

STATEMENT OF TARYN WILLIAMS  
NOMINEE FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR  
FOR DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT POLICY  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS OF  
THE UNITED STATES SENATE  
MAY 27, 2021

Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee. It is a privilege to appear before you as you consider my nomination for Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy.

I want to thank President Biden and Vice President Harris for the honor of this nomination. I share their commitment to advancing the rights of people with disabilities.

I also want to acknowledge my aunts, cousins, family and friends for their love and encouragement. My husband Reggie who has been by my side for more than twenty years, including today: Thank you for always supporting me.

And, my mom who believed so strongly that I should be able to shape my own destiny. From childhood, you taught me to find my own voice and learn to advocate for myself. First with doctors, then with teachers and classmates, and finally with colleagues. You shared that it wouldn't be easy as a Black woman in this world, that there would be times I faced discrimination, times that I would fail, but that I should never give up on my journey to find my way in this world. How my mom raised me has shaped who I am and my career in disability policy -- the conviction that everyone, including people with disabilities, should have the opportunity to not just learn and earn but also to advocate for themselves and fully participate in all aspects of community life.

As I reflect on my career, there are key moments that have made me who I am today. At the age of 22, newly out of graduate school, I was denied health insurance by my small nonprofit employer for my preexisting condition of ulcerative colitis. I was fortunate that I was still young enough to qualify for my mother's insurance. Shortly after, I underwent emergency surgery for complications from that condition. I wondered whether I would be able to keep my job. In 2008, I cycled in and out of emergency rooms with more complications. It was then that I asked for my first set of accommodations from my employer. I was terrified and certain that my career would be over before it really got started. But colleagues who were also members of the disability community reached out to me. Within the community, that young woman who had grown up with a chronic condition became an adult who understood how many of my fears and aspirations were shared by millions of people with disabilities living in this country.

I am sharing these moments with you because they helped define my understanding of the struggles and barriers that so many disabled people and their loved ones face each day. I know firsthand how challenging it can be to work as a person with a disability and

to wonder whether my request for accommodations will be accepted or if knowledge of my disability will cause others to question whether I am suited for a job.

I spent six years at nonprofits focused on research, policy, and practice designed to improve educational opportunities for all students and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. I then went on to a decade of service – as a career public servant – at the Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy as a policy advisor on the Youth Policy Team, Director of the Youth Policy Team, and as Chief of Staff. I also took on detail assignments – working with the Senate HELP Committee on Disability Policy and with the White House as an Associate Director of Public Engagement and Liaison to the Disability Community.

Fundamental to my approach is a firm belief that we must heed what advocates with disabilities tell us they need in order to be successful. This is the disability community’s mantra: nothing about us, without us. My past two years leading a team working on anti-poverty issues has only deepened my firm commitment to working on behalf of people with disabilities, many of whom are low-income, to advance policies to address the economic security of individuals, families and communities.

ODEP’s research, evidence-based policies and practices, and expert technical assistance will play a critical role in ensuring that people with disabilities are part of our economic recovery. Now more than ever, we must work across the federal government, in states, with the private sector, and in partnership with people with disabilities, members of their families and service providers to build a better future.

I am honored by this nomination and the opportunity to once again work alongside the exceptional staff at the Labor Department who are committed to advancing employment opportunities and ensuring fair treatment in the workplace for all workers, including people with disabilities.

Thank you.