



US Business Leadership Network®
1501 M Street NW, Seventh Floor
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (800) 706-2710
Fax: (800) 706-1335
www.usbln.org

Testimony of

**Jill Houghton
Executive Director
US Business Leadership Network®
Washington, D.C.**

On

**Securing the Future of the
Social Security Disability Insurance Program**

To

**United States House of Representatives
Ways and Means Committee
Social Security Sub-Committee**

Friday, September 14, 2012

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Becerra, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding “Securing the Future of the Social Security Disability Insurance Program”. My name is Jill Houghton and I am the Executive Director of the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN®), a national non-profit, non-partisan business to business network promoting workplaces, marketplaces, and supply chains where people with disabilities are included. The USBLN® serves as the collective voice of over 60 Business Leadership Network affiliates across the United States, representing over 5,000 businesses. Additionally, the USBLN® runs the nation’s leading third party certification program for disability-owned businesses, including service-disabled veterans.

As the USBLN® Executive Director, I’m here today because our corporate members including small, medium and large businesses across the nation are deeply committed to recruiting, hiring and retaining employees with disabilities. Collectively, these businesses represent the demand side of the employment equation.

As the former Executive Director for the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Advisory Panel, between 2005 and 2008 I had the pleasure of working with bipartisan members and staff on this Committee. I very much appreciate your commitment to securing the future of the Social Security Disability Insurance program. My testimony is grounded in my professional experience working with corporate members of the USBLN®, as a policy advisor, and my personal experience as a person who is married to someone with a spinal cord injury who transitioned off of the Social Security Disability Insurance program and is currently a successful entrepreneur.

While our members are not experts on the Social Security programs they strongly believe that the foundation of any changes in our current system needs to be rooted in moving our nation’s view of people with disabilities from a deficit or **medical** model to a talent or **social** model.

The medical model of disability is still prevalent in our country as evidenced by our language choices, media portrayals, fundraising activities, and program eligibility requirements. A social model defines disability as different from the average, neutral in the absence of additional context, and located in the interaction between individuals and society. The remedy in the social model is ensuring that the environment is accessible and that attitudinal barriers are addressed. There are signs that this model is gradually emerging in our nation's workplaces and policies, but we need to accelerate this paradigm shift to effect sustainable change and to ensure that individuals with disabilities are fully included.

Senior corporate leaders like Deborah Dagit, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, Merck, Randy Lewis, Senior Vice-President, Supply Chain and Logistics, Walgreen Company, Stephen J. Szilagyi, Senior Vice President, Distribution, Lowe's Companies, Inc. and Keith Wiedenkiller, SPHR, SVP & Chief People Officer, AMC Entertainment

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

Inc. to name a few are teaching their peers how to build inclusive workplaces where people with disabilities work side by side with people without disabilities, earning the same pay, doing the same jobs, held to the same standards of productivity and other workplace standards. These senior leaders and countless others recognize that incorporating individuals with disabilities in all diversity and inclusion practices positively impacts their companies' bottom line.

While businesses sometimes encounter serious challenges as they seek to implement inclusion strategies, many employers have overcome these hurdles with robust and creative practices. For example, some companies have learned that:

- It's cost effective to recruit and retain the best talent regardless of disability;
- Technologies that are usable by all employees lead to greater productivity;
- There are economic benefits of broadening supplier bases to include diverse categories, such as disability-owned businesses; and,
- Disability inclusion often increases their companies' share of new markets.

The USBLN® is based on the premise that businesses respond to their peers. We bring companies and leaders together to learn how to include people with disabilities in all aspects of their corporate enterprises. The USBLN® and our BLN affiliates have become an important organization to help businesses realize the wide range of opportunities available and the potential for replicating success.

In preparation for my testimony today we asked USBLN® members about recent challenges and successes related to recruiting, hiring and retaining employees with disabilities and my testimony summarizes these responses.

