

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 have felt a special bond to Dan and the Chairman ever since. I believe that we all share a lot in common with our outlooks and values.

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 that affect people with intellectual disabilities; and furthermore, some strategies and recommendations to overcome those challenges.

My journey to employment took many years of preparation. All through the years, there were very special people: 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 the not so fun. It is with family, school, and community that the ball got rolling. I learned then that I was in charge of my attitude, and **I am in charge of my life.**

When I was younger, 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 later at the Davis Center, a vocational training program. However, the best internship was with Booz Allen Hamilton. I started at Booz Allen Hamilton 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 Booz Allen Hamilton 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. I have been taking 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 in and after the summer internship, she asked me if I wanted to stay with the company and become a staff employee. The Fairfax County public school system 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 receive their packages. I also learned to work in the supply room when I had downtime.

I am treated like other employees at Booz Allen Hamilton. I receive benefits, time off, and an annual 360 degree assessment like everyone else. I go to compulsory training, participate in all-hands meetings, and attend corporate events. The company cares about my personal and professional development.

I have also made many friends at Booz Allen Hamilton. 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 Booz Allen Hamilton, everyone from the senior managers to the most junior employees help each other succeed. **I feel that I am part of the team.** Booz Allen Hamilton offers me more than a job, it offers me 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 as an individual**. In addition, they support 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 self-advocate serving as a board member for the Down Syndrome Association for Northern Virginia (DSANV) and then last year, I was also elected to be 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 teaching both students and parents and educators about strategies and effective ways of helping individuals with Down syndrome learn and grow.
- 2). The ABLE Act - This is critical legislation for individuals with Down syndrome to live a full life, just like any other individual. 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. This bill will reach out and support more than just individuals with Down syndrome. It will end discrimination in the area of tax-sheltered accounts and allow for every family to save effectively for their children. I hope that you senators will

look into this bill and help see it to a successful passage.

3). Outreach into the Hispanic community - This is an important initiative in helping the Hispanic population advocate for their rights within the Down syndrome community.

4). Employment – We are surveying the current status of employment and making sure individuals with Down syndrome have access to jobs and also opportunities to find their dream jobs.

My other extended family is Special Olympics. I am an athlete, a Global Messenger, and an advocate. I want to promote awareness and show that people with intellectual disabilities can be capable and productive people. Special Olympics at the local, state, national, and international level is instrumental in building confidence in athletes. The mission of Special Olympics is to provide opportunities for young and old to shine in competition, building an environment for families to celebrate the successes of their sons and daughters. That mission has not changed in the past 40 years since Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded the movement. She believed in people and her message is a message of hope, human dignity and inclusion. In her address at the 1987 World Games in Indiana, she said to the athletes and I quote:

*“You are the stars, and the world is watching you.
By your presence, you send a message to every village, every city, and every nation.
You send a message of hope and a message of victory.
The right **to play on any playing field**, you have earned it.
The right **to study in any school**, you have earned it.
The right **to hold a job**, you have earned it.
The right **to be anyone’s neighbor**, you have earned it.”*

She has inspired people around the globe to become believers and follow in her footsteps. Her message is a message of hope and opportunity. Our oath is: “Let me win, if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt”.

Special Olympics programs are great promoters of inclusion, with programs like Healthy Athletes, Young Athletes, Unified Sports, Global Messengers, and 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 was economically hard, but the right thing to do, and I am proud to say that SOVA has now hired a person with a disability on their staff. Special Olympics means a lot to myself, my siblings, my family, and so many others.**

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 many sports, I used to do speed skating, track and field, but now I play soccer, basketball, and enjoy softball with my brother on a unified team Special Olympic team. Special Olympics also connects me to the world. I was very lucky to participate in the 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 younger, I was dreaming of winning every 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 people with intellectual disabilities, changing perceptions, opening doors for people with disabilities to shine and overcome their 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 and offer them internships in high school and then during vocational training. Give employers incentives for employing people with intellectual disabilities. Expand 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 expensive 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 a 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 our full potential. Slow learning and unique problems that we have are not

barriers to success. **There may be challenges ahead, 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 our full potential. Our passion, persistence and patience will make us walk the path, to overcome the obstacles in the journey, and to forge new paths for people with intellectual disabilities.

We, the people with intellectual disabilities, have a place in 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, social skill development, internships during high school, and a seamless transition from school to work, which will show that WE CAN achieve success and make valuable 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.**

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