

From: Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi <JenniferM@respectabilityusa.org>
To: Mayer, DougDougMayer@gov.sc.gov
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Subject: Message to Presidential candidates: Include people with disabilities in the "Opportunity Agenda!"

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RespectAbility urges Presidential candidates to focus on jobs for people with disabilities: "Include people with disabilities in the "Opportunity Agenda!"

Washington, DC. As presidential candidates and political leaders gather for CPAA **RespectAbility**, a non profit, non partisan organization devoted to empowering people with disabilities to achieve the American dream, urged candidates from all parties to put people with disabilities into the "Opportunity Agenda." Said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, President of **RespectAbility**, "Our nation was founded on the principle that anyone who works hard should be able to get ahead in life. People with disabilities deserve to be able to work to achieve the American dream, just like anyone else."

Companies including Walgreens, E.Y. (which was formally known as Ernst and Young), AMC and others have shown that employees with disabilities are loyal, successful and help them make more money. When we find the right jobs for the right people it can and does increase the bottom line of companies. There is a substantial body of evidence-based practices that show how people with disabilities can have tremendous success if the right programs are put into place.

RespectAbility has developed a resource called the **Disability Employment First Planning Tool**. This document details what those practices are and what models are most effective.

Most Senators and Members of Congress voted for both the **ABLE Act** and the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act**, which recently became law. Each of them is a vital tool in empowering people with disabilities to be able to work. If the policies are put into place thoughtfully, they will help to reduce the government's expenditure on SSI benefits, while enabling people with disabilities the opportunity to become independent and achieve the American dream.

Said Mizrahi, "People with disabilities bring unique characteristics and talents to

workplaces that benefit employers and organizations. Stephen Hawking is a genius who just happens to use a wheelchair. People with disabilities can work in restaurants, tend our parks, and be super talents in developing computer software. Moreover, government policies that help people with disabilities get and keep jobs are a win-win because they allow people with disabilities the dignity and financial benefits of work and also grow our economy and save taxpayer money."

President Ronald Reagan worked to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to achieve the American dream. Under his administration, the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** was started. President George H.W. Bush signed it into law. This act enabled millions of Americans with disabilities to go into schools, civic institutions, and the workforce to create a better future for themselves and their families.

According to the U.S. Census, 1/5th of Americans have a disability. Additionally, 1 in 51 percent of Americans report having a family member or close friend with a disability. Fifty-two percent of Democrats report that they or a loved one have a disability, and for Republicans a smaller number of 44 percent report they have a disability. Surprisingly, independents have the largest number of voters who say they have a disability, with 58 percent saying yes. This shows that swing voters with disabilities and their families are up for grabs. Upon completion of a recent **bipartisan poll following the 2014 election**, Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg, PhD issued the following statement, "Issues of employment among people with disabilities can affect outcomes in competitive races for Senate and Governor. The community is far bigger than many people realize, including people in my profession." Likewise, Republican pollster Whit Ayres commented, "we are accustomed to thinking about 'soccer moms', 'Hispanics' or 'values voters.' But this poll shows that Americans with disabilities – and those who care deeply about them are a demographic we need to pay attention to in the future. "Introducing policies which create opportunities for employing people with disabilities is not a conservative or liberal issue, it is a human issue, and it impacts a large portion of the electorate in the United States.

Many leaders from both parties can speak with legitimacy to Americans with disabilities. Republican Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL), Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), and former Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) have disabilities. Democrats Rep. Tammy Duckworth (IL), Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI) and others have disabilities as well. Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX), Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), Rep. Gregg Harper (R-MS), former Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK), former Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) have children with disabilities. Governors,

including [Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin](#) and Governor Jack Markell of Delaware have been at the forefront of improving policies so people with disabilities can work.

Upon the announcement of Governor Walker's "[Better Bottom Line](#)" initiative, which was sparked by the 2012-2013 National Governor's Association initiative, "[The Year of a Better Bottom Line](#)" that was promoted heavily by then NGA Chair, Delaware Governor Jack Markell (D-DE). Gov. Walker's proclamation included introducing 7 new [Project SEARCH](#) sites to the state's 7 current sites within three years. Walker has followed through on this by announcing that the current number of sites will double for the 2015-2016 school year. This means 14 programs for young people with disabilities who want to work towards bettering their future. [Project SEARCH](#) generates outstanding results for people with disabilities, employers, and taxpayers alike.

As for all Americans, the number one issue in the disability community is jobs. People with disabilities are looking for new answers and policies. RespectAbility wants all candidates to speak directly to voters with disabilities and their families offering specific plans for a better future.

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Contact: Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi at 202 365 0787 or JenniferM@RespectAbility.org

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RespectAbility
4340 East-West Hwy, Suite 350
Bethesda, MD 20814
[240-744-0546](tel:240-744-0546)

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