CHALLENGES

Recruiting

One challenge some members identified was taking the first steps to begin recruiting and hiring people with disabilities. Many companies shared their internal challenges associated with addressing the fears of their supervisory and mid-level management, as well as, the challenges associated with the "NGDGU" (No Good Deed Goes Unpunished) principle. In this economy the last thing managers want is anything that complicates their lives and they assume that they don't have the time and/or resources to handle any "complications" of hiring and retaining employees with disabilities that may arise. Additionally, there's great fear that if they make the effort to do the right thing, it will result in equal employment opportunity issues and litigation.

Also challenging is recruiting competitive candidates with disabilities. The question we receive regularly is, "where can we find candidates with disabilities that have the pre-requisite skills, and/or have the required supports in place needed to support work?"

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

When we asked USBLN® members if there's an interest in hiring people with disabilities the answer was overwhelmingly, "yes"! However, we're repeatedly told that business won't hire candidates simply because they're disabled. Rather employers hire individuals because they're qualified to perform the job with or without reasonable accommodations. Additionally, several companies made it a point to emphasize that they're not only seeking candidates for entry level jobs but also for supervisory and managerial positions and it's very difficult to recruit for these types of positions whether the candidate has a disability or not.

Our members often ask us "Where can we find college students with disabilities?" and as a result, we established a USBLN® National Student Advisory Council. A little over a year ago we were personally confronted with the challenges that one of our student advisors was facing. Jimmy Curran, a Montgomery County resident, who in May 2011 graduated with honors from Temple University with a degree in Finance and accepted a position as a Market Research Analyst with Independence Blue Cross. While Mr. Curran was at Temple, he had two student internships, one at the CIT Group in New York City on the Risk Management team of the Transportation Finance department and the second in the Office of Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA.) In an economy where unemployment is high and college students cannot find positions in their fields of study, Mr. Curran not only did everything right to prepare for employment but found a professional position in his field of study. When he began to work on Monday, September 12, 2011 he was in jeopardy of not being able to afford to work because he's a person with a significant physical disability who was at risk of losing the personal care services he needs and that had been paid for through Medicaid. He was technically eligible to transfer to the Act 150 waiver, which is for individuals who meet the medical criteria and work. However, there was a waiting list of 250 people. If he worked and maintained his earnings for over 30 days before getting on Act 150, he would not have been eligible for that program. Luckily, he was able to get assistance and access 1619(b) which will allow him to continue working while receiving Medicaid to support his personal care services. However, unless something changes with the program he will need to limit his earnings and will be unable to advance with the company. This represents a huge missed opportunity for business and these type of challenges greatly impacts our members ability to recruit, hire and retain youth with disabilities.

Additional reports indicate that when our member's campus recruiters go to colleges and universities, they contact Career Services to schedule their visits but do not find cooperation between this office and the offices for Disabled Students Services. Consequently, these recruiters rarely encounter students with obvious and/or disclosed disabilities.

The bottom line is that there are a myriad of government and private organizations in every community across America attempting to help connect youth and adults with disabilities to jobs, but they often times don't approach business in a manner that's responsive to their needs. Thus, many of our members describe being contacted by a

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

multitude of job developers who have good intentions but don't speak the language of business.

Getting to and from Work

Another challenge reported is the lack of access to and accessibility of public transportation. Many of our members have U.S. facilities that are rural and draw from an employee base within a large geographic radius without access to public transportation. In many instances this had led prospective candidates with disabilities that don't drive to withdraw from consideration for employment. Similarly, some businesses have sought out assistance in sourcing talent with disabilities from local VR and/or CRPs only to be declined due to the lack of availability of public transportation. For example, when a job calls for people to work extended or unusual hours, as can be true in the entertainment industry, employees who rely on public transportation are unable to do so because there is no access after "normal" business hours. It is next to impossible for their employees to find a public bus at 1:00 in the morning. For many industries, the employee must be on site to accomplish the work.

This creates a huge missed opportunity to business because skilled and valuable employees are unable to accept or keep their positions. Limiting these opportunities can also result in higher expenditures for public programs like Social Security Disability Insurance and Medicare.

