

**Statement of Erin Willman
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**All Means All: Empowering People with Disabilities to Thrive in Careers and
the Workplace**

**United States Senate
Special Committee on Aging**

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Before I begin, I would like to thank Senator Casey, Senator Braun, and all of the members of the Aging Committee for inviting me to come down to this nation's great capital and for having me here to speak on a subject that is very dear to my heart.

When I lost my vision at the age of 15, I went through a very familiar experience for many disabled teenagers. I started to question what my future was going to look like.

As many young people do, I went looking for employment only to be met with rejection time and time again due to the fact that all people could see was my white cane and all of the things I couldn't do, instead of the things I was capable of.

After all this time and all of the continuous rejections I started to become discouraged. I was beginning to question what my worth was.

After going to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation I was told that I would never be able to have competitive employment.

Thankfully I have a wonderful and supportive family. On a particularly bad day my dad tried to cheer me up by playing a game. It was a thought experiment on what I would do if I could create a job, since I couldn't find one. We had come up with a coffee business. My reasoning at the time was that coffee is something that is known to bring people together. So why not use that to bring both able-bodied and disabled people together.

We kept talking about it for days until we realized we could create a business like the one we imagined, we named it White Cane Coffee

From that very first discussion we knew we wanted to do 2 things with the company. Firstly, we wanted to have Braille on all of our packaging. Secondly, I wanted to hire other people with disabilities so that they could have the same opportunity for competitive employment. I figured that if I wasn't getting hired due to my disability, others in my community might not have been faring much better.

Now I knew at the time a little bit about the sheltered workshops due to my older brother working in one for a time when I was younger. While working there he was only being paid \$1.50 an hour, which is not only much less than minimum wage in Pennsylvania but he was also losing money due to the price of transit. He was also not allowed to pack a hot lunch or use the microwave in the kitchen and the able-bodied staff not only looked down on the disabled employees but kept a cold distance from them. Needless to say, he was my first employee.

Meanwhile at White Cane Coffee, our staff has full access to warm meals and have always been treated with respect. Some businesses treat their employees as liabilities while we treat ours as assets.

As my business grew from an online store to a brick-and-mortar shop, I was able to hire more people with disabilities. That growth has also given me the privilege to speak with schools for the blind to discuss with the students about their futures.

I will never forget when we hired an employee, we'll call Jay. He had also worked at a sheltered workshop. When he came to us he said that he was willing to work for \$7.25 or less. The "or less" caught our attention. Along the way in his life, someone had made him feel like he was worth less. To this day I am deeply upset that he was made to feel that way, but I also think of all of the other disabled people in this country who are either going through such an ordeal or already have.

When we hired him, we made sure that he knew that he had worth, he would be starting at \$9 an hour, and we couldn't wait to see him come in on Monday. He has been an incredible employee since that day. No matter what he is always on time, even when he has to walk in terrible weather. He also has risen in our

business and is now a team leader and is teaching other employees. All of this because someone believed in him. I've noticed the same loyalty and drive in all of my employees. I've never before heard a group of people speak so enthusiastically about their jobs and being able to tell their families what they have been doing at work.

Since opening our company, we have won numerous ethical employment awards due to the fact that we treated people like people. If one small coffee manufacturing company in Pennsylvania can achieve such success, then there's no reason for larger companies to not do the same.

Even making smaller changes to adapt the workplace increases productivity and morale while also lowering employee turnover. The rhetoric that people don't want to work anymore is simply untrue. People want to work, they just want to be treated and paid what they deserve.

I have always said that if you change one life you change the world. By passing the Transformation to Competitive Employment Act you will be changing countless lives. So I implore you all, change the world.