

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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Chairman Menendez's Opening Remarks at the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities Hearing

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, made the following remarks at this afternoon's hearing about the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) Hearing.

The remarks, *as prepared for delivery*, follow:

"Welcome to our panelists and all of our guests who have taken the time to come here today for this important hearing on the rights of roughly 1 billion people around the world with disabilities.

Let me quickly welcome three guests. First is Congressman, Tony Coelho, who has been a longtime champion of the rights of the disabled. Let me also recognize, Ann Cody, a multiple-Paralympic-medalist representing the USA on three Paralympic Teams. She has also been nominated to be the Vice president of the International Paralympic Committee. Ann understands that it's not enough to just make the stadium accessible, you also need to make surrounding restaurants and businesses accessible. Ann, thank you for being here and for your advocacy.

I also want to recognize Jagoda Risteska who is a leader in the disability community in Macedonia. She is in the United States to learn about transportation and independent livings systems. Having public transportation standards allows her to work and live independently here in the United States, and with the help of American leadership she hopes to make that a reality at

home as well. Thank for your work, Ms. Risteska. I hope what we do here will help you in your efforts.

Ann and Jagoda make clear what we are here to do. Ratifying this treaty will help the United States lead in the effort to give every disabled person the opportunity to live, work, learn, and travel without undue barriers.

There are 5.5 million American veterans with disabilities, young men and women who risked their lives to fight for us, and now it's our turn to fight for them to have full access and equal opportunity wherever they go.

138 countries have already ratified the treaty, but protections won't come automatically. It will take U.S. ratification and U.S. leadership to ensure the treaty's protections not only become a reality, but reflect American values.

From the U.S. Constitution, the treaty borrows principles of equality and the protection of minorities. From the Declaration of Independence, it borrows the unalienable right to pursue happiness, and from the Americans with Disabilities Act and other landmark accessibility laws, the treaty borrows the concept of reasonable accommodation.

By ratifying this treaty, we will be advocating for the adoption of American values around the world.

At the end of the day, if we fail to ratify this treaty, the U.S. point of view and U.S. interests will be marginalized. We have heard from the State Department that they have gotten pushback in their accessibility advocacy because we are not a party and we have heard from NGOs who have been asked why American experts should be consulted on matters pertaining to a treaty we have not ratified.

And American businesses, the greatest accessibility innovators in the world have expressed the fear that our diminished standing on disabilities rights could mean markets for accessible goods might not expand as quickly as they otherwise would and in the future our businesses may have less success advocating for US accessibility standards creating the possibility that the world will adopt standards incompatible with American standards that have proven so effective.

In short, we need to ratify this treaty if we are going to lead the way in raising worldwide accessibility to the American standard.

As we embark on the first of our two hearings on the Disabilities treaty, I ask my colleagues to look past the fear mongering some have engaged on in this

debate. Ratifying this treaty will not mean bureaucrats in Europe will determine how many parking spots are in your church's parking lot as some have claimed.

Our jobs as Senators require us to see through these smoke screens and see clearly that this treaty is about putting America in a position to help lead the world so everyone – everyone – has the opportunity to fully achieve their dreams and fulfill their God-given talents.

Thank you very much for coming today, and with that let me turn to Senator Corker for his opening remarks.”

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