

Testimony by David Egan
before the
U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
[Improving Employment Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities](#)
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**“Employing Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities
is a Smart Business Decision and a Social Responsibility”**

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Employing Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities is a Smart Business Decision and a Social Responsibility

First I want to thank Chairman Harkin and the members of the Committee to dedicate a full hearing on a topic that is dear to me:

[Improving Employment Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities](#)

This is also a familiar topic for Senator Harkin who many years ago employed Dan Piper, an individual with Down syndrome to work at his district office in Iowa. Chairman Harkin is a pioneer in the employment of people with intellectual disabilities and I was honored to be the first recipient of the Dan Piper Award. I met the Piper family then and feel a special bond with Dan and the Chairman as his mom told me that we had a lot in common.

I am here to tell you my story but I am also here to be the voice of many who are seeking to be valued members of our society. I will tell you how it all started and why I am able to succeed. I will also share some thoughts on the challenges and some strategies and recommendations to increase employment for people with disabilities.

My journey to employment took many years to prepare. All through the years, there were very special people who helped me: my family, neighbors, friends, teachers, coaches and mentors who made a difference in my life; **it takes a TEAM. They all helped me overcome obstacles.**

Adults with intellectual disabilities can be successful employees. I and many others like me have demonstrated that we can contribute in the workplace. However, there is a lot more that we can do to make it easier for people with intellectual disabilities to showcase their abilities. A lot more needs to be done so that people like me are not confined in institutions and limited to working in sheltered workshops. When people are successfully employed, they contribute to the well being of our society rather than becoming a burden.

Preparation for work and inclusion starts at home. In my family, I was taught that work is part of life. Early on, I helped and I continue to help with family chores. I was not excused because of my disability. On the contrary, I engaged in all of the activities: the fun ones and not so fun. It is with family, school and community that the ball got rolling. I must have learned then that I was in charge of my attitude, and **I am in charge of my life.**

It was hard for me to accept the fact that I have Down syndrome, but it became easier when I discovered that I was not alone. I know that I have a disability just like many others in this world but my disability does not get in the way when I train and compete in Special Olympics sports. It is not an obstacle when I learn and perform; it is not a barrier when I take the bus to go to work; when I earn my paycheck every two weeks. **My disability is not an obstacle; I think of all the things that I CAN DO.**

I started learning about work in high school with an internship at the Wild Life Federation and then at the Davis Center vocational training. However, the best internship was with Booz Allen and Hamilton. I started at Booz Allen and Hamilton (BAH) when I was a junior in High School as a clerk in the Distribution Center. There was a program called the “BRIDGES program” sponsored by the Marriott Foundation to encourage employers to have interns with intellectual disabilities to try working and exploring job opportunities.

In 1996, the high school called my mom to ask if I was willing to intern at BAH during that summer. However, there was one condition: I had to be able to get to work on my own. The internship did not include transportation. My family and I discussed our options and my mom started training me on taking the bus to work. She went with me a few times showing me how people get on and off. She made sure I understood some basic security in crossing the roads and that I knew where to take the bus and where to get off. It took a week and then I was completely on my own throughout the summer. I have taken the bus now for the past 15 years.

My first supervisor, Felicia was great. She took it upon herself to teach me everything there was to know about being a clerk in the Distribution Center. **She believed in me.** She wanted me to fit and after the summer internship, she asked me if I wanted to stay and become a staff employee. The Fairfax County public school sent a job coach to help out, but that did not work out too well. Felicia did not want to have a middle person to show me the ropes. She taught me how to fill out my timesheet and establish a routine for the day.

Later in my career, I had another supervisor, Showanda who preferred to have a job coach from Service Source to teach me new skills. I learned to use the computer systems and follow the instructions of a manifest, ensuring that clients got their packages. I also learned to work in the supply room when I had down time.

I am treated like other employees at BAH. I receive benefits, time off, and an annual 360 degrees assessment like everyone else. I go to compulsory training and participate in All Hands meetings, and corporate events. The company cares about my personal and professional development.

I also made many friends at BAH. One of them is Greg, a senior employee in the Distribution Center who knows me well and has been my role model for the past 14 years. He truly cares about me and gives me guidance. At BAH, everyone from the senior managers to the most junior employees help each other succeed. **I feel that I am part of the team.** BAH offers me more than a job, it is a career.

The CEO, Dr. Shrader, has stated and I quote: “Work provides more than a paycheck. It brings dignity and community. When businesses open job opportunities to men and women with disabilities, everyone benefits – the individual, the company and society at large.”

My firm is special, not just because they employ me **but because they help me succeed.** They support the causes that are important to me. They

encourage me to volunteer and be an advocate for people with intellectual disabilities.

I enjoy my after work activities in the community: I was selected to be the first ever self-advocate to serve as a Board member on the Down Syndrome Association for Northern Virginia (DSANV) and then last year, I was elected to be also the first self-advocate on the Board of the Down Syndrome Affiliates in Action (DSAIA). These associations are important because they create awareness and provide support to parents, families, children and adults with Down syndrome. It is like an extended family where we care about each other and make sure that all members reach their full potential.

