



Remarks as delivered by
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"Disability as an Intelligence Community Mission Need"
First Intelligence Community Disabilities Summit

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National Reconnaissance Office Headquarters, Chantilly Va.

Good morning. I love "firsts," and I'm glad we set this summit up. Thank you, Rita [Sampson, director of Intelligence Community equal employment opportunity and diversity], for inviting me to kick this off. I'm particularly happy that we're putting some devoted thought into meeting the needs of disabled members of our workforce.

When I'm preparing to speak at events like today's, I torture our staff by asking them to look back to see if the date marks a historic occasion. Well, we found one today that's – *different* – and strangely appropriate. Today marks 55 years since the premier of the sci-fi and fantasy series, "The Twilight Zone." [laughter]

Stay with me. [laughter]

The show's trademark was to show viewers a world that was almost like the one they lived in, but with a twist.

Thinking back on my first years working as an engineer in the intelligence field, they could have been the set-up for an episode of the Twilight Zone:

Imagine you live and work in a society of intelligent, creative people – people who design technologies that do things most people couldn't imagine. But the world is populated only with men. Even though they really mean well, they have no idea how to deal with you – the only woman in their midst.

That could be a Twilight Zone set-up, right?

I'm really not exaggerating. Early on in my career, I spent a lot of time being the only woman in the room. I remember, at the first conference I ever went to, being the only woman in an auditorium full of about 300 men. I realized I couldn't get up and leave what was turning out to be an exceedingly dull lecture, as many of the men were doing. Heck, I believed I couldn't get up to take a bathroom break, because everyone in the room would notice that "the woman" was leaving.

Then, at TRW when I first started working there, there was only one other woman in the organization. And men constantly confused our names, because they were defining us by a label. We were, “the women.” And believe me, we didn’t look alike.

I think many assumed we were secretaries, and I know in their minds, we were just “the women.” And, for a long time, none of them knew how to work with us. I can’t particularly blame them for that. Many of the engineers I worked with had been in the field for decades and had never worked with a woman before. But the result was that I felt isolated and alone.

The reason I bring up that experience today is because that’s the experience many people with disabilities have in our community today, because this is the one category of diversity in which we haven’t made much progress.

Many impaired employees feel isolated, and many of their coworkers don’t know how to work with them, because they don’t have experiences with other impaired coworkers and have never thought about or lived with a disabled perspective.

Just last week, I got an email from an employee who is visually impaired. She’d received a wide-distribution email about a training opportunity. That email simply had a graphic with pictures of employees working together, like they would in the class. In clear text, to you and me, across the top and bottom of the image, it had all the information about the class, including how to sign up and attend. And she couldn’t read a word of it.

Not only that, but we’d given her assistive technology, the JAWS software that helps her read, but the software couldn’t read the information in the image, because the advertisement was just a picture that included those words and images.

An employee without a visual disability might be annoyed that he’d have to retype the information, rather than cut and paste and stick it into a form, but this person had no way to know what words were on her screen.

That was a real workforce issue, and obviously a 508 compliance issue, one that we fixed. But that happens all the time, because we are not attuned to the impact on impaired employees around us, the impact on productivity and lost capacity, the kind that hurts our mission.

We have subject matter experts with visual impairments, and we’ve had issues of them getting pdf documents that we quickly needed their opinions on, documents that their assistive technology cannot read. These are the experts. We need their input, and they don’t have the tools to do their jobs, to enable them to contribute.

So this summit today is necessary and overdue, because, believe it or not, 508 compliance – pairing employees with the technology and access they need to do their job and contribute – is a mission need.

But that mismatch of technology and information is a symptom of our bigger problem – hiring and retaining men and women with disabilities. Rita is going to go through statistics in a few minutes, and they boil down to this: Over the past several decades, we as an IC have made great strides with diversity, except in this one area.

Today, we have a much higher percentage of women in leadership than we did three decades ago, when I started work in this community. Today, when I look around, I have friends and colleagues who are women. I'm not alone.

But when it comes to impaired employees, to employees with disabilities, our numbers as a community haven't changed significantly. And culturally, we have not made the same great strides in adapting to their needs. We just don't have the experience to consider their impairments. We don't see the world from their viewpoint.

Camille Wider, who recently retired, unfortunately, from ODNI's HR office, led the very first IC Wounded Warrior event, back when ODNI was located in DIA's building on Bolling Air Force Base.

