

**The Honorable Tom Ridge
Chairman of the National Organization on Disability**

**Testimony Before the Foreign Relations Committee
Of the United States Senate on
The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Tuesday, November 5, 2013**

Chairman Menendez and Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the disability treaty today as you consider ratification. I was one of many who made a public statement of disappointment following last year's failure to ratify the treaty. I am pleased that we are here today to revisit the issue. I hope that after today's hearing, we move closer as a nation to joining this important treaty.

As many of you know, I have had the pleasure of wearing numerous hats in the public service of this great nation including serving as a Member of Congress, Governor, and the nation's first Secretary of Homeland Security. I will touch upon how this treaty is important to all of those roles, but first I want to share with you the story of my first public service role – that of a United States infantry staff sergeant in Southeast Asia. Frankly, I had poor hearing when I went in, worse hearing after, and, because of my age, diminished hearing since. So, technically, I am a disabled veteran but I can't attribute the loss solely to my military service. Most of the 5.5 million disabled veterans can and I am proud to represent their cause as well as my own commitment to Americans with disabilities at this hearing. I hope that after U.S. ratification and a lot of work with other nations, Americans with disabilities will no longer face undue burdens abroad either.

There is no greater example of U.S. leadership than on the front lines of armed conflict where service members fight to protect the moral integrity of mankind and the values of equality and liberty. If there is one thing you take away from my testimony today I hope it is that United States leadership counts and we have the opportunity to lead now and lead well with the disability treaty. My fellow veterans recognize this leadership, as evidenced by major veterans' organizations'—like The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Wounded Warrior Project—support U.S. ratification.

My initial experience with disability began in grade school. One of my dearest friends had a serious disability. We enjoyed her friendship, her smile and admired her courage. My lengthy public service career has given me the insight and experience to now sit here before you as the Chairman of the National Organization on Disability. I became Chairman of NOD in 2005 because I believed we have to be more committed, as a society, to giving people with disabilities the opportunity to establish their worth.

Around the same time I became Chairman, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was finalized. This treaty is important for the 57 million Americans with disabilities to have equal access to opportunities the rest of us may take for granted. There was no question that NOD would come out in full support of the treaty, which echoes our own Constitutional values, U.S. laws, and NOD's mission to allow people with disabilities to have the same opportunities as their counterparts. My testimony today will describe how the CRPD advances democracy, benefits business, and ultimately will advance opportunities for Americans with disabilities worldwide. Finally, I will share with you a few examples of how exactly the U.S. is equipped with the tools we need to change the circumstances of people with disabilities around the world.

Democracy and the CRPD

Twenty three years ago I had the incredible opportunity as a Congressman for Pennsylvania's 21st district to vote for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation in our history. Though today it stands as a celebrated piece of American legislation, at the time this was not an easy vote for many Members. There was loud opposition to the act, mostly fear-based, and there were efforts to abandon the bill altogether. Yet I was convinced that when I cast my vote in favor of the ADA, this piece of legislation would have a long-term positive impact on people with disabilities all over the world.

The ADA was born of a nation whose values are grounded in the concept that "all men are created equal." Whether you are born with one arm, with Down Syndrome, or without sight, or you are injured on the job or in service to your nation, you have the right to life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness. Our founders did not preserve this notion just because it is the right thing to do, but because government is strongest when run for and by all of its people.

Some countries attempted to follow in the footsteps of the U.S. and created similar, but often inferior legislation to the ADA in the years following its enactment. Many other countries have not even attempted to meet our standards and do not provide for equal protection of the rights of their citizens with disabilities. Many do not know how. And so, with great input from the U.S. and the community of people with disabilities, the disability treaty came into being to create the framework for people with disabilities everywhere and Americans with disabilities travelling abroad to enjoy the rights they deserve.

There was a sense of urgency in 2001 when this treaty was created because without disability rights legislation many countries, regardless of intention, were isolating and segregating people with disabilities and creating dire outcomes for the lives of their citizens. This meant that children with disabilities were being placed into nursing homes and institutions and removed entirely from their families, adults with disabilities were being barred from the workplace and having to rely on government entitlements to subsist, and in many countries being born with a disability was perceived so negatively that people began to kill newborns with disabilities or hide their children with disabilities in attics and backyard sheds to keep them out of the public eye.

I believe strongly that being part of the disability treaty benefits the U.S. and other member nations. This treaty will enhance, not lessen, American sovereignty by allowing us to export American Constitutional values abroad. The U.S. will continue to lead the world in establishing a democratic model for participation of all its citizens, including its most vulnerable ones. If you don't believe me, just ask [Giorgi Akhmeteli](#). Giorgi is a fellow at NOD this year from the country of Georgia, visiting with us through the McCain Institute for International Leadership. Due to a spinal injury in 2003, Giorgi uses a wheelchair and decided he would found a Georgian disability organization to fight for the rights of his fellow citizens. Right now his organization is working on CRPD ratification in his country. However, Giorgi has told me that the decision of the U.S. to ratify the CRPD will impact his own country's decision about whether to ratify the disability treaty. Further, full US participation in the multilateral process will be necessary to help push Georgia to adequately implement the treaty after ratification. Giorgi is not naïve; he is

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Giorgi will be attending the hearing

a talented advocate with years of experience in leadership on behalf of Georgia in the international arena. Giorgi knows the reality that the U.S. voice counts in Georgia and for his country to validate him as an equal, U.S. involvement is mandatory.