Program Obstacles

Finally, while our members would be the first to admit that they aren't the experts on the Social Security Disability Insurance program they've shared that there seems to be significant obstacles (i.e. losing program eligibility, healthcare benefits, fear of overpayments) in the current system that lead to individuals with disabilities needing to limit their earnings, reduce hours worked and in some instances resign or refrain from entering the workforce. These types of challenges significantly hamper Corporate America's faith in and ability to recruit, hire and retain good employees with disabilities. One member shared that in some instances, this can also lead to internal challenges associated with headcount requirements and/or extra management time which inadvertently lead to increased expenses.

SUCCESSSES

Recruiting

Overall, our members shared that their best successes have come from what they've learned from other companies about hiring people with disabilities. A critical component to the success of any initiative to hire or retain people with disabilities is a company's ability to establish a trusted relationship with a partner that can source talent with the required skills.

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

Some employers shared that they've worked closely with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, National Employment Team (CSAVR - NET) to source talent and prefer to do so rather than partnering directly with a community rehabilitation provider (CRP). They choose to work with CSAVR – NET because their experience has shown that CRPs are contracted directly by VR and thus the candidates originate from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Because of this in many instances it makes more sense for corporations to source qualified candidates with disabilities from VR directly. Business then asks VR to engage CRPs as needed to provide the support services each individual candidate may need to be successful in the jobs they hold within their company.

While other companies reported that they work with a wide range of partners including CSAVR-NET, a CRP, a coalition of CRPs, or private staffing agencies depending on their ability to deliver talent and to effectively meet businesses needs.

In an effort to specifically reach students with disabilities, several of our members shared that they work closely with Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (COSD). In its 12th year, COSD is a network of over 1200 colleges, universities and national employers in the private and public sectors. They raise awareness regarding the unique challenges that students with disabilities face and help with career placement. They also encourage employers to specifically request access to students with disabilities during campus recruiting activities, and inquire whether or not the school coordinates their disability support services and career placement programs.

Additionally, the USBLN® and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN), a National Employer Technical Assistance Center (NETAC) funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and operated by Employment and Disability Institute at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations of Cornell University have joined forces and to launch the Alliance Mentoring Pilot Program. The program was launched in April 2012 and aims to provide career mentoring opportunities to college students and recent graduates with disabilities through linkages to business professionals.

Mentor recruitment was targeted towards companies who are part of the Circle of Champions, a distinguished group of businesses that received the Secretary of Labor's New Freedom Initiative Award between 2002-2008 for innovative efforts to recruit, hire and promote people with disabilities. While the initial goal was to secure 5-8 mentors, the call for volunteers surprisingly netted a total of 21 employee volunteers. Mentors in the 2012 Alliance Mentoring Pilot Program are from companies such as Deloitte, Ernst & Young, Highmark, Microsoft, Northrop Grumman and WellPoint.

The pool of mentees were sourced from the Workforce Recruitment Program's (WRP) 2012 database of 2770 students and recent graduates with disabilities representing over 270 colleges and universities. 153 veterans are also included in the WRP database. Matches were made based on mentors' background and preferences as well

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

as mentees' career goals. A total of 20 mentees were selected (1 mentee was assigned 2 mentors).

While the Alliance Mentoring Pilot Program is still underway and does not end until October 2012, some initial feedback indicates a great need for improved self-advocacy and communication skills that mentoring can bring. The high level of initial interest demonstrates the value both mentors and mentees attribute to this project and thereby conveys the need for further expansion which will focus on students and recent graduates with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) majors and those with veteran status.

Getting to and from work

While telework does not replace adequate accessible transportation systems, for some industries, it can be a good solution to recruit and retain employees with disabilities. For our members attempting to recruit in rural or low population areas where there is not available or adequate public transportation, telework can provide access to employees without requiring relocation. In addition, distance learning can also provide an opportunity to teach employees new work skills. Telecommuting can also be a stop gap measure during and after natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes or hurricanes and for shifts when public transportation is not available and/or when work hours are not consistent.

Given the increased accessibility of information and communications technology, an employee located at a distance can often perform the same work regardless of location. This said, like many agencies in the federal government, companies must first purchase accessible technologies and be knowledgeable about the functions and features that can make information and communications accessible to their employees with disabilities.

