE Act so that individuals with disabilities can accrue capital;
- ratification of the CRPD;
- the passage of a restraint and seclusion law that would provide for prevention and early intervention services so behavioral concerns would be greatly reduced in our schools;
- amendments to the Air Carriers Act that would make air travel truly accessible for all;
- increased accessibility of technology, including all new devices that come to market;

- the passage of the Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013, which would increase preventive services in schools, and provide supports for students and families in their schools and communities;
- visit-ability standards for new home construction, so all people, no matter how they move about, can visit houses and apartments.

I could go on and on, because the needs are many, and we must strive to address all of those needs.

You know, since announcing my retirement from the Senate almost a year ago today, I constantly get the question, “Who will be our champion for disability issues after you leave?”

The answer to that question is easy. It is YOU, and you, and you. Every single one of you. There is great power in our collective action and our united voice. Your consortium is built on that wisdom. As always, your efforts and advocacy need to be carried out, as Nelson Mandela said, “with goodness and compassion.”

Another leader, one quite different from Nelson Mandela, but one with many decades of leadership experience said this:

“You don't lead by hitting people over the head - that's not leadership; that's assault.”

That leader was President Dwight D. Eisenhower—and he was right.

As an ambitious disability community, we cannot afford to bully one another. We cannot indulge in infighting. We cannot waste resources painting one another as good or bad, the “right” kind of disabled or the “wrong” kind. We don't

have enough time, or energy, or resources to squander on those kinds of distractions. We need to focus all of our energy to reach the great goals and dreams we have for -- for this generation of people with disabilities, and for those generations to come.

So while I have set forth five challenges for you, perhaps the biggest and most difficult challenge is work together; to find common ground; to find one voice; and to marshal your collective resources to make each of our communities and all of the country a better place for people with disabilities.

Thank you for your great friendship and for your amazingly productive partnership over the years. **I** make you this promise: I will continue to work in the years to come to reach **all** of our shared goals.