As former Secretary of Homeland Security, I had the unique experience to understand how the U.S. is perceived by our enemies and our allies. I can confidently sit before you and tell you that the voice of the U.S. matters to both. The disability treaty seeks to bring democracy and equal opportunity to people with disabilities allowing them to participate in society, vote, seek public office, and live in the community amongst others. We must be a part of this conversation. As I travel around the world, I have seen firsthand how with the best intentions countries try to address the circumstances of their citizens with disabilities, yet fall short. Without U.S. participation, the treaty will not reach its greatest potential. Without America, the conversation will have a deficit of expertise and experience that only our nation can fill. The CRPD will not change American law, but it is important because it provides access to the most important international forum on the rights of people with disabilities. If the U.S. wants to effectively promote access abroad, we must ratify the disability treaty.

Business and the CRPD

In addition to our democratic principles, there is more at stake for U.S. ratification of the disability treaty. Following the failure of ratification in 2012, businesses became even more vocal that the disability treaty is important to advancing their interests in the global marketplace. I have served on the boards of The Home Depot, The Hershey Company, and Exelon Corporation. I can attest to the fact that advancing the rights of people with disabilities has become an important priority for corporate decision-making. At NOD, we work with a CEO Council including international corporations Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, and UPS who view the employment of people with disabilities as advancing their mission and goals and in our increasingly global marketplace more and more jobs require international travel. So, accessibility abroad is very important to American workers who need to be able to access the building to make the sales pitch or have accessible transportation in order to present at a conference. American businesses understand that accessibility abroad means opportunities for their employees and efficiencies for their operations.

Like the ADA, Article 27 of the disability treaty recognizes the right of people with disabilities to work and empowers them to be an active part of society. As the Chamber of Commerce states in its letter of support for the treaty, “the United States has been an effective world leader in developing policy to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equal opportunity not only in the workplace but in society.”

As Chairman of the U.S. Chamber’s National Security Task Force, I can tell you that the Chamber does not take lightly decisions to endorse any piece of legislation. Regardless of how a bill may benefit people with disabilities, we must give greatest weight to the benefit to our 3 million business members. The Chamber determined that ratification of the treaty will benefit our members.

Joining this treaty will promote unprecedented global markets and new commerce that will be aimed at 1 billion people with disabilities worldwide. As the world follows the U.S. vision of greater accessibility, we will have expanded opportunities to export American made products and services, increase international employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for Americans with disabilities and promote U.S. standards internationally. As a representative from Adobe Systems Incorporated recently explained, the danger of going about accessibility in a bilateral way is that you run the risk of having to create different products for each country based on varied standards. Companies not only have greater access to broader markets through efforts like the disability treaty, but they have the ability to harmonize standards and streamline their production. This efficiency is critical.

Ultimately, investment follows opportunity. The treaty requires countries to promote accessibility for their citizens. U.S. business recognizes the disability treaty as an opportunity to further the objectives of their businesses and expand markets of technology, mobility devices, and other U.S. made accessible products. Other countries party to the treaty, like Brazil and China, are taking advantage of the absence of U.S. participation to lead accessible technology and provide to this expanding marketplace. This should be the role of the United States and will be once we ratify the CRPD.

Examples of how the U.S. can lead

I would like to close with a few examples of how the U.S. is prepared to advance the disability treaty through already existing knowledge and expertise. Within five years of the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, I had the honor of becoming the 43rd Governor of Pennsylvania and witnessing the many ways that our fifty states advance the rights of people with disabilities.

The U.S. supports a system of independent living centers, which are available in every state within our country to offer support to all people with disabilities to live independently and self-sufficiently in the community. Article 19 of the disability treaty recognizes the right of all people with disabilities to live in their community. As Governor, I appointed an executive director of a regional center for independent living to the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation in the state. I saw firsthand how employment outcomes for people with disabilities were affected by this U.S. created system. The National Council of Independent Living in the U.S. is a lead supporter of CRPD ratification and looks forward to the opportunity to contribute to the global independent living movement.

As governor I also appointed members of the disability community to serve on our State Council on Developmental Disability. Through the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, which is now celebrating its fiftieth year of enactment, every state and territory of the U.S. is required to have a Council on Developmental Disability to serve as a catalyst for the community towards better inclusion of people with disabilities. In Pennsylvania, our Council was successful in providing resources to remove people from state run institutions and integrate them into the community, providing employment training, and helping people with developmental disabilities become self-advocates.

The United States is also an international example for integrating and coordinating emergency preparedness, response and recovery for children and adults with disabilities and others with access and functional needs before, during and after a disaster. In 2001, I became Director of the Office of Homeland Security and later, in January 2003, the first Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, overseeing the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In this time it was critical for disability to be included in any comprehensive response and recovery system. Article 11 of the CRPD supports these actions. It states that State Parties shall take any measures to

ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in emergencies and natural disasters. We must ensure that, similar to the United States, countries around the world are including people with disabilities when developing emergency preparedness tools, offering trainings to emergency response professionals and, in an emergency, carrying out emergency assistance. FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination's mission is to do just that and the CRPD will give us an opportunity to enhance our reach and technical assistance in this arena.

Closing

In closing, I urge you to support ratification of a treaty that will have a tremendous impact on Americans with disabilities at home and abroad. The treaty advances democracy and business, and above all validates for the rest of the world the value of people with disabilities. While I respect the differences of our nation's leaders on many topics, I stand firm that we must come together on the topic of disability. Disability does not know a political, racial, religious, or other barrier. It is an experience that has or will touch us all at some point in our lives. As the ink fades on our Declaration of Independence, it is up to us to ensure that the words of equality our country stands for are everlasting. Although our own laws will not change, U.S. ratification of the disability treaty will validate that all men are indeed equal and that, Senators, will have a resounding impact on the one billion persons with disabilities in the United States and around the world.