

Written Testimony
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
Hearing: “Empowering People with Disabilities to Live, Work, Learn, and Thrive”
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As a resident of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I’m heartened to sit before Senators Casey and Fetterman on this special day. Ranking Member Braun and other members of the Committee, thank you for welcoming me today.

I sit before you today as the Mayor of North Wales Borough, an amazing community of 3,400 residents in Montgomery County just outside of Philadelphia. That may not be remarkable in itself - there are, after all, over 519,000 elected officials in the United States today.¹ I am unique in that I am, as far as we’re able to tell, the first Deaf person to be elected to the office of Mayor that uses American Sign Language as their primary means of communication.

Concurrently with my role as Mayor, I am also the Executive Director of the Deaf-Hearing Communication Centre, a regional nonprofit organization providing critical services to the Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind community members in the Philadelphia region. I previously served with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in their Office of Disability Integration and Coordination. I also worked at Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Inc. (TDI) managing their emergency management grants. I also served my community as a volunteer firefighter for 8 years, as one of the few disabled individuals nationally certified to do interior firefighting. I am also a proud alum of Gallaudet University right here in Washington, DC.

As an elected official who uses American Sign Language and the first one in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania - we find out very quickly what barriers exist for us in doing our jobs effectively.

Deaf individuals like myself represent a unique aspect of the disabled community, in that the accommodations that make our jobs possible are operational costs. For most disability accommodations, the cost to retrofit a building or provide a device to make it accessible to individuals with disabilities is a capital cost that can be amortized over the lifetime of the facility/device.

For me, the cost of an interpreter is essentially a direct charge against the profit/loss ledger, or in the parlance of local government, represents a cost that taxpayer dollars cover.

¹ <https://poliengine.com/blog/how-many-politicians-are-there-in-the-us>

In a tiny community like North Wales, I'm blessed that the Borough Council and Borough Manager wisely had funds set aside in their budgets long before I was elected to ensure accommodations for people with disabilities. I know that this is fairly unique to small communities across the United States. The sad truth is that I don't have enough funds available to cover all of my interpreting needs and I need to pick and choose where I spend those funds.

Senator Casey, I shared the challenges I had with you and your colleagues. In your research, you also found another barrier that exists for people with disabilities that want to get involved in politics. That is, if a person with a disability simply runs for any office (paid, barely paid, or unpaid) - they can lose their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) income, even if they don't raise any money or they lose their election.

In two separate Congressional sessions, Senator Casey introduced two bills. The "Removing Access Barriers to Running for Elected Office for People with Disabilities Act" would address the discriminatory language in the Social Security Act that penalized people with disabilities for running for office (S.3747/HR.7351).²

The second was "The AID (Accessibility and Inclusion to Diversify) Local Government Leadership Act of 2024" to address my challenge, that is, for small communities like North Wales Borough, it would establish a grant to reimburse those municipalities for accommodation expenses they incur for any elected and appointed officials with disabilities (S.3749/HR.7350).³

These bills are a critical step towards addressing a glaring gap in the demographics of our elected officials. Out of the 519,000+ elected officials across the country, I am personally aware of only 5 who use American Sign Language nationally today. If we extrapolated the total number of users of American Sign Language⁴ nationally today and applied that to total elected officials, we should have over 1,550 elected officials using American Sign Language.

Extending that further - current estimates say that 10% of all elected officials have a disability of some type,⁵ but 28.7% of the population has a disability.⁶ The unfortunate conclusion is that our elected officials are not representative of the people they serve.

²https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/removing_access_barriers_to_elected_office_one_pager.pdf

³https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/aid_local_government_leadership_one_pager.pdf

⁴https://gallaudet.edu/wp-content/uploads/gcloud/gal-media/Documents/Research-Support-and-International-Affairs/ASL_Users.pdf

⁵<https://disnetwork.org/the-lack-of-politicians-with-disabilities-is-a-systemic-issue/>

⁶<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>

In the recent Presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate spent over \$35,000 on American Sign Language interpreting expenses while the Republican candidate spent nothing.⁷ In fact, during President-elect Trump's first term, the National Association of the Deaf had to bring lawsuits to require the administration to provide ASL interpreters.⁸

The reality is that the Americans with Disabilities Act is the last great civil rights bill that was passed with true bipartisan support. As I said during my remarks at the White House's Disability Pride event a few months ago - "I woke up one morning with rights I did not go to bed with. The ADA made millions of Americans first-class citizens in our own communities overnight."⁹

In the 34 years since the passage of the ADA, our political will toward safeguarding these vital human and civil rights have weakened significantly. I call on leadership and Senators from both parties to recommit to protecting these vital rights and services for millions of Americans. I ask you to look beyond the rhetoric of soundbite politics, and listen carefully to the people who would actually be affected by the policies that have been suggested or proposed by members of the incoming administration.

The next Congress can take positive and proactive steps toward ensuring the civil and human rights of people with disabilities stand fast. First - the passage of Senator Casey's bills, "Removing Access Barriers to Running for Elected Office for People with Disabilities Act" and "AID (Accessibility and Inclusion to Diversify) Local Government Leadership Act" would be an excellent first step toward ensuring that our elected officials are truly representative of the communities they serve.

Recognizing that when we remove all barriers to participation, people with disabilities are able to fully engage with the communities they live in. This means making it easier for people to vote, making it easier for them to run for elected office, and to volunteer for their small-town boards and commissions.

Congress must also ensure that the United States Department of Justice continues to work closely with counties and municipalities to ensure they are in compliance with civil rights statutes. That often means paying close attention to the accessibility of polling sites. The incoming administration's record in turning back the Department's civil rights focus and defunding their work is significant cause for concern.

Senator Casey, you have been a steadfast ally of North Wales Borough, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and millions of disabled and Deaf Americans. We owe you a debt that can never be repaid. Thank you.

⁷ https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/october-23-2024?selection=6bc53a2b-9a8e-45c4-a89b-ca4e1015bfb8&utm_campaign=post-share-selection&utm_medium=web

⁸ <https://www.nad.org/2020/09/23/historic-win-white-house-ordered-to-provide-sign-language-interpreters-for-covid-19-briefings/>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbNDDVxMgME>