

**Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth (IL-08)**  
**Testimony Before the Foreign Relations Committee Of the United States Senate on The**  
**Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and Members of the Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I am a strong supporter of the disability treaty for many reasons.

I believe ratification is integral to our nation's global leadership role. We set the Gold Standard in our lifelong commitment to our disabled Veterans. We have what should be the Gold Standard in disability access, yet our legitimacy to lead other nations is weakened because we have not yet ratified the CRPD.

The CRPD will allow Veterans with disabilities to have greater opportunities to work, study abroad and travel as countries implement this treaty. Veterans, active Service Members and their families who are affected by disability will be able to lead active lives around the world.

**Legacy of the Americans with Disabilities Act**

There are over five and a half million Veterans with disabilities in the United States. And this number will continue to grow as we welcome back our Service Members from their deployments in a number of conflict zones. We are fortunate to have many laws, most importantly the Americans with Disabilities Act, that make sure our Veterans are welcomed back with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The ADA makes life easier for the thousands of wounded Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who face tremendous challenges adjusting to civilian life with a new disability. Accommodations like curb cuts, accessible entrances, vehicles and public transportation are so crucial to allowing these proud men and women to live independent lives. The importance of this cannot be understated for our nation's Veterans, including myself.

The ADA is essential in helping me overcome the obstacles I face as a Wounded Warrior and gives me the opportunity to assist other Veterans. It allows me to be physically active, resume my pilot privileges and serve in Congress. The ADA gave me the opportunity to move forward with my life.

This historic legislation was a true bipartisan effort. It was introduced by Senator Tom Harkin and advocated for by a fellow Veteran, Senator Bob Dole. It saw support from President George H.W. Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy, among many other Republicans and Democrats. The passage of the ADA showed a united America standing up for the rights of disabled persons. America's leadership inspired many around the world to seek justice and fairness for disabled communities in their countries. It is one of the main reasons we now have the opportunity to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

## **International Travel**

Unfortunately, our laws do not follow Service Members and Veterans when they are outside U.S. borders. When Veterans travel abroad, we are often jolted by leaving a country that does everything in its power to support our Wounded Warriors. We often travel to places that have no idea how to accommodate someone with an artificial limb, guide stick, or wheelchair.

It is a sad fact that in many countries around the world, the disabled are hidden, considered to be an embarrassment and not afforded the accommodations needed for them to lead productive lives. It is not surprising then that when disabled Americans travel abroad, we can find ourselves mistreated and rejected simply because we are physically or cognitively disabled. Without U.S. ratification of the CRPD, those of us who are disabled and active lose the ability to set an example when traveling overseas.

International travel is an obstacle for the disabled. It is reflective of a grander global misunderstanding of disability. Blinded Veterans have had their guide sticks taken away after being mistaken for weapons. People with artificial limbs have been told to store them in overhead bins and others have been stranded abroad when one leg of a flight accommodates wheelchair users, but the next one does not. As one blinded Veteran, who ventures around the world climbing its tallest peaks recently put it, climbing the mountains is not the challenge but it is the getting there that is.

The generous benefits provided by the post-9/11 GI Bill that many on this Committee supported, have given almost a million Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans the opportunity to further their education. Many of these Veterans are disabled, however, and will be unable to enhance their education with study abroad opportunities because of a lack of disability access overseas. It is sad that those who fought for our freedoms would find their own freedoms restricted now that they are moving on with their lives.

I am proud to be the first Member of the United States Congress born in Thailand and I traveled there earlier this year. I saw firsthand how even countries that are moving forward economically are not keeping pace with the necessary protections for disabled persons. For example, disability groups I met with in Thailand told me about the challenges they are face in trying to make public buses wheelchair accessible. The U.S. has an opportunity to lead, but to do so, we must first ratify this treaty.

Many Wounded Warriors are returning to active duty, despite having a disability. They should not be limited by their disability as to where and how they can leave their impact on this world. We do want to travel, work and yes, serve, abroad. Our service abroad will be limited if we do not start thinking globally about accessibility and how the U.S. can have an impact now on this issue.

## **Current Service Members**

When I visit injured service members at bases around the world, we are consistently met with the issue that they cannot leave the base for lack of accessibility. Last May, I returned for the first time to the warzone where I was injured. I am thrilled that Iraq and Afghanistan recently ratified the CRPD, but I know that they will need American leadership in order to rebuild their communities to be accessible to the disabled.

Accessibility abroad also impacts our current Service Members. For those of them that have a child or family member with a disability, the lack of accessibility in the country of their duty station can mean limited opportunities for children or employment for spouses. These Service Members may have to face the difficult choice between a career-enhancing tour of duty and having to deploy while leaving their loved ones behind.

In order to facilitate a military family's movement abroad, families are asked to enroll in the Exceptional Family Member (EFM) program. GAO reports have found that a fair number of families intentionally opt not to enroll in the EFM program because they are concerned that enrollment may adversely affect service members' careers. They are afraid that they will only be placed in countries with stronger disability protections, laws and services.

This is unfortunate since the Department of Defense provides many accommodations for the needs of military families. For example, the DoD will pay for homeschooling supplies, equipment and support for Service Members with families in the Exceptional Family Member program. Yet if the Service Member fears negative stigma from joining the EFM, they are likely to miss out on a homeschooling benefit that might have allowed their children to accompany them on an enriching overseas assignment.

The CRPD will allow our Service Members to deploy to more locations without concerns that host nations will not be able to accommodate their families' needs.

## **U.S. Leadership**

For all these reasons, The Veterans of Foreign Wars, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and Blinded Veterans of America all support ratifying this vital treaty. In August, I was thrilled to cheer on the American Legion when their membership unanimously voted to support ratification of the CRPD at their annual convention. A few weeks later, I welcomed their new Commander to the Joint Session of the Veterans Committee to thank them for their leadership. I was touched by the room full of Legion members who expressed to me through their nods and applause what this treaty means to them.

I know much of the opposition to this treaty comes from a lack of information. I strongly disagree that the U.S. might be hurt by ratifying the CRPD. Rather, I think this is a tremendous opportunity for us to lead in an area where we are clearly the best in the world.

The treaty needs U.S. leadership and expertise for implementation. We have the top medical device manufacturers of disability access equipment in the world. Those wheelchair accessible

buses that I hope will be purchased for use in Thailand should be provided by American companies. Thanks in large part to the work of disabled Veterans, we have opened the world of competitive athletics to the disabled. Our Vietnam Veterans fought successfully to open marathons and the Olympics to disabled athletes, and today, many Paralympians are a new generation of Warriors wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our educational and medical institutions like the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and the Alexian Brothers' Veterans Mental Health Program in Hoffman Estates, Illinois should be the global leaders in their fields. However, if we do not ratify this treaty, we open the door for other nations with strong rehabilitation programs to take on this global leadership role.

We Wounded Warriors have done our job serving our country. Many of us sacrificed a great deal in doing so. We did this because we believe in our nation. We believe our country should lead - that the world is a better place when the U.S. steps up to take leadership. And when it comes to improving opportunities for disabled Americans who want to travel and work abroad, Veterans believe we should have a seat at the head of the table.

It is time that the United States reaffirms itself as a leader for fairness and justice. We must stand as an example for those with disabilities around the world. We have done it before and we can do it again.

Thank you so much for your time.