Senator Tom Harkin
Going Out Swinging
for the Disability Community
Commentary
Let’s Make it Policy to Hire PWDs
By John M. Williams

It is a national catastrophe that only 17.8% of working age people with disabilities (PWDs) were employed at the end of 2011, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. I suspect that figure is higher when you consider the number of minorities unemployed.

It is a national tragedy that each year thousands of students with disabilities drop out of high school and never return. A bitter 17-year-old paraplegic, who wished to remain anonymous told me: “There is no future for me. No one talks to me about college and a future.” He is not alone.

Last year, I knew of more than a dozen students with disabilities who left high school because they believed they had no future. Their parents or guardians unfortunately agreed.

For every student I know who has dropped out of high school, there are thousands of others like them. As a nation committed to ensuring equal opportunity for all Americans, we can’t allow this travesty to continue. Now is the time to change the conditions that foster failed policies. President Barack Obama’s administration should take the lead in developing programs that encourage students with disabilities to graduate from high school and enter a junior college, community college or university with a career path toward employment.

In high school, a curriculum should be developed that mentions famous people with disabilities and their accomplishments. The areas covered should include politics, arts, science, math, athletics, communications, history and other subjects. Students with disabilities should welcome such studies. Maybe they will be inspired to go on to college.

In college, students with disabilities should be encouraged to do their best. Role models could be helpful in inspiring students with disabilities to graduate. The U.S. Department of Education should encourage colleges and universities to work with students with disabilities and discuss career opportunities with them. The federal

Into the Light
Damaged Self-image? Fix Your View!

Growing up in an environment that says you are worth less than others damages one’s self-image and often results in a lifetime of accepting demeaning, disrespectful treatment.

Inaccurate self-images often preclude people from recognizing when they are not treated with the respect they deserve.

This has been the experience of many of us, with or without disabilities. When you’re told often enough that you’re stupid, ugly, inferior, too fat, too thin, or worth less because you don’t walk or talk or look like others, you wind up with a self-image that lies to you about who you are. The fact (fact being the key word here) is that no one reading or hearing or encountering these words is worth less than or is inferior to anyone else on the planet, past or present. The fact that you, the reader, may be at a time in life when you don’t believe this doesn’t mean it’s not true. It just means that something or someone is impeding your ability and right to recognize what has been true about you all along: that you are equal to, and as valuable as, anyone else. I hope with all my heart you will give yourself the permission and the time to discover that this is true.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, there may be times when you are, without realizing it, allowing yourself to be treated in some cruel or demeaning -- in short, disrespectful -- way.

The challenge is to find a way to outwit your damaged self-image so you can recognize when you are being mistreated.

Some years ago I came up with a tactic, strategy, method (pick the word that works for you) that never fails me, as long as I remember to ask myself one particular question. I’ll tell you what the question is in a minute.

Like many others -- I am in no way unique -- it has not always been easy to identify when I am being treated with disrespect. For me, this “blind spot” has primarily surfaced in two areas: romantic relationships and people’s discovery that I live with a brain injury. My disability is the result of being held up and shot in the head in 1984. Upon learning that I have a brain injury, some people literally have backed up a step as if I were going to explode into a million pieces! (And I’m the one with the brain injury?) The strategy is as follows:
Harkin Going Out Swinging for the Disability Community

By Kathi Wolfe

In January, Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, renowned for his staunch advocacy for people with disabilities, announced that he will not seek re-election to a sixth term in the U.S. Senate in 2014. Harkin, who has worked with both Republicans and Democrats to champion disability rights, introduced the Americans with Disabilities Act in the Senate.

Via email with Independence Today, Sen. Harkin recently related his personal experience with disability, the ADA and his hopes for the disability community. Excerpts from the interview are as follows:

Q: Senator, all of us with disabilities are indebted to you. What made you interested in issues faced by people with disabilities? How did having a brother who was deaf influence you?

