



Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Chairman

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Statement of Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)

At the HELP Committee Hearing:

“Fulfilling the Promise: Overcoming Persistent Barriers to Economic Self-Sufficiency for People with Disabilities”

As Prepared for Delivery

“Today’s hearing will focus on the urgent national challenge of people with disabilities living in poverty and what we can do about it.

“Two days ago, the Census Bureau issued its 2013 report on poverty in the United States. The report had some good news: poverty for the overall population went down half a percentage point, from 15 percent to 14.5 percent. There was even better news with regard to children, where the poverty rate fell almost two percentage points. Other groups including Asian-Americans, Hispanics, women, and people in all parts of the country—northeast, south, mid-west and west – saw declines.

“But those with a disability were one of just two groups to see an increase. Shockingly, people with a disability now have a 28.8 percent poverty rate—higher than any gender, ethnic, or racial group tracked by the Census Bureau – and twice the rate of those without disabilities.

“Twenty-four years ago, Congress passed the *Americans with Disabilities Act*. We have been successful at meeting many of the goals of the ADA. We have increased the accessibility of our buildings, our streets, even our parks, beaches and recreation areas. And we’ve made our books and TVs, telephones and computers more accessible as well. And for many Americans with disabilities, our workplaces have become more accessible as well.

“But far too few people with disabilities are in the workforce! The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 12.8 percent, more than double the six percent unemployment rate for people without disabilities. Of the almost 29 million people with disabilities over 16 years of age, less than 20 percent participate in the workforce compared with nearly 70 percent of those without a disability.

“If almost 30 percent of people with disabilities are living in poverty; a rate that is going up; and the unemployment rate for people with disabilities continues to be double that of people without disabilities, and only 20 percent participate in the workforce, then we face a serious problem – indeed, a crisis. We are far from meeting the ADA’s goal of economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities.

“To state the obvious, not being part of the workforce contributes powerfully to the incidence of poverty. Unfortunately, these negative trends are long-term and entrenched. We have not seen improvements over time and, as I said earlier, compared to last year, the poverty rate for people with disabilities has actually increased.

“Because of these stubborn trends, I asked my HELP Committee oversight staff to take a closer look at the problem. I asked staff to investigate why people with disabilities live in poverty at a greater rate than those without disabilities, and how they fare at moving out of poverty and into the middle class.

“We heard from over 400 people with disabilities from across the country, all of whom had or currently live at the poverty level. These participants were generous in sharing their stories and circumstances. Here is what we learned:

- Living with a disability in America can be both economically and socially costly;
- Many people with disabilities fear that earning or saving too much money could cause them to lose access to supports that they need to live independently in the community;
- People with disabilities often cannot save for emergencies and unanticipated challenges;
- People with disabilities often cannot participate in the workforce because they lack reliable, accessible transportation and accessible, affordable housing; and
- People with disabilities continue to report experiencing employment discrimination, discriminatory wages, inaccessible workplaces, and persistently low expectations about what they can accomplish.

“Congress needs to address these concerns. We need strategies to break through these barriers and create paths to the middle class for the nearly 29 percent of people with disabilities living in poverty.

“As a way to begin to address these concerns, today I am introducing three bills, the *Universal Home Design Act*, the *Accessible Transportation for All Act*, and the *Exercise and Fitness for All Act*. These bills address a number of the barriers – accessible housing, accessible transportation – that people with disabilities described during our investigation.

“To hear more in depth about these concerns and to look toward solutions, we will hear from people with disabilities who participated in this HELP Committee investigation, and also from national experts about how to address this persistent problem. We will learn from their stories and hear their best ideas about how we can increase opportunities for people with disabilities to move out of poverty and into the middle class.”

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