

Testimony of

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On behalf of

The Autism Society of America

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Small Business Committee

Hearing on

***Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses Empower People with
Developmental Disabilities***

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My name is Lori Ireland. As noted, I am the elected Vice Chair of the Autism Society of America, testifying in my role as a founder of Extraordinary Ventures.

I want to thank Chairman Chabot, ranking member Nydia Velázquez and esteemed members of the Committee for allowing me this valuable opportunity to address the employment needs of adults who have an autism diagnosis.

Last week, the CDC announced the prevalence of individuals diagnosed with autism is now 1 out of every 59 eight year olds, up from 1 in 68 when the CDC last reported the prevalence number. We can expect the prevalence of adults with autism to more than double within the next 14 years. While these numbers certainly require attention, there are additional statistics that need to be highlighted. An estimated 70 percent of adults with autism are either unemployed or underemployed, despite their ability, desire, and willingness to work in the community, and as many live on incomes below the poverty level. Each year, 50,000 additional individuals with autism are entering adulthood. Simply put, we are not providing or creating the job possibilities required to meet these numbers and as important, we are not providing the opportunity for so many to achieve the highest quality of life possible and full participation in American life.

Extraordinary Ventures (EV), formed in 2007, is a sustainable business model and one unique solution addressing this employment dilemma. With an operating budget of one million comprised of 80% business revenues and 20% private donations, and more than 50 tax-paying employees all of whom have disabilities, we are also a part of the local marketplace and economy.

We have accomplished this through old fashion American small business practices and four core philosophies:

One: We operate as a real business. Nothing works if we don't make quality products and services that the marketplace will buy, and in turn support us. We serve an important mission in our community and customers support that, but everything we do starts and ends with delivering competitive products and services. Without this, there would be no sales and then no jobs. That is the main distinction for EV over

other developmental disability programs that we see that either offers no pay or less than minimum wage.

Two: We operate a portfolio of businesses. This model allows us to provide a variety of job options to the people we hire and the opportunity to find the right fit for each person. While a business will typically hire to fill a specific - set job, we are able to change or re-arrange operations and workplaces so that the work in front of our employees is a customized match for their capabilities and interests. We find the job to meet the person, not the other way around.

We currently operate 6 businesses:

1. A pick-up and delivery laundry operation serving about 150 UNC college students, residential families and businesses in the community. We are priced competitively in the market and have a waitlist for new signups so the operation is primed for expansion if our employees can be provided consistency in support staff and a higher income cap.
2. A bulk mailing operation where we send out 60,000 pieces of mail per month.
3. EV Gifts where our employees create a premium line of handmade candles, soaps, lip balms and other products sold online and in retail stores across the state.
4. EV Pets dog walking business serving the local community.
5. A bus detailing service which operates on a yearly contract with the town of Chapel Hill servicing a fleet of public transit vehicles.
6. An event center where we rent out the surplus space in our building for parties, conferences, and meetings – This provides good cash flow that helps pay the rent and support the other businesses.

Three: Everyone is paid minimum wage or higher. Our employees are paid fairly and held to the same standards and expectations as any other business. As people improve in their jobs, they grow into bigger roles and are compensated more. Currently our employees earn anywhere from minimum wage to \$15/hour.

Four: We serve the full range of adults on the autism spectrum. We are able to offer a wide variety of tasks within our businesses that in turn, best suit a wide variety of people. We employ people that live and

work independently to those that are non-verbal, prone to severe behaviors and need 24/7 support --

These are the people that need your help.

In our experience, the difficulty is not in successfully employing someone with a disability, it is in attracting and keeping qualified employment support staff so they can grow in their jobs and expand their role and hours while facing a low income cap.

We are witness to the dramatic positive impact having a job has on our employees. We see the significant decrease in challenging behaviors, an increase in job skills, dexterity, communication, life skills, and confidence. There is no question that employment is beneficial and a worthy cause to fight for. We know that not everyone is able to work, but our goal is to provide training and opportunities for those that can and want to work. We should strive for the same labor force participation rate as those without disabilities. What we are trying to do is put the largest number of people in jobs that will still be around fifty years from now. It begins with setting these individuals up with opportunities allowing for growth and independence and continues with sustainable business practices.

