

STATEMENT OF SENATOR ROBERT J. DOLE

Mr. President, I rise in support of H.R. 2127, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1991. The bill, which extends the expiring program authorities of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 for one-year, also amends the early intervention services program authorized under Part H of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The 1973 Rehabilitation Act

Congress has long recognized the importance of providing programs and services that enable people with disabilities to live lives of dignity and productivity. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, established a network of programs and services to assist Americans with disabilities to prepare for employment and to develop independent living skills. In order to achieve the inclusion of people with disabilities into the work force and the community, the Act provides funds for several broad program categories including individual services, research programs, personnel training, and demonstration projects.

The centerpiece of the Act is the Federal-State Vocational Rehabilitation Program, which provides Federal grants to states to help locate and obtain jobs for people with physical and mental disabilities. Some of the other important programs eligible for the one-year extension include the Supported Employment Services for Individuals with Severe Handicaps Program, rehabilitation training grants, comprehensive services for independent living, centers for independent living, the projects with industry program, the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and the special demonstration projects.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA), is an integral part of our nation's effort to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. Sadly, for many years, our nation legally prevented children with disabilities from enjoying the social and academic benefits of public education. In 1975, against this background of exclusion, Congress established a framework of services and programs to ensure children with disabilities, ages 3 to 21, an enforceable right to a "free appropriate public education."

Since the enactment of IDEA, Congress has come to recognize the importance of providing early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. The statistical and anecdotal evidence underscores the need for services and programs designed to help these special children prepare for learning. While access to a "free appropriate public education" is critical to the development of all children, it is essential to prime those with special developmental needs for the rigors of the classroom.

In 1986, Congress created an optional state grant program to assist in the establishment of statewide systems for early intervention services. This early intervention program, known as Part H, is targeted to children from birth through two years of age who are developmentally delayed, infants and toddlers "at-risk" of substantial developmental delay, or children with physical or mental conditions that will probably result in substantial delay. Although Part H focuses on the needs of infants and toddlers, it also recognizes the needs and importance of the family.

Mr. President, this bill changes the early intervention services program. It creates a mechanism, known as differential participation, to enable the continued participation of states having difficulty adhering to Part H's original five-year time line. The new funding mechanism is very simple.

Those states submitting applications on time are rewarded, while others experiencing fiscal difficulty are eligible for two, one-year extensions. States granted extensions are allowed to remain in the program, with funding frozen at the previous year's level. Then, the funds not allocated to the extension states are to be reallocated to the on-line states. At this point, any remaining grant money is to be re-allocated to the extension states.

I am proud that Kansas was among the first states to successfully apply for a fourth-year grant under the Part H program. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Kansas Interagency Coordinating Council, and service providers across the state, such as the Early Childhood Development Center in Hays and the McPherson County Special Education Cooperative deserve tremendous credit for their hard work and dedicated efforts on behalf of the smallest, most vulnerable Kansans.

Mr. President, I ask my colleagues to support the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1991. As a nation, we must ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to a free education, and the corresponding opportunities to develop into independent and productive members of our nation's communities.