

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement

"All Means All: Empowering People with Disabilities to Thrive in Careers and the Workplace"

Good morning, everyone and welcome to the Senate Special Committee on Aging. This hearing will come to order. This is our twelfth hearing of the Special Committee on Aging in the 118th Congress.

Today, we will discuss a topic of growing national significance: employment for people with disabilities. As of January of 2024, the labor force participation rate of people with disabilities was 40.5 percent, that number is up from 32.7 percent, just since April 2020. So significant growth in that short time period. Disability employment is at the highest levels since record keeping began in 2008. More people with disabilities are looking for, are finding, and are retaining employment than ever before.

These increases in disability employment are happening as more states and businesses move away from segregated, subminimum wage employment into competitive integrated employment. Like everything there, we have to have acronyms, some of us may refer to it as CIE or Competitive integrated employment. This means that people with disabilities are paid at or above minimum wage, and they also, with Competitive Integrated Employment, would have opportunities for advancement, and work alongside people with disabilities and without disabilities. Competitive integrated employment is possible for all people with disabilities and is the standard for disability employment.

In this pamphlet, I will go to the picture here, the pamphlet is entitled 'Competitive Integrated Employment, the standard for disability employment' and on this panel, we make reference to Hannah, who is a sales associate. She is a young woman with intellectual developmental delays from Southeastern Pennsylvania who is working in the stockroom at her retail job. You can also see, on another panel here, Chris, a deaf-blind man from Central Pennsylvania, working as an accessibility engineer from his computer at home. So, there is a lot of variety to this employment.

Competitive integrated employment is truly possible when we work with businesses and workers to create situations that work for everyone. That works for the employees as well as the employer. That is why my *Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act*, the so called, *TCIEA*, legislation provides essential support to states and businesses to facilitate successful transitions to competitive integrated employment. Senator Daines from Montana is a co-sponsor of that bill. This bill makes it so people with disabilities who want to work will be able to work.

Workplaces across the country have achieved this reality. And we will highlight that success in today's hearing. We will hear from experts and people with lived experience about what people with disabilities need to thrive in the workforce.

Our witnesses will be able to speak about successful employment outcomes in various work environments, from small businesses to large corporations. With the right support, people with disabilities can thrive in their work environments, and we must create an ecosystem that supports their ability to do so. This happens by ensuring they find a good match in an employer. It happens by creating healthy work environments that balance the right combination of natural supports and reasonable accommodations so that people can thrive in the workplace. And it happens by ensuring businesses have the proper resources and the support they need to provide their employees with these healthy work environments.

That is why I am also proud to once again, to sponsor the Disability Employment Incentive Act during this Congress. This bill would expand three existing tax benefits to businesses that successfully hire and retain people with disabilities. The *Disability Employment Incentive Act* would help support businesses that hire people with disabilities in competitive integrated employment. This bill supports the transition to a fully integrated workforce where people with disabilities work alongside people without disabilities, for equal compensation, and have the same opportunities for advancement as their peers.

We have seen substantial progress in disability employment in recent years as we made references to the gain in percentage of the people that are in the workforce. But even with this progress over just a few short years, people with disabilities continue to work at almost half the rate of people without disabilities. So, when we increase from 32.7 to 40.5 in the workforce participation rate, that was great growth for a short period of time but still at that 40.5 level; that is still half the rate of labor force participation compared to those without disabilities. So, we can do more and must do more to employ people with disabilities.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses who will provide lived experience to the Committee and to the Nation and also, we will hear about solutions to further increase competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities. Now, I turn to Ranking Member Braun.