The DSANV this year has worked on the following issues:

- 1). Learning Program - Our work in not only teaching students but also parents and educators of the strategies and effective ways on helping individuals with Ds learn and grow.
- 2). The ABLE Act - This is critical legislature for individuals with Ds to live a full life like any other individuals. The bill will allow individuals with disabilities and their families the opportunity to save money to help to pay for things like education, housing, travel, community supports and training without disqualifying them from critical benefits such as Medicaid. These needs are critical to both employment and community inclusion.
- 3). Outreach into the Hispanic Community - This is an important initiative in helping the Hispanic population advocate for their rights within the Ds community.
- 4). Employment – Survey the current status of employment and making sure individuals with Ds have access to a job, but are also an opportunity to find their dream job.

My other extended family is Special Olympics. I am an athlete, a Global Messenger and an advocate promoting awareness that we are capable people. Special Olympics at the local, state, national and international level is key to building confidence in athletes who train, creating opportunities for young and old to shine in the competition, building an environment for families to celebrate the successes of their sons and daughters. The Special Olympics programs are great promoter of inclusion with the Healthy Athlete, Young Athletes, Unified Sports, Global Messenger and the Best Buddies. All of these programs help us the athletes to set objectives and work towards achieving simple and big successes.

As a former Board Member of Special Olympics Virginia, I put forward a motion requesting that SOVA hires a person with intellectual disability on their staff. **It is economically hard but the right thing to do and I am proud to say that SOVA now** hired a person with disability on their staff. **Special Olympics means a lot to me, my siblings and my family.**

I started competing at age 8. While I learned to swim in my neighborhood pool with my sisters, I only gained confidence when I joined Special Olympics. I also learned to play on a team when I started playing basketball and I had to pass the ball rather than run with it. I enjoy all of the sports, I used to do speed skating, track and field but now I play soccer, basketball and enjoy softball with my brother and the unified team. Special Olympics also connects me to the world. I was very lucky to participate in international Global Congress events in the Netherlands in 2000 and in Morocco in 2010.

I learned that people in the world have more in common than we think.

When I was 12, I was dreaming of winning the race in Special Olympics. (*I still like the competition and want to win many races.*) **But now, I dare to dream about changing the way people think of us, changing the perceptions, opening doors for people with disabilities to shine and overcome the**

disabilities not only on the court but in the workplace and at all levels of our society.

Now I want to ask all of you. **Do you want to dare to dream and imagine the PossABILITIES?** Dream with me of a world where people are respected and encouraged to succeed: a world where people with intellectual disabilities are fully accepted and have great friends. We need to change the world **and we are**. It is my role to demonstrate abilities and it is **OUR ROLE** as a team to make it happen.

Some successful strategies that will help promoting and implementing competitive integrated work settings include starting early in the educational system to mainstream students, offer them internships in high school and then during vocational training. Give employers incentives for employing people with intellectual disabilities. Expand the public transportation or other means of transportation as many cannot depend on family or friends to get to work on a regular basis.

The barriers to employing people with intellectual disabilities are rooted in perceptions and stereotypes. Our group of adults range in capabilities like the general population and therefore not all of us need to be in sheltered workshops or enclaves with full supervision. These environments are needed but not sufficient. If families are exposed to healthy and safe employment settings, they will be willing to take a risk like my family did and work in the competitive mainstream work environment.

Another barrier has to do with the concern that employers have with the cost of accommodations. However many adults with intellectual disabilities do not have physical accommodation needs, but rather need a mentor and a supportive supervisor. We understand the routine and adjust to it quite well.

The policy conclusion needed is to encourage employers to hire more people with intellectual disabilities and one size does not fit all, but there are many jobs

that fit both the needs of the employee and the employer. I strongly believe that it is good business decision and a social responsibility. It is an important investment that grows.

Adults with intellectual disabilities can be successful. We have a **message to share**, a message of hope, a message of determination to succeed and reach full potential. Slow learning and unique problems that we have are not barriers to success. **There may be obstacles but they can be overcome with open hearts and minds.**

Adding us to the roster is not enough; you need to **INCLUDE US in all aspects of the business**. We are determined to succeed and reach full potential. Our passion, persistence and patience will make us walk the path, overcome the obstacles in the journey and forge new paths that were closed to people with intellectual disabilities.

We, the people with intellectual disabilities, have a place in the society and in the workforce; we serve, we contribute, we are reliable, caring, consistent, and predictable. Those among us with Down syndrome can lead normal lives with the help and support of family and community. We are able to learn if taught with patience. We are able to succeed if given the right motivation and placed in an accepting environment that helps us thrive. Include us in all aspects of life, in your plans and in your decisions and you will not regret it. Then our nation and the world will be a better place for all of us: **a place where people with disabilities do not have to hide and are fully accepted.**
We need help, but not pity. We hope that we are valued and treated with dignity.

In summary, our goal is to make sure that all people with intellectual disabilities can launch successful careers according to their potential. To achieve that goal, we need strong family and community support, good education and social skills, internships during high school and a seamless transition from school to work showing that WE CAN achieve because people have

high expectations and value our contributions. More effective public transportation would make it easier for individuals to be self-sufficient in getting to work on a daily basis. We also need mentors in the workplace, supervisors who are willing to take a risk and invest some time to teach us new skills and help us learn. This is what it means to have an inclusive workforce. This is how we fulfill our social responsibility and make a good investment. Our nation and the world will be a better place for all of us: **a place where people with disabilities do not have to hide and are fully valued and accepted.**