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**Testimony of Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi
President, RespectAbilityUSA
United States Department of Labor**

**Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals
with Disabilities**

Contact: JenniferM@RespectAbilityUSA.org
March 23 and 24, 2015

Honorable Committee,

Thank you for your leadership on expanding opportunities through the successful implementation of WIOA.

As you know from my previous testimony, my name is Jennifer Mizrahi and I am the President of RespectAbility, a national nonprofit working to enable people with disabilities to achieve the American dream. We know that people with disabilities deserve to have jobs and careers, just like anyone else.

Together with our partners [NCIL](#), [Best Buddies](#), [NOD](#), [NACDD](#), and [PVA](#), we have developed the Employment First Planning Tool, which we shared with you earlier respectabilityusa.com/Resources/DisabilityEmploymentFirstPlanning. I urge you to read and share it along with our state-by-state statistics that can help in state performance metric dashboards.

In all, we have already met with 49 states (including 40 governors) on these issues. We understand that this work is a marathon, not a sprint. However, together we can win the race.

There are over 1,200,000 people with disabilities between ages 16 and 20 . Every year, 300,000 will age into the workforce. Whether they will achieve competitive integrated employment or not depends on high expectations, as well as connecting them to effective programs and supports. There are proven programs such as Promise, Project SEARCH, Bridges to Work, supported employment and other practices. I urge you and each state to focus resources there. I also urge you to reduce spending on bricks and mortars such as American Job Centers. That is because we are in an era where more and more can be done online. Moreover, proactive planning such as transitioning students from school to work is much more effective than reactive work.

It is also vital to put ending the stigma around disability employment into plans and budgets, as it is a key barrier to employment. Twenty-five years after the ADA, while architecture and educational opportunities have changed, negative attitudes and stigmas about people with disabilities have not. Indeed, a Princeton study shows that while people with disabilities are seen as warm, they are not seen as competent. A study published by Cornell Hospitality Quarterly found that all of the 320 hospitality companies studied share the concern that those with disabilities could not do the work required of their employees.

The reality is different than the perception. Walgreens, Wal-Mart, EY, Lowes, AMC and others have successful models of inclusive hiring of people with disabilities. Like others, they have seen the myth-buster outcome: when their interests and abilities are aligned with the needs of their employers, people with disabilities are as productive, and more loyal, than their non-disabled peers.

The Cornell study also showed that another key stigma was the perceived high cost of accommodations they might need to provide. This is despite the fact that the record shows that most such accommodations are not costly. Anecdotally, there is also evidence that employers fear legal action should they terminate an employee with a disability. So, given that that the perception is that people with disabilities are not competent, and could be costly or risky, why would an employer take the risk of hiring them?

One answer is found in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *David and Goliath*, which extols the strength of people with disabilities. Because traditional ways of doing things don't always work for people with disabilities, Gladwell demonstrates that they compensate for that in ways that benefit the workforce by developing incredible ways to innovate.

Indeed, I just returned from Israel where I visited a unit in the Israeli Air Force that uses the talents of people with disabilities to help them do a better job. I also saw how the Israeli Electric Company incorporates more than 250 employees with a full range of disabilities fully inclusively in their work.

Close to home, AMC Theaters, Lowe's, and many others are also getting outstanding results by hiring employees with disabilities. So what are other employers waiting for? They are still blinded by stereotypes. It's time for people with disabilities to be seen for what they CAN do, and not for what they cannot. Thus, I urge all to ensure that actual public relations campaigns on inclusive employment – which are done using proven scientifically tested messages that work to reduce stigmas – are a part of every plan.

What can people with disabilities do? Think about it.

Beautiful music from a deaf man? It happened. Ludwig von Beethoven.

World changing words from someone with dyslexia? It happened. Thomas Jefferson.

A Super bowl champion NFL player who is deaf? It happened. Derrick Coleman.

A Nobel Prize for a scientist who failed in school? It happened. Albert Einstein.

Secrets of the universe being revealed by a man who uses a wheelchair and who can no longer speak? It's happening. Stephen Hawking.

It's time to change the narrative of how we see people with disabilities so employers can see the ABILITIES they have and the positive impact that can have on the bottom line. It's amazing that such small change can have such a big impact. It can - if it is done in a focused and strategic way.

Recognize the disability. Imagine the possibility. Respect the ability.

Thank you again.