A member company in South Carolina worked with their main disability service partner to create a solution by accessing a grant to purchase a small bus and they charge the employees a subscription fee to cover the operational costs of running that bus. It operates with a "hub" system so that in most cases, the employees need a ride to the pick-up spot, but it eliminates family members needing to drive individuals for an hour each way every day. This system also has limitations because if one person on the bus has overtime, everyone has to stay at the building until the last person's shift ends. However, their Texas location partnered with the agency that provided the largest number of employees with disabilities and selected them as the charity for one year's campaign. The funds raised were matched by a grant and the money was used to purchase a bus to transport individuals for training as well as for work.

In Wyoming, one of our members has had members of management drive a company vehicle to transport their team members to and from work. However, this is limited by the size of the vehicle and territory they are able to cover.

Testimony of Jill Houghton of US Business Leadership Network®, to U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Social Security Sub-committee
September 14, 2012

Retention

One large pharmaceutical company shared that they have a "Workplace Enablement" program that provides supportive, productive and flexible work environment solutions for employees with both non-apparent and visible disabilities. This not only ensures that they are fully compliant with regulations, but positively impacts return to work after a health event, and enhances productivity for employees, their managers and peers who can quickly access appropriate accommodations solutions.

There are four key pillars in their program:

- Inclusion messages that ensure the program is well understood and easily accessed by employees, managers, and the human resources community;
- Linkages to their broader health and wellness initiatives to ensure all employees are proactively engaged in their fit and healthy efforts;
- Ensuring full compliance with ADA and OFCCP guidance and associated documentation requirements; and,
- Training for managers to support confidence and capability by addressing any concerns around language choices, accommodations, and performance management; linking these efforts to the broader talent objectives (e.g. retaining top talent after the advent of a health challenge), the business case for disability inclusiveness, an overview of the ADA Amendment, and some case scenarios to "make it real."

Finally, many of our members shared that they've taken some additional measures to promote workforce inclusion such as:

- Developing active Employee Resource Groups for colleagues with disabilities, caregivers and allies;
- Creating guidelines and checklists for ensuring meetings are accessible and that accommodations are readily available for travel, hotel requests, accommodations for presenters with a disability, and dietary needs;
- Evaluated and addressed various access issues to corporate facilities for both guests and employees to make sure the environment is safe and welcoming;
- Ensuring that development opportunities, both virtual and classroom are accessible;
- Routinely including closed-captioning during major business meetings and make this service or sign language interpreters available to colleagues upon request for smaller meetings;
- Offering a variety of work/life tools and resources, including ready access to flexible work arrangements, and a variety of home health support through an external partner; and,
- Including entrepreneurs with disabilities in supplier diversity programs.

One member shared that their desired outcome is that candidates and colleagues who have a disability believe that “the company is always there for me and that they are not defined by a disability, but by the contributions they are able to make to their team's goals.”

Promoting the Use of Disability-Owned Businesses

The USBLN's flagship program is the Disability Supplier Diversity Program (DSDP). DSDP is the nation's first and only third party certification program for disability owned businesses and includes service-disabled veterans. The certification is a rigorous process that includes a site visit. It offers the Disability Owned Business Enterprise the opportunity to market its certification and to connect with USBLN member companies. The program advances economic opportunities for all entrepreneurs with disabilities, by working with America's top corporations to broaden corporate supplier diversity programs to include disability-owned businesses. The ultimate goal of the Disability Supplier Diversity Program is to develop and grow an infrastructure that will foster a mutually beneficial relationship between corporate purchasers and disability-owned businesses.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's important to emphasize that businesses recognize that disability inclusion in their workforce strengthens their competitive edge. Perhaps more than any other group of people, individuals with disabilities have the ability to adapt to different situations and circumstances. As employees, they add to the range of viewpoints businesses need to succeed, offering fresh ideas on how to solve problems, accomplish tasks and implement strategies. USBLN® member companies like Walgreens have documented that recruiting, hiring and retaining employees with disabilities results in lower turnover; better safety; and reduced hiring and operational costs.

Business represents the demand side of the equation and needs the talents, dedication and creativity that people with disabilities bring to the workplace, marketplace and supply chain. Equally important are policies, programs and investments that support the paradigm shift from a **medical** model to a **social** model and focus on talent that meets a business' need.