A: My brother Frank was a real inspiration behind all of my work in the House and the Senate on disability issues. He lost his hearing at an early age and, because of that, he faced prejudice ... on a regular basis. But he refused to accept the biases that society tried to impose on him. He fought for – and won – a life with dignity. His story is similar to that of millions of Americans with disabilities.

I delivered a speech in American Sign Language on the Senate floor to support the Americans with Disabilities Act. I did it as a tribute to my brother Frank and to other individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Q: Today it seems almost unthinkable that the ADA could have been passed along bipartisan lines. Why do you think both Republicans and Democrats voted for the ADA?

A: In American Sign Language, there is a wonderful sign for America. You put your fingers together, interlocking your fingers, and then move your hands in a circle. It signals that we are one family – we are all in this together.

In that spirit, passage of the ADA was a bipartisan effort. As chief sponsor in the Senate, I worked closely with people on both sides of the aisle – both in Congress and in the administration. Senator Bob Dole was an indispensable ally. We received invaluable support from President George Herbert Walker Bush and key members of his administration, including White House counsel Boyden Gray and Attorney General Dick Thornburgh. And there were so many others – (the late) Justin Dart, Tony Coelho, Steny Hoyer, Steve Bartlett, advocates, other members of Congress and the administration – whose commitment and support were instrumental in helping get the ADA passed.

The final vote on the ADA, 91 to 6 in the Senate, sent a resounding message that this nation would no longer tolerate ... second-class citizenship for people with disabilities.

Q: Why does the ADA matter? Why is it important to address the discrimination that people with disabilities
WASHINGTON, D.C. – It’s a chilly, sunny January day for President Barack Hussein Obama’s second inaugural address. The 44th president is flying high. This promises to be his day and also, by constitutional law, his last inaugural.

As I walk down 13th Street to Constitution Avenue, I begin comparing this inaugural to the one held in 2009. My first remembrance is how cold it was on Jan. 20th, 2009. It was so cold then that I thought I was in the Arctic.

Four years ago, there was a sea of people getting on and off the metro trains at every stop. A normal ride from Vienna, Va., to the Metro Center takes 40 minutes. On that day, travel time from station to station doubled. Back then, when I emerged from the subway at the Metro Center, I was met by a seemingly endless wall of people. So many people were on all sides of me that I was practically slow-motion walking. Today, I am walking faster.

Then, it was easy to see people with disabilities, or PWDs; they were omnipresent. Today, I do not see people with disabilities -- not even someone in a wheelchair. When I reach 13th and Constitution, I look left, right, behind me and straight ahead. Then, across the street, I spot two blind women with guide dogs.

I cross the street and shout: “Hello. Hello. Please stop.”

They do.

I introduce myself and ask for their names.

“I’m Sheryl Thomas, and I come from Austin, Texas.”
Centers for independent living (CILs) across the United States continue to face severe staff and budget cuts because of federal and state cutbacks to the Medicaid home- and community-based services (HCBS) waiver program.

Each state operates its own Medicaid system, but in order for a state to receive matching funds and grants, its system must conform to federal guidelines. Some states have refused to draw down federal Medicaid dollars by withholding the allocation of matching state monies.

The Americans with Disabilities Act ruled that people with disabilities can no longer be forced into nursing homes or other institutions but have the right to live in the least restrictive environment. Medicaid pays for the services and supports that allow income-eligible people with disabilities to live in their own homes.

How is it that cuts in Medicaid dollars are now a serious threat to several CILs? After several disability communities successfully challenged the institutional bias in their state’s provision of Medicaid service delivery, some CILs became fiscal intermediaries, providing personal assistant services and other supports. Some provided HCBS assessments, plans of service or service delivery. States developed HCBS Medicaid waivers, and CILs were a natural to contract for consumer-directed or Money Follows the Person supports and service.

The disability community maintains that the HCBS program is far more cost-effective than nursing homes or institutions, and CILs were proficient at saving money through consumer-directed models. Then came the cry to eliminate Medicaid programs funded by “discretionary” funds as states and the federal government faced serious budget short-ages.

