

United States International Council on Disabilities

June 30, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In February 2017, the U.S. International Council on Disabilities (USICD) congratulated you on your appointment as Secretary of State and sent the enclosed letter. As of today, we have not received a response. I look forward to receiving your response soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patricia A. Morrissey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping tail on the "y".

Patricia A. Morrissey, Ph.D.
President

United States International Council on Disabilities

February 13, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The U.S. International Council on Disabilities (USICD) congratulates you on your appointment as Secretary of State.

We recognize that President Trump intends to put America first. From our perspective, that includes sharing American expertise in disability rights, access and inclusion, including support for the advancement of disability rights globally and disability inclusion in U.S. foreign development programs. When people with disabilities are included in a nation's economy, everyone benefits. We in the United States have much experience to showcase in this area, and we at USICD believe that including us in foreign relations will strengthen U.S. partnerships abroad and forge new relationships. Disability inclusion in foreign aid and international relations is real opportunity for the United States, and we regard this as critically important when we consider President Trump's interest to pursue international initiatives on a bilateral basis.

USICD looks forward to working with you and the new Congress to secure, recapture, and strengthen the United States' position regarding disability rights internationally. The number of people with disabilities around the world is rapidly increasing due to the aging of the world's population and advances in health care that allow people with disabilities to more likely survive accidents and other challenges to their health status. Moreover, the range of conflicts around the world is resulting in more people with disabilities, especially among young people. Despite these trends, U.S. aid and diplomacy initiatives fail to consider accessibility issues that are so important to people with disabilities and their families. Countries around the world are trying to address the expectations of their now more vocal citizens with disabilities, who have been inspired by the progress they have seen take place here under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and empowered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Quite simply, the United States needs to do more. Our days of good intentions with modest actions should be behind us. We must be clear, direct, and bold.

We urge you to take two important actions to strengthen U.S. leadership going forward in promoting the rights and concerns of people with disabilities internationally. First, propose to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee legislation to make the Office Special Advisor for International Disability Rights in the Department of State a permanent entity with an authorization of sufficient standing (e.g., ambassadorship for the director), staff, and funding to be effective. This leadership position must have the capacity to be influential within the Department, to enhance disability rights and inclusion across the entire U.S. foreign policy community, and to serve as a resource for other executive departments and agencies that engage

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in international work (e.g., Department of Defense).

Second, affirm through the issuance of policy that the foreign aid, development, and diplomacy programs of the United States Government will not discriminate against people with disabilities, will always be accessible to people with disabilities just as they are to the non-disabled, and that U.S. funds will never be spent overseas to build inaccessible facilities or facilities that segregate people with disabilities from mainstream community life.

While the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has a policy that all foreign assistance programs be accessible and appropriate to people with disabilities, that policy is 20 years old and needs updating to reflect current global standards; it is also currently not enforceable and does not apply to all U.S. State Department programs. At minimum, the State Department needs a disability policy to ensure its programs do not discriminate against people with disabilities. Our foreign operations must be accessible and appropriate to people with disabilities, reflecting the American values expressed in the Americans with Disabilities and Rehabilitation Acts. While we no longer lock up people with disabilities in asylums and let them languish for a lifetime, we do not want U.S. government programs to fund these abusive institutions abroad. Similarly, in the United States, we would never build a school that was not physically accessible, nor would we provide education that was not appropriate to children with disabilities. Our foreign aid should not either.

By making the Office of the Special Advisor for International Disability Rights permanent, and formalizing a policy of disability access and inclusion in foreign operations—two concrete steps—we will be upholding the best principles of disability rights that we live by in all aspects of our own society. The U.S. will be able to do more and show more of its disability rights leadership on the world stage. There is no time to waste. It is a matter of human rights, but it is much more. People with disabilities and how they are treated in education, employment, health care, housing, transportation, and other areas are a reflection, good or bad, of how others are treated. As you begin to build your legacy, please embrace these steps to expand the capacity of the U.S. to influence the quality of life for one billion people with disabilities around the world. Please take the broad view and through your testimony on the fiscal year 2018 budget and other opportunities endorse the actions we have suggested. They may well reshape the planet and bring us more peace, collaboration, inclusion, and harmony.

Standing up for the rights of people with disabilities is part of what makes America great. We are ready, willing, and able to work with you on ensuring this promise.

Sincerely,

Patricia A. Morrissey, Ph.D.
President