

Written Testimony  
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging  
Hearing: *Empowering People with Disabilities to Live, Work, Learn, and Thrive*  
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Hello, I am Erin Willman. I am the founder and CEO of White Cane Coffee, and I would like to thank Chairman Casey and Ranking Member Braun, along with the rest of the members of the Aging Committee for inviting me to speak on subjects that both I and many in the disabled community face.

A lot has happened since I was here in February. I have received an incredible number of calls and emails from disabled persons and organizations that assist the blind and disabled. The common theme of those messages is that things are actually changing. We are not yet where we need to be when it comes to disability access and acceptance, but we are getting there. It brings me great joy when I hear of disabled people in my community getting good paying jobs and not being relegated to sheltered workshops for less than minimum wage.

A few weeks ago, an engineer from a large manufacturer in our county, visited our coffee factory to see how we adapted our workspaces and machinery to accommodate our employees. He honestly wants his company to be inclusive. I consider this as a huge step forward.

On a side note, I had the honor to run for PA State Representative for District 65. Even though I lost the election, I found that the majority of people I met were accepting of me as a viable candidate. The best part of the experience was having younger people come up to me and tell me that because of my running for office, they too now feel that they can also create change in their community in both large and small ways.

Today I would like to talk about accessible education and how it can be bettered with the RISE Act. People ask me all the time if I went to college. The answer I am sorry to say is “No.” Despite the fact that I graduated high school at the age of 15, I felt wholly unprepared for the challenges that my disability would bring me in a college setting. However, my hope is that others in the disabled community won't feel that trepidation when they seek out higher education. But I recognize that there are things that need to be changed for that to happen.

At this time, people with disabilities who wish to go to college and need accommodations to be successful have to prove that they are disabled through costly testing, even if they were born with a disability or have previous documentation from when they were in high school.

I remember how nerve-wracking it was for those in my life who were heading off to college. I can't imagine putting more stress on a person with a disability because they must prove their disability to get the support they need to thrive. If a person already has documentation that they

are disabled that should be sufficient. I don't believe that any prospective student who somehow miraculously became able bodied would try to ask for the same assistance they had before when they were disabled.

While proving that a person has a disability is disheartening enough, there is also the issue that many schools make it difficult to find out what sort of assistance and accommodations are available to disabled students. When looking into what college a student wants to attend, they have to comb through websites, visit the campus, and even, in some cases, contact the administration personally just to find out if the school has the accommodations that they would need to access the education offered by the college. If one school does not have the accommodations a particular student needs, the student will have to repeat the search process as many times as needed until they can find a school that is suitable. Not only can this process be stressful, it can also be so disheartening as to possibly turn them away from the idea of going to college at all. It doesn't have to be this way though. If schools were upfront and transparent about what accommodations are available the stress of finding the right school would be lessened significantly, making the transition into higher education easier.

Now I believe it is time to give the spotlight to our educators. We have all, at one point in our lives, had a teacher who has inspired and helped us find our path in life. So, I believe that they should have help to continue that work on a wider scale. It is an unfortunate truth that many teachers do not have the training that they need to accommodate a student with a disability. However, under the RISE Act this is a problem with an easy solution. The RISE Act would allocate funds to college administrations so that their faculty has the tools and know how to be able to teach all of their students, so they are able to thrive in their classroom. By educating our educators, our colleges can be a place where everyone can succeed no matter what.

I have always been extremely passionate about education. I believe that it can open doors and build bridges. It can lead to good jobs and a better life. Education expands a person's opportunities in life. It's why I work so closely with many schools for the disabled, so those students can create a brighter, more inclusive future. America is known as the land of opportunity. By implementing the RISE Act many disabled people across the nation will have the opportunity to seek out higher education without the worry that they would not belong. Something as simple as that would change their lives. If you change one life you change the world. It is time to change the world.