

**Robert A. Mecca**

**Ageing and Disability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: How Technology Can Help Maintain  
Health and Quality of Life. Testimony before the  
United States Senate Special Committee on Ageing  
May 22, 2019**

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am honored to be here on behalf of people with disabilities who need assistive technology to live the independent lifestyle that so many people take for granted. My name is Robert Mecca. I will be married for 29 years this year. My wife Dawn is here to support me today. I was born with Spina-Bifida and I use assistive technology every day to live independently, work and be an active part of my community. I have been working in the independent living field for almost 30 years with over 20 years as the Executive Director of LIFT, Life and Independence for Today.

I use both high-tech and low-tech assistive devices. I use a wheelchair for mobility and portable driving hand-controls that I can put into any automatic vehicle in less than 5 minutes. I am currently looking into funding for an All-Terrain Tracked Wheelchair, as I am an avid deer hunter. This outdoor wheelchair would allow me to go into the woods where I wouldn't otherwise be able to go.

One low-tech device I use is a Reacher to get things out of high places. A few years ago I had shoulder surgery and had to use a transfer board and a power wheelchair for four months. The transfer board was a little different. It had a seat on it that would slide back and forth. This took very little effort to use. I acquired the transfer board through LIFT's Reuse program and my power Wheelchair through the Saint Marys Pharmacy Home Health, a durable medical equipment provider in my home town. If I had not had access to these priceless pieces of AT, I would have been stranded in my living room looking at the same four walls for three to four months, as I only had the use of one arm. This example demonstrates that AT is not only important for people with

permanent disabilities but it is very helpful in temporary situations to keep people independent and in their own homes!

LIFT is one of 17 Centers for Independent Living in Pennsylvania. My Center is located in Saint Marys. LIFT serves arguably the six most rural counties in Pennsylvania, Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean and Potter counties, an area of over 5,000 square miles. We serve this huge geographical area with a staff of only six. We provide services to assist individuals with disabilities to live independently in the community. Currently, LIFT has 366 open consumers. We also receive hundreds of Information and Referral (I&R's) requests every year.

LIFT is a regional center for TechOWL, Pennsylvania's Assistive Technology Act program. As a state AT Act program, TechOWL and LIFT work together to ensure people with disabilities have access to and acquisition of the assistive technology and services they need to live in their communities. Under the umbrella of Tech OWL, LIFT provides services through the Assistive Technology Lending Library (ATLL) which is a free service that enables all Pennsylvanians with disabilities, regardless of age or disability to try AT Devices to see what best suits them before they buy something. LIFT also facilitates the Telecommunications Device Distribution Program (TDDP) for our six counties. The TDDP provides telecommunication devices to qualified applicants with disabilities. These devices allow individuals to use telephones independently. LIFT also has an assistive technology reuse program. We take donations of lightly used equipment and recycle them to those with disabilities who would otherwise not have the means of obtaining them.

As Executive Director of LIFT, I serve on the board of directors for the Statewide Independent Council (SILC), which is a governor appointed position. I also serve on the board of the Pennsylvania Council on Independent Living (PCIL). Which is a membership association of centers for independent living (CIL's) in Pennsylvania. I travel quite a bit for my job and when I need overnight accommodations I always try to arrange for wheelchair access. For someone with a mobility disability who is active like myself, things like an accessible shower, shower chair, and grab bars are essential to my independence outside of my home.

In closing, I would like to thank you for the honor of allowing me to represent people with disabilities who use assistive technology to enhance their independence and become and remain productive citizens in their communities. I would be happy to answer any questions.