

The Honorable Michael Pompeo  
Secretary  
United States Department of State  
201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The U.S. International Council on Disabilities (USICD) is a non-profit membership organization that brings together the U.S. disability community on behalf of the global disability rights agenda. We, a member organization of USICD, oppose any decision to eliminate the position of U.S. Special Advisor for International Disability Rights.

In 2018, USICD sent a letter to you asking to make the office of the Special Advisor for International Disability Rights in the U.S. Department of State a permanent entity. We received no response. Your failure to respond to either inquiry shows a lack of commitment to persons with disabilities and demonstrates the lack of leadership that would be remediated by having an appointed Special Advisor for International Disability Rights.

Having no Ambassador-level Special Advisor on International Disability Rights shows a clear disregard for the disability community in the United States and the discrimination and isolation faced by over one billion persons with disabilities worldwide. We ask that you reconsider this suggested course of action and keep the position of Special Advisor.

The U.S. experience of the last several years has shown that we need a centralized, high profile, visible office on disability affairs in the Department of State to address the ongoing worldwide disability rights movement. One purpose of this movement is to help the Department learn about the human rights violations that millions of persons with disabilities face on a daily basis in order to ensure that disability is integrated into the agenda of the Department. In the sprawling, diverse bureaucratic environment of a major cabinet agency, it is essential that the position remain at a high level and visible to remain effective and influential.

Prior to the creation of the Special Advisor's position, disability had been a marginalized part of the work of the Department. The creation of this position significantly increased the visibility of this issue both within the Department and with embassies around the world. This position also demonstrated the U.S. commitment to advancing the human rights of persons with disabilities around the world.

The previous Special Advisor and its very small staff proved to be an excellent resource and focal point for marshalling the U.S. response to numerous inquiries from foreign nations. And the Special Advisor and its staff have proven effective. A several year series of meetings and negotiations with officials from China resulted in China beginning the process to move away from segregated schools and sheltered workshops, opening up opportunities for those in China with disabilities and providing a foundation for an open and fair exchange between our two countries. The work of Special Advisor also helped Mongolia pass its first disability rights law, based on the principles of our own

Americans with Disabilities Act. The Special Advisor has also assisted Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Vietnam as these countries have worked to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in their countries.

When the Senate chose not to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Republican leadership in the Senate expressed the view that the United States could continue to exercise leadership in international disability rights bilaterally, working with individual countries on their implementation issues. The U.S. Special Advisor on International Disability Rights is the embodiment of this bilateral approach. In his comments on the CRPD, Sen. Corker noted that “substantial concrete action will be needed to bring about actual and tangible progress internationally. And the United States should continue to bolster those efforts.” Senate Report a 36. Continuing the Special Advisor position in a highly prominent role is exactly the type of action that is needed to fulfill Sen. Corker’s vision. Not appointing a Special Advisor now would reverse a successful course.

With a Special Advisor for International Disability Rights, the Department of State will be able to coordinate disability-specific resources and expertise quickly, to maintain U.S. leadership on the principles that we as a nation have adopted in the Americans with Disabilities Act, and to provide information and support to advance the rights of persons with disabilities around the world. Please do not turn your back on an issue where the United States pioneered the principles of rights for persons with disabilities; instead maintain the position of the Special Advisor for International Disability Affairs.

We again request a meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Your organization

CC: Senator James Risch, Chairman, SFRC  
Senator Bob Menendez, Ranking Member, SFRC