

**Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr**

**Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Highlighting Innovations, Maximizing Inclusive Practices and Overcoming Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities**

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February 8, 2022

Good morning Chair Murray

Thank you for working with me to schedule this hearing.

Thank you to our witnesses for testifying today. I am glad to see that we could have some of you join us in the hearing room.

Today we are here to discuss employment for people with disabilities

This is always an important topic, but especially so during the uncertain times we are facing due to the pandemic.

I don't know about you, but I am happy to be at work today.

I'm looking forward to putting in a hard day's work with my colleagues to find solutions to help the people of this country.

I'm glad I got to come to work today because I believe that having a job is an essential element of the American dream.

Having a job is about more than a paycheck.

Having a job is about participating in society, maintaining independence and building a sense of purpose. Today, there are 10.9 million job openings in America. Our total unemployment rate is at 4 percent

But for workers with disabilities, the numbers look a little different  
Unemployment rates for people with disabilities have been historically high  
Despite improvements last year, the unemployment rate for people with  
disabilities is nearly double that of the rest of the population – at 7.9 percent.

Further, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, across all age groups,  
people with disabilities are less likely to be employed than people with no  
disabilities.

These numbers are troubling.

As we focus on getting people back to work, we have to help employers and  
individuals understand that our communities are better off when we include  
individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

We also have to think about what it means to be working in a pandemic.  
COVID-19 has changed the way we work and transformed our economy.  
Virtual meetings have become the norm, and access to technology is more  
important than ever.

Looking around at all of the devices in this room is a great example of the  
importance of technology. We can have everyone at this hearing today because of  
technology.

These devices have also helped companies transition to remote work, where  
many employees perform their job from home.

The ability to work remotely is one example of an accommodation that may make a workplace more inclusive.

While remote work is a great option for some companies and employees, we know that it does not work for everyone. The ability to work on the job remains a critical piece of the equation.

Employers are looking everywhere for people to hire. There are “help wanted” signs in storefronts across the country.

I frequently hear from businesses in North Carolina about the need for skilled workers. These businesses also share with me the innovative ways they are recruiting new talent.

Employers are tapping in to talent pools that they did not look to in the past.

What can we do to continue this positive trend?

To start, Congress does not need to make it harder for people to find jobs or harder for businesses to grow.

Our job should be to support pathways to employment – not eliminate options.

By encouraging these pathways to employment, we can open up a world of opportunities.

We need to work with individuals and employers to learn more about what solutions make the most sense.

I strongly believe in empowering individuals to make decisions about their education, job training, and where and when and how they want to work.

We have to be mindful that not everyone will agree with what any one of us would individually choose to do for work.

So we need to build in a culture of respect that allows individuals to make decisions that best meet their own individual needs. What empowers them to make a good decision? What satisfies their personal perspective of meaningful and rewarding work?

The federal government can also lead by example.

In the previous administration, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs established voluntary goals for contractors to hire individuals with disabilities. These goals have been a great success in signifying a partnership between private sector contractors and the federal government.

While this is one example, every individual and every job is different. There is not going to be a “one-size-fits-all” answer to the questions we have today. The Senators at this hearing have demonstrated the ability to come together to solve difficult problems.

Senator Casey and I worked together on the ABLE Act in 2014 to better support individuals with disabilities to plan for their futures with tax-free savings accounts.

As part of that process, we took the opportunity to meet with every group on every side of the issue to find agreement.

I think that is how we should handle today's topic, and I look forward to speaking with today's panel to see what commonsense solutions we can find.

Thanks again to our witnesses for testifying today.

Your insight will be invaluable as we consider ways to better support employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

I look forward to your testimony, and I thank the Chair.