

Comments of the National Association of the Deaf

Submitted to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Submitted on October 21, 2011

**Leveraging Higher Education to Improve Employment Outcomes  
for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

Dear Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) applauds the Committee for hosting the historic hearing on Leveraging Higher Education to Improve Employment Outcomes for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing where all the panelists were deaf or hard of hearing. We are very much looking forward to continuing these important discussions and submit the following comments on this issue.

The NAD wishes to encourage the Committee to look at some options to improve employment opportunities for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. These suggested options go beyond the realm of higher education, and focus on overcoming barriers that complicate hiring chances for this population.

During the hearing, one of the stated statistics was that only 48% of people who are deaf and hard of hearing and aged between 18-64 years have jobs.<sup>1</sup> It is our belief that the main obstacle contributing to this terrible statistic is the way employers perceive and handle the cost of ongoing accommodations. Sign language interpreters are one form of an ongoing accommodation necessary in some circumstances for many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Employers too often worry more about the cost of such ongoing accommodations than the abilities or skills of deaf and hard of hearing job applicants and employees.

To move past this misperception among hiring entities, we recommend new approaches to how such ongoing accommodations are handled, in both the public and private sectors. A few such approaches are listed here:

1. Encourage more businesses to adopt a Cost Recovery program similar to IBM's. This program removes the accommodations for employees with disabilities from the individual manager's budget to ensure that hiring and promotion decisions are based on skill and talent. In short, it removes the cost calculation from decisions about hiring people with disabilities.
2. To lower or remove the cost barrier of providing accommodations, we encourage Congress to greatly increase the Disabled Access Tax Credit. Currently, the tax credit is only available for small businesses with previous tax year revenue of \$1,000,000 or less (or 30 or fewer full-time workers.) A small business may only take a tax credit for 50% of their costs beyond the first \$250 of expenses, up to a maximum expenditure of \$10,250 (the first \$250 does not count.) We believe that to truly lower or remove the barrier, the tax credit should be 100% and should be greatly expanded to cover much larger employers. Further, this tax credit will be offset by taxes paid by an increase in working deaf and hard of hearing people and less reliance on Social Security payments.
3. Government could promote a policy that encourages all employers to participate in a large centralized fund to provide for all accommodations. In short, this would allow for costs to be evenly spread out among all employers. Such a centralized fund could be funded through some sort of tax on employers, or possibly use money from Social Security in cases where a beneficiary transfers from disability benefits to employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Census Bureau's 2010 American Community Survey

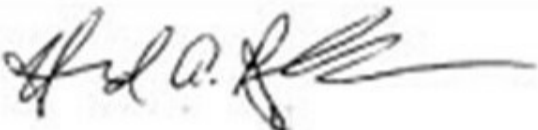
4. Encourage the Department of Labor's one-stop centers to focus on helping people with disabilities find employment. Many people with disabilities do not need rehabilitation but simply need job placement assistance. The DOL should require these centers to become accessible and require them to hire Business Service Representatives who are focused on the hiring of people with disabilities.
5. Amend the Rehabilitation Act to ensure that Vocational Rehabilitation programs throughout the country not only provide employment placement services but also are mandated and credited for employment retention services.
6. The Rehabilitation Act should also be amended to support the National Employment Team (NET) concept promoted by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR).
7. Create or fund a center (including but not limited to the NET proposed in paragraph 6) that is prepared to support employers with new or developing communication technologies that can support employment opportunities of individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.

These preliminary ideas are meant to start the dialogue on ensuring that people who are deaf and hard of hearing are given a chance to secure jobs as well as move upwards within their workplace. This population needs the opportunity to work and not be seen as a burden by prospective employers, and the current economic model under the Americans with Disabilities Act does the opposite by making reasonable accommodations an economic disincentive.

This economic disincentive can be reversed by removing the cost of ongoing accommodations from the hiring equation and placing it elsewhere.

Changing the way hiring decisions are made is just as important as making sure that individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing receive adequate training from their colleges and universities. It is also important to note the importance of elementary and secondary education for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. There are many states that are currently looking at ways to cut costs in such elementary and secondary education, particularly with state schools that are often the only means of direct education available to young deaf and hard of hearing children. Such schools are a critical means of preparing such young students for a lifetime of quality employment, and these schools must be preserved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Howard A. Rosenblum", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Howard A. Rosenblum  
Chief Executive Officer  
National Association of the Deaf