The disability rights community pushed back. In September 2011, ADAPT, NCIL, and AAPD led numerous disability and aging groups in the My Medicaid Matters (MMM) campaign. A rally and a major media blitz were employed to explain the importance of protecting Medicaid HCBS funds. The MMM campaign still exists at the federal level, but the main battleground has shifted to the states.

“It is clear that Medicaid as we know it will go through major transformations over the next few years and will not be the same as it is today,” said Bob Kafka, a national ADAPT organizer. “If we don’t recognize these signals and respond with a strategy to make sure we are at the table, these changes will happen without our input.

“During the Clinton years, there were similar threats to Medicaid, but money was found at the eleventh hour, and Medicaid reform ideas never happened. It seems unlikely that will happen now in this political environment. Medicaid is on the table in all the discussions of entitlement reform, and we need to offer ideas on how reform can enhance community integration and is not just an excuse for cuts.”

The Obama administration has said that the federal government will not reduce Medicaid funding. But if states don’t put up the funds to draw down the federal HCBS money, “there will not be enough dollars to meet the growing needs of the disability community,” Kafka said.

Even though they receive federal funding, states set the Medicaid rates for all the HCBS programs and decide the hours and the amount allotted for all services and support.

“This means it is critical that we have a state-by-state organizing strategy that recognizes that each Medicaid program is unique,” Kafka said.

Bruce Darling, CEO of the Center for Disability Rights in Rochester, has been in the forefront of those supporting consumer-directed HCBS programs and Medicaid expansion. He is chairman of the NCIL’s committee on Medicaid HCBS funding and has helped organize the national MMM campaign for ADAPT.

“We’ve fought federal Medicaid cuts and have held off Medicaid Fund Cuts Imperil CILs
By Janine Bertram Kemp

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often face?

A: Working on the passage of the ADA, I heard stories of individuals who had to crawl on their hands and knees to go up a flight of stairs or to gain access to their local swimming pool, stories of individuals who couldn’t ride on a bus because there wasn’t a lift … and who couldn’t go to concerts or ballgames because there was no accessible seating. Before the ADA, millions of Americans were denied access to their own communities – and to the American Dream.

The ADA sets forth four simple goals for people with disabilities: equal opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency. I keep these goals in mind every day when I go to work in the Senate, and it is something I will continue to do over the next two years.

Q: Would you talk about the adverse effect of some of the Supreme Court’s decisions on the ADA on people with disabilities?

A: Starting with the Sullivan trilogy and continuing with Toyota v. Williams, there was a significant problem with the Supreme Court interpreting the definition of disability in the ADA too narrowly. Many people with epilepsy, diabetes, depression, cancer and a range of other conditions had their cases thrown out of court because they weren’t “disabled enough” to qualify for civil rights protections. This was inconsistent with our Congressional intent – and meant that millions of Americans who experienced discrimination at work were not able to get their day in court because they couldn’t pass the Supreme Court’s unreasonably high threshold for what counted as a disability.

Q: Why was it necessary to have the ADA Amendments Act passed? How has the act helped restore the intent of the ADA?

A: The ADA Amendments Act was a bipartisan bill that overturned the four problematic Supreme Court decisions and restored protections for millions of Americans with disabilities who were able to manage their symptoms with medications and other mitigating treatments. This law has helped to refocus the courts on whether individuals were being treated fairly at work or experiencing discrimination, and not on whether they were impaired enough to deserve civil rights protections.

Q: Do you worry that efforts to reduce the budget deficit and to reform entitlements could hurt people with disabilities?

A: I am concerned that we’re not having the right discussion about how to deal with budget deficits. First, I don’t accept that our country is broke. We are a prosperous country, and if we are clear about our priorities, we will have more than enough money to make investments in the disability community and help them become part of the labor force and part of the middle class.

If the discussion starts from the assumption … that we can’t afford our commitments to key safety-net programs, then the debate is over before it begins. What we need to focus on is how to make investments in education and job training that will help to rebuild the great American middle class – and people with disabilities have a big stake in that discussion.

Q: Would you talk about the need for people with disabilities to live in their homes instead of in nursing homes or other institutions?

