

**Lois Ondik**  
**Testimony before the**  
**United States Senate Special Committee on Aging**  
**May 8, 2018**

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. It is an honor to be here.

My name is Lois Ondik. I am 73 years old and a resident of Blandon, Pennsylvania. I have 3 children and 2 grandchildren. I am a retired school bus driver for the Berks County Intermediate Unit.

Five years ago, my doctor diagnosed me with type 2 diabetes. At that time, my doctor wanted me to start on medication to help manage my blood sugar and A1C. A1C measures the amount of hemoglobin in the blood that has glucose attached to it. An A1C level of 5.7% is considered normal. An A1C of 5.7 to 6.4 is pre-diabetes and 6.5 and over is type 2 diabetes. Five generations of my family have been diagnosed with diabetes, myself being the fifth generation and now my daughter has just been diagnosed with pre-diabetes, making her the sixth. I understand the toll that it can take on both your body and finances. I was concerned about the side effects of medications and I knew that the cost of medication would likely eat into my budget and my savings. So, I insisted on trying to manage my condition on my own, without medication. For a while, I was able to do so.

During a recent visit with my doctor, I was again told that my blood sugar and A1C levels would soon require me to begin taking medication. And, so again, I thought to myself that there had to be another option.

Then, I saw an advertisement for a diabetes self-management program through Berks Encore, my local Area Agency on Aging, hanging on the bulletin board at my local grocery store. I ended up registering for the diabetes self-management class. I did not know what the class would be about when I signed up, but knew that I needed to manage my diabetes better or face the bills and side effects associated with medication.

The class has been a blessing. We met once a week for two and half hours for six weeks and it was run by two trained leaders. One of my leaders, Martha Sitler, joins me here today.

My classmates were at different levels in their disease, including those with a new diagnosis, people managing with Metformin medication, and people on insulin. I met a woman who used an insulin pump and another who was struggling to manage her blood sugar, even with insulin. Meeting them, learning about the side effects, and knowing how costly the medications can be affirmed my resolve to manage my diabetes on my own for as long as possible.

The class is evidence-based, so I know that I learned about techniques to deal with the symptoms of diabetes that really work. We discussed how to deal with emotions and stress management

and also talked about foot care, exercise, healthy eating, and many other topics, but especially how to talk to our doctors.

Before these classes, I did not regularly test my blood sugar, but I started to once I joined the diabetes self-management program. I also tracked everything I ate and learned how food and exercise affected my blood sugar. The class helped me understand the amount of food I need per day, including how to balance protein, carbohydrates, and fats to better control my blood sugar.

At the end of every session, each individual created an action plan, something they wanted to accomplish before our next class. For example, I wanted to start exercising. My plan was to start low and slow, to exercise 15 minutes per day, 3 days per week. The following week we were accountable to our classmates and had to report on how we did. Sometimes it is hard to accomplish every goal you set, but being accountable to my classmates helped me reach my goals. I found the peer-to-peer support to be very important. The class was eye opening to say the least.

After my diabetes self-management program ended, I joined a free walking class entitled “Walk with Ease”, sponsored by the Arthritis Foundation of Berks County. The program is presented by Martha Sitler and Kathy Roberts of Berks Encore, my local Area Agency on Aging. Today, my foster dog, Murfee, and I walk every day, and I use two pedometers to track my activity. I went from zero exercise to more than 2.5 miles per day. I think of the walking class as an extension of the diabetes self-management program because of how important exercise is in managing my disease.

I am pleased to say that since starting my class, I lost thirteen pounds and lowered my A1C two tenths of a point. In fact, the doctor told me that had my A1C moved two tenths of a point in the opposite direction, she would have insisted I start taking medication. That is where it all fell into perspective, I knew I had the ability to manage my diabetes on my own, I just needed the right tools.

The diabetes self-management program did just that, it gave me the tools I need to manage my diabetes and now I use those tools to live a healthy life. I even told my doctor about the course and recommend that she tell her patients about it. I am now able to manage my disease through lifestyle changes, instead of having to purchase expensive medications and supplies, like insulin.

I believe it is important for people to have access to supports to prevent or better manage their diabetes and that can help them avoid paying for high-cost medications. I am concerned about the rising cost of medications across the board, because it puts treatment out of reach for some people.

Again, thank you for the invitation to testify before the Committee. I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.