

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Working and Aging with Disabilities: From School to Retirement”
October 25, 2017

Good afternoon. Since 1945, October has been designated as National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Today, we will examine a range of issues including educational and vocational training, and social and housing supports, that can help lead to a stable career and a more satisfying life for many people who are living with a disability.

Studies show that employing individuals with disabilities is not simply a social good -- it is also good business. Individuals with disabilities offer many advantages including a highly motivated workforce, lower rates of absenteeism and employee turnover, greater loyalty, and higher rates of satisfaction and productivity among the entire workforce.

I know these benefits from personal experience. Michael Noyes, who was born with disabilities, has been a caseworker in my Bangor, Maine, office for the past 20 years and worked for former Senator Bill Cohen before that. His excellent work has been recognized by numerous veterans’ organizations, and he is appreciated by his co-workers and all those whom he has helped over the years. He is an extraordinary person who strengthens the services that my office provides.

While the business case is strong for employing individuals with disabilities, the unemployment data show that we can do better. While nearly three quarters of Americans without disabilities are employed, only a third of those with disabilities have jobs.

The biggest barrier appears to be cultural – an implicit bias that is widespread. Avery Olmstead, a 46 year-old from Old Town, Maine, shared his experience with my staff of applying for a job. Avery has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair to get around. When he arrives for an interview, he says that he is often met with visible confusion and discomfort. He finds himself spending half of his time trying to make the prospective employer feel comfortable.

Yet, Americans with disabilities are integral members of our communities. They are our mothers and fathers, our aunts and uncles, our children and our siblings, loved by family and friends. They are doctors, writers, researchers, artists, scientists, carpenters, counselors, and in just about every sector of our society. Every day, individuals with disabilities dream, and they achieve their dreams and contribute to the workforce.

Depending on the specific disability, some individuals may require certain supports, ranging from help with basic daily activities to transportation and housing. With this assistance, we can break down barriers, and move from exclusion to inclusion and recognition.

From housing and social supports to vocational training and employment, there are models of care and integration that work to ensure that each individual is valued as a contributing member of society.

With advances in medicine and technology, Americans with disabilities are living longer. This presents both unique opportunities and challenges as they prepare for their older years. For some with disabilities, the normal aging process can be exacerbated and complicated due to medications, reduced mobility, and their general health status.

Often, as these individuals age, so too do their family caregivers. Elderly parents who served as caregivers for their entire lives may find themselves in need of care. For some families, the caregiving situation flips: the adult with the disability becomes the caregiver for the aging parent. For others, caregiving needs double, as both the adult child and the parent require care, and siblings or other relatives may be called upon to help. It is so critical that we support our caregivers, who are an essential source of assistance, but respite care and other supports are often difficult to secure, particularly in rural America.

We must better prepare for the retirement years of people with disabilities. Like many older working Americans, they look forward to retiring. This desire, however, is complicated by the fact that many individuals with disabilities have experienced higher rates of unemployment and under-employment. Approximately 27 percent of Americans with disabilities live in poverty, that's the highest rate of any subgroup in our country.

Whether one is born with disabilities or acquires them as one grows older, aging is a normal part of the human experience. Older Americans with disabilities share the same hopes and aspirations of the average senior – and we must work to ensure that their distinctive needs are met as they grow older.

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