A: It’s important that people with disabilities have the option to receive care in their own homes and communities. I’m committed to ending the institutional bias in the Medicaid program, which is why I pushed to include in the Affordable Care Act a provision known as the Community First Choice option, which allows these individuals to receive these services outside of a hospital or nursing home. Several states, including California, have chosen to implement the CFC option, and I’m optimistic that more states will continue to follow suit.

Q: Do you have anything you’d like to say to folks with disabilities?

A: I want my friends in the disability community to know what an honor and joy it has been for me to work with you and to know that I expect that work to continue for the next two years and after I leave the Senate. I want the disability community to know that I love them and that our country needs them to keep pushing for justice and freedom. To quote the late Justin Dart, “Lead on!”

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a play for pity ... I didn’t need anyone’s help with it,” she writes, even though she admits that, during her youth and young adulthood, type 1 diabetes treatment was “more primitive.”

Even though most people with diabetes today can lead fulfilled lives, thanks to more knowledge and better treatment of the illness, living with this disability can be challenging. Growing up, she internalized the secrecy that until recently has surrounded illness and disability. “...The secrecy wasn’t simply in my nature,” she writes. “When I was young, disabilities ... of all sorts were governed by a code of silence .... you didn’t speak about them outside the family.”

Until her late 30s, Sotomayor told few people other than her family that she had diabetes. At her 37th birthday party, her secret was revealed when her blood sugar level plunged dangerously low. “There was Theresa. She was talking to me, but I couldn’t make out the words,” she vividly recalls. “... There was something in her hand that I wanted badly ... I grabbed for it, but my aim was shaky. I smashed the piece of birthday cake into my mouth.... When I recovered ... Theresa told me that although she was vaguely aware that I was diabetic, she had no knowledge of what a sugar low looked like.”

“My Beloved World” (Alfred A. Knopf, New York) is a poignant, page-turning account of Sotomayor’s struggles and achievements from becoming open about her diabetes to dealing with people who disapproved of affirmative action or who thought that she was too “brassy.”

The book says little about Sotomayor’s take on the issues that have come up or might appear before the Supreme Court. Anyone looking at “My Beloved World” for clues as to how Sotomayor will rule in future cases involving disability issues will be disappointed. Yet, it’s clear from this memoir that disability has been a profound and integral part of her experience. “The reality of diabetes always lurked in the back of my mind,” she recalls, “and early on I accepted the probability that I would die young .... I have never worried about what I can’t control. But nor could I waste what time I had ...”

Though lower life expectancy is no longer the norm for people with type 1 diabetes, Sotomayor still deeply values life. “Now diabetes has become more manageable, and I no longer fear falling short in the tally of years,” she writes, “But the habit of living as if in the shadow of death has remained with me, and I consider that, too, a gift.”

Don’t be lulled by Sotomayor’s use of the word “gift” in the above quotation into thinking that “My Beloved World” is sappy about life or disability. She recalls channeling her disappointment at being told as a child that she couldn’t become a detective (like her hero Nancy Drew) into a desire to become like Perry Mason, a lawyer. One day as a teen, heading to her job at Prospect Hospital in her crime-ridden Bronx neighborhood, Sotomayor tripped, and her insulin syringe and needle fell out of her purse in front of a police officer. “Oh, no, no,” said the cop incredulously as I explained ...” she writes. “My explanation carried no weight; neither did my bottle of insulin. What crazy story would a junkie come up with next? An arrest would have dimmed any hope of college, let alone law school.”

The book reveals how Sotomayor fought race- and class-based discrimination with the help of mentors and her community, exceeded her career goals and, along the way, took ownership of her diabetes.

No matter how busy you are or how familiar you think you are with Sotomayor from news reports, read “My Beloved World.” Her story is inspiring in the best sense of the word.

Kathi Wolfe, a writer and poet, writes frequently about disability and the arts.
government could hire more students with disabilities and encourage local and state governments to do likewise.

