



## Testimony before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Building Wealth and Fostering Independence: Creating Opportunities to Save

Testimony of:

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Good morning, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and other distinguished members of the committee. My name is Thomas Foley, and I am the Executive Director of the National Disability Institute. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to be part of Building Wealth and Fostering Independence: Creating Opportunities to Save. I'm here today not only as the Executive Director of the National Disability Institute, but also as someone who is blind, has been on SSI and SSDI and has, over time, learned how to build an economic future for myself and my family.

There remain far too many barriers to economic advancement for people with disabilities. I still vividly remember as a freshman in college, hearing from a friend, of this \$2,000 asset limit if one received SSI. I thought she was kidding. Why didn't the government want me to save? I wanted what everyone else did: a job that led to a career, a home of my own, rainy day savings, a family, a shot at the American dream. That \$2,000 asset limit hasn't changed since my freshman year in college. Simply put, asset and income limits discourage savings, work and hope.

Many other factors complicate long-term savings for people with disabilities. Stable, full-time employment is still elusive to many people with disabilities who are often the last hired and the first let go, as we have seen during COVID. According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy, in June 2021, the labor force participation rate for people with disabilities was 21.3% versus 67.7% for people without disabilities ([ODEP, 2021](#)). It's nearly impossible to save for one's financial future without stable, competitive employment. People with disabilities want to work and are capable of working but often lack the opportunities or ability to successfully navigate byzantine benefit programs and complex work-incentive rules. In addition, recent data indicates that people with disabilities spend an additional \$17,000 a year as a result of their disabilities ([NDI, 2020](#)).

I was lucky that in high school I received a financial education class that changed my life. I learned that every financial decision I made had a long-term financial implication—and I should take that very seriously. According to 2020 data from the Federal Deposit and Insurance Corporation, people with disabilities are three times more likely to be unbanked than people without a disability: 16.2% versus 4.5% (FDIC, 2020). It is difficult to plan for an economic future without the basic building block of a bank account or basic financial education.

Underlying much of this is an unspoken but palpable belief, that people with disabilities are incapable of building an employment and economic future. I am often asked, "Do you work?" rather than the more traditional "Where do you work?" These low expectations permeate the disability experience from school, to employment, to public policy and even one's friends and family. These low expectations can seep into the hearts and minds of people with disabilities themselves. The removal of policy barriers and the resulting message such actions send goes a long way to changing expectations within the disability community.

One such policy action is the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act of 2014. We at the National Disability Institute manage the ABLE National Resource Center (ABLE NRC), which is the leading, comprehensive source of objective, independent information about federal- and state-related ABLE programs. Our mission is to educate, promote and support the positive impact ABLE can make on the lives of millions of Americans with disabilities and their families.

In this work, we have seen first-hand the positive impact of ABLE accounts in the everyday lives of people with disabilities. From buying a home and covering out-of-pocket medical expenses to providing a way to save money to start a small business, ABLE has been a gamechanger for thousands of people with disabilities. Particularly for people with disabilities, who, due to their disability, have episodic employment or contract work, we have seen how access to savings through ABLE allows individuals and their families to better financially navigate periods of unemployment, remain financially resilient and ultimately, improve their long- and short-term economic self-sufficiency.

As currently written, the ABLE Act prevents otherwise-eligible individuals with disabilities (many of whom spent years advocating for the Act) from realizing the benefits of ABLE accounts. By passing the ABLE Age Adjustment Act, more than 6 million people with disabilities would be allowed to open ABLE accounts, nearly doubling the currently eligible population. Passing this critical legislation would increase the financial security of people across the spectrum of disabilities without jeopardizing their much-needed public benefits.

We strongly urge the passing of the ABLE Age Adjustment Act; this bill would greatly increase the utilization of the program by allowing individuals with disabilities that started before age 46 to open ABLE accounts. Increasing the number of people with disabilities who can open accounts is a market solution that will strengthen the ABLE program from a fiscal perspective while also allowing older adults who become disabled through accidents, chronic illness or military service to benefit from this tool.

Members of the committee, I started this testimony by mentioning my American dream. I bought that house, built a career, and have put two and a half kids through college. I'm not particularly special. People don't need to change; systems do. With your help, today, we have the opportunity to change these systems and increase financial resilience and economic opportunity for millions of people with disabilities and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity.