

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

ROSA'S LAW

Dear Colleague:

We write to request your support in eliminating the terms “mental retardation” or “mentally retarded” from federal laws by signing on as a cosponsor of Rosa’s Law.

The Problem: At the turn of the 20th century, people who were viewed as having limitations in intellectual advancement and social behavior were institutionalized. The prevailing sentiment at the time being that such people could not and should not interact with “normal” people. In federal statute, they were termed “feeble-minded.” As a country we have come a long way since those years of forced institutionalization and exclusion. Through federal legislation - such as the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* – Congress has taken great strides to ensure that Americans with intellectual disabilities are afforded:

- 1) Educational opportunities that lead to success in the workplace
- 2) Equal opportunity without discrimination
- 3) Supports for independent-living, community-based or otherwise

While our efforts reflect a commitment to the progress of the more than 6 million people diagnosed with intellectual disabilities in this country, our maintenance of the terms “mental retardation” or “mentally retarded” (MR) communicates a fundamental disconnect between our intent and our values. What kind of message are we sending when Congress maintains an antiquated and stigmatized label while the World Health Organization, the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), and the President of the United States [*through the President’s Committee on Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities*] have all shifted to using the term intellectual disability in the place of MR?

In Sen. Mikulski’s home state of Maryland, a 13 year old boy recently testified in front of the state’s General Assembly and successfully advocated - on behalf of his sister, Rosa, a child diagnosed with an intellectual disability - for a substitution of MR with intellectual disability. He explained, “Some people say they are just words, and it’s not going to make a difference if we *just* change the words. Some say we shouldn’t worry about the words, just the way we treat people. But when you think about it, what you call people is how you treat them! If we change the words, maybe it’ll be the start of a new attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities. They deserve it.” We think they do too.

The Solution: We are introducing a bill that replicates a law recently passed in Maryland – “Rosa’s Law.” It brings us out of the dark ages and into a world of evolved sensibilities by retiring an archaic term that equates the person with the disability, and substituting it with a term that references the type of disability.

This legislation will make a nominal change to health, education, and labor policy by substituting the term “mentally retarded” with “an individual with an intellectually disability” and “mental retardation” with “intellectual disability” where applicable. The term intellectual disability covers the same population who were previously diagnosed with mental retardation. This bill will not alter eligibility of services or lead to a diminution of rights for these individuals.

We would appreciate your support as a cosponsor.

Barbara A. Mikulski
United States Senator

Mike B. Enzi
United States Senator