

Theo Braddy
Testimony before the
United States Senate Special Committee on Aging
June 17, 2021

I would first like to thank you Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott and the members of the Special Committee on Aging, for inviting me to share my story.

My name is Theo Braddy. I became a person with a disability at age 15 after breaking my neck playing high school football in Wadley, Georgia.

I am originally from Georgia. I am 61 years old. I retired early in 2019 after working 31 years as CEO of the Center for Independent Living of Central Pennsylvania (CILCP). The mission of CILCP is to eliminate and prevent barriers faced by people with diverse disabilities on a day-to-day basis.

I am married with a 28-year-old daughter and a 23-year-old son. I now work part-time as President of Theo Braddy Consulting.

Most importantly for this hearing, I am a user of Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and have been for almost three decades.

As I share my story, please understand that it is not only my story, but a story that is lived out by millions of people across the country!

Disability - What we don't know is when it can happen, but what we do know for sure is when it happens, life will change!

You will be faced with all types of new barriers in life. The turning point in my life happened when I broke my neck that April 46 years ago, at age 15 and my life changed.

I became paralyzed from the neck down and I couldn't do anything for myself!

Life changed for me. It became what I refer to now as a "maze of confusion".

I ended up in a nursing home at age 15, and like most people becoming disabled, the full weight of caring for someone newly disabled falls solely on the family. For me, that responsibility fell to my brothers and sisters.

You see, they got me out of the nursing home and moved me to Pennsylvania where I ended up on the 3rd floor of an apartment building looking out of a window for weeks at a time, waiting for my brothers to come over and physically carry me down 3 flights of stairs and eventually back up again. That waiting on others went on for a long time.

I have no way to explain how it feels not to be able to do anything for yourself anymore. I left rehab not even being able to feed myself or able to push my manual wheelchair.

Home and Community-Based Services changed all of that. It started when I received attendant care services.

I have said this many times in my career, people with disabilities do not want to be taken care of. We do not want to be objects of charity. We want to contribute and give back!

HCBS attendant care services did that for me. I call it the great equalizer!

Breaking my neck paralyzed me. It took away my ability to do things for myself independently. I couldn't dress or bathe myself, feed myself, get in or out of bed. I couldn't go anywhere without help from others.

There were many times throughout my 31 years at work when I had to depend on attendants to drive me back and forth to my many meetings, because it was just too far or too painful for me to do it myself.

Being provided with attendants gave me back my independence and my ability to live life fully again.

Once my I started to receive HCBS I enrolled in Edinboro University in Erie, earned my degree, and graduated with honors. I then went on to graduate school at Temple University in Philadelphia and received my master's in social work (MSW).

In undergraduate school, for the first time, as all college students want, I was able to move off-campus and live in an apartment by myself.

Shortly after finishing my MSW, I worked with a group in central Pennsylvania to apply for a grant to establish what became the Center for Independent Living of Central PA.

Once the grant was approved, I applied for the director position, and I ended up leading the organization for 31 years.

I have taught as an adjunct professor at Millersville and Temple Universities and have visited quite a few colleges as a guest lecturer.

I have been appointed to serve on boards and commissions by 3 different Governors. These include the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission; The Pennsylvania State Independent Living Council; and the Pennsylvania State Board of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, which I current serve on.

As a result, I have impacted many lives for the better!

All along the way, my different attendants helped me get up in the morning, travel with me as needed, and assisted me in getting back in bed at night. Not 24/7 but when I needed them. They made it possible to live a full life.

This is what I want to be your takeaway - don't miss this!

All the time I was going to school, leading a non-profit agency, and helping to form state and federal policy, I was still paralyzed from the neck down. My physical disability didn't change. So what did?

My access to HCBS!

Some might say I've received a lot of support and resources for one person. But this is the thing — I have paid more taxes and put so much more money back into the economy than what has ever been spent on me as I was being supported through HCBS.

This is one reason why HCBS is so essential. It is an investment in the potential of people, people who, so often, society wants to write off.

Believing in the potential of people with disabilities will yield a return on that investment.

What it did for me, it can do for so many others: for people with disabilities; for older adults, for their families, and for the workers who provide the services, if we make the investment in HCBS.

HCBS is not only a great equalizer, it is a game changer!

This is why the \$400 billion proposed by President Biden's Infrastructure Bill for HCBS is so essential.

Please don't forget this! Thank you!