There are also incredible benefits to employers and small businesses that come with the hiring of adults with autism. Employee retention is an example. While we have a number of employees who gain the necessary skills and choose to leave and pursue full-time employment outside of Extraordinary Ventures, *which we applaud*, we also have employees hitting their 8, 9 and 10 year anniversaries almost every week. With millennials switching jobs about every two years, this should be a huge selling point to small businesses, especially when the ideal positions for adults with autism tend to be the ones with simpler, more repetitive tasks that typically have high turnover.

Extraordinary Ventures does not seek or rely upon government funds. We pay livable wages and are now generating 80% of our costs through product and service revenue and the remaining 20% from donations. While we are very proud of our work, I would be doing a disservice to our employees and their families if I did not use this opportunity to ask you to address several critical policy needs that we believe can expand and help our efforts. We know that in partnership with the Autism Society, we can expand our efforts but we need public policy changes.

Let me give you an example. One of our workers came to us who relied solely on Supplementary Social Security Income (SSI) for years. His SSI payment was around \$700 and that was all he had as income. When the cost of a one bedroom apartment in Chapel Hill is around \$600, he couldn't afford to live as independently as possible since he had only \$100 for utilities, transportation and food each month. He received SSI when he was unable to work and after other agencies helped him, he was ready to work. He came to us and excelled at work. He was so proud of his first paycheck, but because of his disability, he could only work part time and his take home pay was around \$300 after taxes were subtracted. He then realized that due to SSI rules, his \$300 would result in losses of his SSI income. While certainly we want to help people off of government support whenever possible, the current approach isn't helping us do that. Our worker was only able to have a total of around \$850 which still would not allow him to move to economic self-sufficiency. And when you consider that apartment rentals often require security deposits, limitations on how much he could save under SSI rules limited such savings to less than \$2000.

On behalf of this individual and all of those facing the same problem, I would like to make some specific policy recommendations to address some of the challenges for individuals with autism and other disabilities who want to work but cannot risk the loss of health care and income supports:

- Increase the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level at least to the level used for people who are blind.
- Substantially increase the resource limit for SSI and annually index for inflation.
- Enact simplification of work incentives, including allowing on-going presumptive re-entitlement to Title II disability benefits and on-going eligibility for Medicare for those who lose benefits due to work but continue to be disabled.
- Provide cash assistance outside of Social Security and SSI to assist working individuals with disabilities in meeting their disability-related costs, regardless of their income or assets.
- Enact technical and substantive changes to the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act to ensure the law works as intended.
- Protect the Affordable Care Act and provide incentives to states to expand Medicaid authorized by the law.
- Support the ABLE Act and bills to expand it.

- Congress should update and amend the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), the Disabled Access Credit (DAC) and the Architectural and Transportation Barrier Removal deduction to expand eligibility criteria, increase financial benefits to eligible employers, and heighten programmatic oversight.
- Protect the Medicaid program and provide incentives to states to implement the option to buy into Medicaid for people with disabilities who work.
- Reject work requirements being proposed for eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, public housing. These new policy ideas will not help people find employment and will jeopardize their health and well-being.

Medicaid provides health care services and long-term services and supports that maintain the health, function, independence, and well-being of 10 million enrollees living with disabilities and, often, their families. For many people with disabilities, their lives literally depend on being able to access needed healthcare. Medicaid helps people stay healthy so that they go to work.

We also encourage you all to examine ways those of us in the non-profit world who hire individuals with a disability can benefit in a way similar to tax benefits paid to for-profits that hire groups that are chronically unemployed. We want to be able to encourage more entities to hire the most in need and challenged, who often have higher training and support costs.

Extraordinary Ventures hires more than 50 individuals. Imagine just one similar agency in every state and the District of Columbia hiring a total of 2550 people. We are a true small business. Our workers pay taxes and we provide needed community services and products. We provide opportunity to both individuals who have college degrees and those who require 24 hour assistance.

You all can help by creating the policies needed to accomplish this. I ask that you consult with experts such as the Autism Society of America and other stakeholders to help find reasonable, cost-effective ways to help make employment an opportunity that enables a person with a disability to be able to live the American Dream to the fullest extent that they are able.

I thank you for this opportunity to tell you about our work and our wish to expand employment options for every adult with autism.

Please feel free to contact me and our Vice President of Public Policy Kim Musheno for more information on our policy recommendations. To learn more about Extraordinary Ventures or schedule a tour, please contact Paige Morrow, paige@evnc.org.