The government also should establish a national jobs bank, and private industries should detail openings, for college graduates with disabilities. The president should invite CEOs and people with disabilities to a White House meeting to discuss jobs. The Obama administration should hire persons with disabilities in positions in which the public can see them.

The next person picked by the Obama administration to fill a vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court should have a visible disability. There are people with disabilities in law qualified to be a Supreme Court associate justice. Other qualified people with disabilities should be hired.

The Obama administration should do more to promote National Disability Awareness Month every October. During the month, the president should be seen in the first and last commercials, which should emphasize the accomplishments of people with disabilities.

The federal government should raise the ADA Small Business Tax Credit from $5,000 per year to $10,000.

To employers who hire individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the Work

Work Opportunity Tax Credit

Opportunity Tax Credit is available. Employers can receive a tax credit of up to $2,400 per individual hired. Many people with disabilities meet the criteria for WOTC, including all recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and all clients of state vocational rehabilitation agencies. This credit should be raised to $5,000.

People with disabilities want an education so they can be fully employed. They can do extraordinary work. Some are exceptionally talented and driven in the mold of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Helen Keller, Britney Spears, Agatha Christie, Margaret Thatcher and FDR.

John Williams coined the term “assistive technology.” He is a regular contributor to Independence Today.

Medicaid

Medicaid challenges to HCBS funding in the Affordable Care Act and fiscal cliff (negotiations),” said Darling, whose CIL lost half of its Medicaid funding two years ago.

“At the federal level, there are so many bureaucratic details to watch for … it’s sort of like death from a thousand paper cuts. But cuts at the state level are still happening all over the country. Our main effort must be organizing to fight these state by state.”

Many CILs that contracted with their states to provide consumer-directed HCBS waivers are now reeling as those states move to the medical model for service provision. NCIL is working on strategies to oppose that move.

“We have become very concerned about this on a national level basically because there is a trend around the country where fiscal management services budgets are cut and CILs are cut out of those budgets,” said Kelly Buckland, CEO of NCIL. “We agree (that) there is a pattern (of budget cuts) that will keep occurring around the country.”

Kafka agreed with Buckland that the managed care-Medicaid issue is not going away.

“This is not a six-month campaign,” he said. “It will go on for at least the next five years as Medicaid evolves. None of us can predict the specifics, but if we don’t have some organized campaign, the independent living community will be drawn along rather than help form policy.”

“We are searching for some of the solutions,” said NCIL’s Darling. “If your CIL is having problems or if you have found helpful strategies concerning Medicaid and HCBS issues, please share them with NCIL or Bruce Darling.”

A few years ago, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services and other states looked to Kansas as an example of cost-effective disbursement of Medicaid dollars because it was cheaper to support people living in the community rather than a nursing home. Today, several Kansas CILs have lost half their staffs and are scrambling to survive the economic recession. Even so, you may not hear Kansas advocates complaining. Many CILs that entered into agreements with the state for pared-down pieces of Medicaid-funded services signed contracts that stipulate that they may not engage in advocacy.

Darling and two executive-level Kansas sources raised employment of people with disabilities as an important tangential issue. In many states, CILs are among the few agencies that actively recruit and hire people with disabilities. Because states have slashed Medicaid contracts, several CILs have had to lay off 40% to 60% of their staffs. Kansas CILs have been negotiating with large managed-care companies to absorb staff members with disabilities that the CILs are forced to lay off. Amerigroup, which conducted extensive outreach in the national disability rights community, is one organization that has been receptive to hiring qualified staff with disabilities.

Over the last two years, all HCBS programs in Kansas
Commentary
When it Comes to a Republican, I'm a (Grand Old) Party Pooper
By Mike Ervin

When the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed by President George H.W. Bush on July 26th, 1990, I sat on the White House lawn and witnessed the festivities. It was a glorious day indeed.

Two years later, Bush was up for re-election. There was no way on earth I would consider voting for him. I was delighted when he lost.

Four years after that, Robert Dole was the Republican presidential nominee. Dole was one of the biggest champions of the ADA and disability rights in general while he was in the Senate. But I breathed a big sigh of relief when Dole lost, too.

