

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on the Achieving a Better Life Experience Act (the ABLE Act). I appreciate having this opportunity to take a closer look at how this legislation can help individuals with disabilities and their families live a more fulfilling and rewarding life and chart a more certain future. I am looking forward to this open discussion about the merits of the bill.

Mr. Chairman, history has taught us that individuals with disabilities can flourish with the help of their families and a supportive community. Disabilities that were once thought to be disqualifying and limiting in terms of an individual's ability to express themselves are now seen as challenges that can be overcome. Today, those living with disabilities have shown they can contribute in meaningful ways to our culture, the arts, our business community and to society at large. The success and flourishing of individuals within our communities makes our society more inclusive and gives everyone an opportunity to thrive

and pursue whatever path they choose to follow to their ultimate happiness and fulfillment.

One of the bold statements made by our Founding Fathers as they worked together to create our nation was their recognition of our inherent rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Few countries can boast of having been created with an eye toward that kind of freedom of expression. The legislation we are discussing today takes another step forward in the effort to make the promise of the Declaration of Independence ring true for us all.

Mr. Chairman, if we walked over to the Capitol Visitor Center, we would see several poignant illustrations of this. One of the most well-known and best loved examples of what is possible for those living with disabilities to achieve is seen in the life of Helen Keller.

Helen Keller, the famed author and political activist of the early 20th century, became deaf, blind and mute as a result of an early childhood disease. Those challenges did not stop her from

eventually graduating from college with a Bachelor of Arts degree, however. Some might have thought her hopes would never be realized and her goals would be impossible for her to achieve. Where she saw opportunity, many others saw a dream that would never come true. She knew better and she used that determination to create her own path of what was possible for her to achieve.

Helen Keller was a pioneer who lived her life by leading the best way – by example -- and that is why she will always be remembered for her accomplishments. She became the first significantly disabled individual to graduate from college. She went on to write and publish her own autobiography and 11 other books. She served as a prominent spokeswoman for social causes of her day, including women's suffrage and the needs of the physically handicapped. She lived a life that was so inspirational and noteworthy that she has been immortalized on stage and screen.

One hundred years later, we still marvel at her achievements. She remains a remarkable and inspiring woman who taught us what one person can do who refuses to give up on a dream, no matter the obstacles put before her. Although she accomplished tremendous things, she was blessed that she didn't have to go it alone. She had a supportive family who loved her and a mentor who refused to let her quit. It made a difference for her to have the support, encouragement, guidance and direction of her lifelong instructor and companion Anne Sullivan. Added to that, was the active involvement of her parents, and the financial support of others. Together with her unique spirit and commitment to making a difference in the world she was able to follow her dreams and reach her destiny.

You will find her story in our nation's Capitol. Her statue, part of the Capitol Statuary Hall collection, now graces the Capitol Visitor Center. It's featured in a spot in the Capitol seen by countless visitors each day. Even now, it would be difficult to find the bearer of a message that is more relevant to our hearing

today than Helen Keller, a message that serves to constantly remind us that individuals with disabilities, given the right help, can grow and flourish – and become more productive than anyone else would have ever imagined.

The ABLE Act would take a small step in helping disabled individuals support themselves, pursue their dreams, and put themselves in a place of greater financial security. It would allow them and their families to open tax-exempt accounts so that they can plan how to best use their own funds to cover their living expenses. In our economy, many families are very familiar with the challenge of saving for the future well-being and needs of their children. A family with a disabled individual faces even more unique emotional and financial obstacles. The ABLE Act would help these families meet these challenges, whether it's paying for specialized care or a more individualized education to maintain their health and their independence, or provide for a better quality of life.

I've long been a supporter of enabling families and communities to meet the needs of the disabled. A few years ago, I introduced legislation to expand and revitalize the two main federal employment and training programs for persons with significant disabilities, paving the way to create more, better jobs and restore accountability to prevent waste, fraud and abuse.

In my own state of Wyoming, Alees Rogers in Uinta County Wyoming has been helped by her community. She has a developmental disability and, with assistance for housing and other care, she was able to take a job after graduating from high school at First Bank where she sorts mail and shreds documents. She also lives independently in her own apartment. The ABLE Act could help her to accomplish even more as she continues to plan for her future.

Wyoming has also developed an innovative college program called the Wyoming Institute for Disabilities (WIND), to help individuals with developmental disabilities, their families, professionals, and University of Wyoming students through

education, training, community services and early intervention.

These types of services combined with the ABLE Act strengthen the opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to grow, achieve, and succeed.

I don't think there was ever a more well-known or better dreamer than Walt Disney. He knew a thing or two about how to make the impossible a reality. He once said, "If you can dream it you can live it."

Let's help more of our disabled individuals and their families to do exactly that. Let us work together with them to take their dreams from the drawing board to reality by offering them the support they need to make it happen.

While it is true that the initial discovery of an obstacle or a limitation can often be dispiriting, or discouraging, when our families and communities circle around those facing such challenges, we can help them to rise above them and succeed beyond anything they could have ever imagined. The ABLE Act will help to make that happen by providing more financial stability

so that we can all chase after our dreams and fulfill our Founding Fathers' promise of the pursuit of our happiness. That is why this legislation has found overwhelming support from 75 members of the Senate and 366 members of the House.

I welcome our witnesses today. I appreciate their taking the time to join us for this important discussion and I look forward to their testimony.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.