If you've ever been to the DIAC, you know that there's a long hallway from the entrance of the building to the atrium. Camille tells the story that, when they were planning this first event, they didn't want to make the service members, who'd all been seriously wounded and subsequently medically retired, traverse the long hallway, then go up a ramp, then down another long hallway to get to the auditorium.

So they thought about it and planned very carefully to have the Walter Reed buses pull up to a side entrance to the auditorium. Just a few days before the event, they were doing a walk-through with some prior service members and someone noticed that there was no ramp at the auditorium's side entrance.

They called Walter Reed and found out what was in hindsight obvious: that almost all of the Wounded Warriors would be in wheelchairs. So they quickly shifted back to having them enter at the front, and made a quick scramble to recruit volunteers to push the wheelchairs. As you can imagine, there was no shortage of volunteers from all across the organization.

I tell that story for two reasons: first, to point out that people with the best intentions, people who spend a great deal of time and energy thinking about issues surrounding disabilities, can still have a difficult time seeing the world from the perspective of the person who's impaired.

And the second reason I bring that up is to highlight the Wounded Warrior intern program. It's something we, as a community, should see as a benchmark. Almost 600 combat-wounded Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines have interned with our IC Wounded Warrior program. We've helped them transition from military to civilian life, and helped them find full-time employment, for more than a few, here in the IC.

Kyle Carpenter, who was awarded the Medal of Honor this summer, interned with NCTC. He said that even though he chose other long-term opportunities, the experience helped him. That's absolutely terrific.

But anyone involved with the program will tell you, we've gotten a lot more from the Wounded Warriors than they've gotten from us. We've certainly pulled a deeper understanding and feel for our mission from our experiences with them. Knowing people who have served in war zones and who depended on the intelligence we provide, will change the way we approach our work.

But we've also seen a different perspective on life through them. Someone missing a limb has to relearn how to perform daily tasks, like tying shoes or carrying in the groceries. Someone in a wheelchair accesses everything differently, not just the building entrance. Someone recovering from a traumatic brain injury thinks differently, and literally sees the world differently.

So those Wounded Warriors, by virtue of their disabilities, have a different perspective on life than the unimpaired workforce. That's the benefit of diversity in the workforce.

In my career, as I moved from building technology for the Navy, to building teams and then organizations at CIA, and now supporting the DNI's vision of integrating the Intelligence Community, I've seen the value of seeking out people who think differently than I do, to try to find opinions different than my own.

After all, I know what I think. I know the problems that I can identify. I can lay out solutions, and people will challenge themselves to go and put those solutions into effect. The problems that are going to sneak up and get me, and get you, are the ones we didn't think about, and that is the value of having diverse viewpoints and backgrounds on your team.

That's why – this spring – the DNI told the IC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Allies Summit that inclusion isn't just about what's altruistically right. It's also about what the IC is about: integration. Intelligence integration means honing all of our unique tradecraft inside those notorious "stovepipes" at each agency, and bringing those specialized skills together to meet mission needs.

And that's true for the workforce too. It's a mission imperative that we hire and retain people with diverse experiences and thoughts, that we give them a seat at the metaphorical table when we're discussing how to meet the mission, and that we give them the tools they need to do their jobs.

So that's the challenge I'll leave you with today: Find ways to hire more people with disabilities – not just because it's altruistically right, but because it will make us better as a community. It means we will have a better chance to meet our critical mission. Figure out how to make the workplace accessible to them, to meet their needs, and as you know,

your solutions should involve talking with them and listening. And finally, give our impaired employees the tools they need to be successful.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from Rod Serling, the creator of The Twilight Zone. He said: "Imagination – its limits are only those of the mind itself."

It would be easy to read that sentence as something mystical and dreamy, something you might see on a motivational poster in a school gym. But this is the same man that said, "Being like everybody is the same as being nobody." So I think he meant something more grounded with that.

I think he meant that if we're going to be creative people, and make no mistake, we need creative people in the Intelligence Community, we have to stretch the limits of our mind. We have to work to see the world through different perspectives, and we have to surround ourselves with people who can help us do that.

In the same way, we as a community have to expand the limits of our collective mind. And the surest way to do that is to hire, train, equip, and retain people with different views of the world and different experiences they bring to the table. That's what you're here today to do.

Thank you for the work you do every day, and thank you for helping us stretch our collective viewpoint and our potential. Please know this work is critical. Thank you.

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