

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON DISABILITY

**Congressional Forum in Collaboration with the
House Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus**

“Disability in the Budget: Why It Matters”

May 12, 2011

OPENING STATEMENT

of

CHAIRMAN YOUNG

Good afternoon. I want to thank all of you for your interest in this important event and for taking the time to join us today. I'd like to take a moment to introduce the NCD Council Members here today: Vice Chair Linda Wetters (Columbus, OH); Council Member Chester Finn (Albany, NY); Vice Chair Ari Ne'eman (Silver Spring, MD); Council Member Gary Blumenthal (Boston, MA); Council Member Marylyn Howe (Savannah, GA)

Today's Congressional Forum marks the first occasion in the National Council on Disability's (NCD) thirty-year history that it has exercised its statutory authority to hold hearings and take testimony. I am grateful to Representatives Cathy McMorris Rodgers and James Langevin, Co-chairs of the House Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, and their staff Ms. Kimberly Betz and Mr. Todd Adams, for assistance with organizing the event making it possible to convene in a House Hearing Room. I would also like to thank the Honorable Kevin Concannon, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and our other witnesses, for agreeing to testify before the National Council on Disability.

We gather today to discuss the impact of our nation's fiscal policy and budget debates on people with disabilities. Our objective for today is straightforward: we want to highlight the central yet hidden place of disability in our national fiscal policy.

While our current budget debates have been marked by partisan discord and political brinksmanship, we can quickly agree on one basic fact: our current fiscal path is unsustainable. As we will hear in testimony today, our nation's failure to act responsibly now would eventually force draconian actions that will harm all Americans – and particularly future generations. Responsible action now may be difficult - but failure to act responsibly now will be catastrophic.

Unfortunately, consensus on the unsustainability of our current path has failed to create workable solutions to change our current path. Instead, we appear to be rushing headlong down a road that all agree ends in disaster.

We can agree on a second basic fact: any sustainable resolution of our near- and long-term fiscal challenges requires bipartisan teamwork. I am pleased today's forum features testimony by the Co-Chairs of the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, Representatives McMorris Rodgers and Langevin. I am also pleased to acknowledge the NCD Members represented on the dais today consist of two individuals appointed by President Bush and four appointed by President Obama. I am still further pleased to note I appointed as NCD's current Executive Director a long-time leader on the Republican Senate HELP Committee staff.

The bipartisanship represented on the dais and among our panelists reflects the proud history of disability policy in the United States.

Leadership in presidential administrations spanning four decades, together with bipartisan support from both Houses of Congress, have helped secure enactment and implementation of landmark disability policy achievements such as the Rehabilitation Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act, the ADA Amendments Act, and the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act. These are just a few examples of bipartisan collaboration on disability policy that helped improve the lives of people with disabilities. We would do well to emulate these achievements today.

This bipartisanship should not be surprising, for disability is not restricted to party affiliation. A combination of factors, including increases in life expectancy and advances in technologies, have dramatically increased the engagement and involvement of Americans with disabilities, their families, and supporters in our political process. Roughly one in six Americans lives with a condition that qualifies as a disability under the ADA. Virtually every family is touched by disability. Congressman Langevin, like me, became a person with a disability in his teens due to spinal cord injury.

Congresswoman McMorris Rodgers, like my fellow Council Member Sara Gelser, found her way to disability advocacy by being a parent of a child with a disability.

People with disabilities are Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Libertarians, Progressives, Liberals, and Conservatives. They are wealthy and poor, live in urban and rural environments, are of every national origin and ethnicity. Consequently, even where political, social and economic views might otherwise divide people with disabilities and their supporters, there is always the potential for disability to be a vehicle for finding common ground across the political spectrum. As has often been said, disability is the only minority category that anyone can join at any time.

At no time has bipartisan collaboration been more needed. Our fiscal policy challenges are profound. But they can also be resolved. Although trillions of dollars of accumulated debt is daunting—to say the least—in the end we have a simple if exceedingly difficult task of balancing money in and money out. Over the long term, tackling our current debt means that revenue will need to outpace expenditures.

Disability matters in this debate because people with disabilities – more than one in six or over 50 million Americans – simultaneously account not just for substantial portions of our national expenditures but also substantial contributions to our national revenue. As we will hear in testimony today, many people with disabilities rely on various federal and state programs to enable them to be productive tax-paying citizens. Many of these programs, such as those supported through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, do not even look like disability programs. However, we need to inquire about what programs support people with disabilities to lead more independent and productive lives as full participants in communities of their choosing and explore whether pursuing cuts in these programs could effectively *increase* our national debt and *worsen* our long-term fiscal health.

Will short-term gains in program cuts be outweighed by longer-term increases in dependency on entitlement programs? Instead of focusing on spending cuts as ends in themselves, should we be talking about meaningful reform that will enhance the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs while at the same time saving money because we are incentivizing people to contribute to their maximum potential rather than force greater dependency?

The task before us today is not to resolve these questions but to begin asking them and discussing their implications. We have undertaken this forum precisely because partisan battles are being pitched without serious regard to the pervasive presence of people with disabilities in the ranks across the political spectrum and despite substantial bipartisan agreement that we should adhere to goals enshrined in the ADA – equality of opportunity, independent living, full participation, and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities.

NCD is a tiny agency with an outsized mission. Our annual appropriation of a little over \$3 million does not even amount to a rounding error in the federal budget. Yet we are tasked with advising Congress and the President about all federal disability policies, programs, practices, and procedures. NCD has prioritized our allocation of resources, and determined our nation's fiscal health is of the highest priority for all Americans and in particular American's with disabilities. We look forward to building on today's testimony to help inform and influence the unfolding budget debates.

(transition to introducing the first panel of witnesses)