Why is that? What more could Bush have done to win my vote than sign the ADA? I believe that his heart and mind were in the right place. He sincerely believed in the promises of the ADA, as did Dole. Democrats hardly have the market cornered on moving progressive disability rights legislation forward. Senator Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, was a strong force behind the ADA and sponsor of the ADA Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008. George W. Bush signed the ADAA as well as the law that created the Money Follows the Person funds, which still are used today to transition people with disabilities out of nursing homes and into community living.

But the problem with voting for individual Republicans is that they bring their party along with them. A vote for them is a vote to put their party in power. These individuals are still beholden to the Grand Old Party’s platforms, philosophies, leaders and constituents, which are often incompatible with their disability rights sensibilities. Their futile attempts to reconcile the two often result in contradictions that take disabled folks five steps back for every one step forward.

George H.W. Bush provides a clear case in point. The year after signing the ADA, he appointed Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. At the time, Thomas has been extraordinarily hostile toward the ADA in cases that came before the Court. In the landmark case of Olmstead v. L.C and E.W., Thomas wrote the dissenting opinion. He derided the notion that the indefinite, involuntary institutionalization of people with disabilities by state governments constitutes discrimination.

"By adopting such a broad view of discrimination, the majority drains the term of any meaning other than as a proxy for decisions disproved of by this Court," Thomas wrote.

A vote for a Republican is a vote of approval or at least a proxy for decisions disproved of by this Court, which still are used today to transition people with disabilities out of nursing homes and into community living.

My Lifelines: Books and Writing
Peter S. Kahrmann

All of us have experienced loss of one kind or another. At times, the amount of loss inflicted on our lives can make us feel like everything is lost, that all of what is important to us in life is gone. And while these feelings are real, they are, thankfully, anything but the definition of our objective reality.

Some years back I went through an experience in which I felt all was lost. I’d been held up and shot in the head, leaving me with a brain injury. The woman I was seeing ended our relationship about six weeks after the shooting. I had no medical insurance, no job and was living with an injury that could act up and end my life. I very much felt that all was lost.

But I was, thankfully, wrong. My therapist suggested that I identify all the things that were not gone from my life -- all the things that were not under threat of leaving. So that’s exactly what I did. I shuffled about my Lower East Side apartment and, out loud, said things such as, “These are my books, my stereo, my music.” I remembered my friends, my daughter, my coffee, my writing, and so on.

Given that I spent most of my time alone during this period of my life, my attention gravitated to my books and writing.

Books have been companions of mine for as long as I have memory. When I was homeless years ago, I’d pinch paperbacks from those squeaky wire racks in drugstores. Books are good company.

Writing, well … I write sometimes because I want to and always because I have to, and I can’t remember a time I didn’t have to.

Like books, writing gives me a place to go, another world to step into, if you’ll permit the analogy. Sometimes, when times are tough, there’s nothing like having another world to step into when you need to catch a break by stepping out of the one you’re in. Books and writing are my lifelines because, for me, they have always been there.

I must confess that I am very picky about the pen and pencils I write with. My pen is a Lamy Safari fountain pen, and my pencils are made by Palomino. When it comes to books -- boy, oh boy -- there is a saying that best captures my relationship with them: “So many books, so little time.”

I am no different than you. We may have different lifelines, but yours are there, I promise. They may be different from mine, but they’re there. Yours might

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Lifelines
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**Self-image**
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**Step 1.** Choose someone you love with all your heart, someone whose honor you would defend with all your might. Choose a person you would protect and defend in a heartbeat if you saw him being treated with disrespect. For me, it’s my father. For you, it might be your parents, child, significant other or friend.

You will be surprised and delighted at how well this strategy works. I can tell you that in the last few months there have been two or three times when this strategy has allowed me to instantly recognize when I was permitting myself to be treated with disrespect. As a result, the damaged portion of my self-image was rendered powerless, which is exactly what it should be, and I was able to respond to the mistreatment accordingly.

So, again: Pick someone whose honor you would defend with all your heart and soul. And the next time you catch yourself accepting some form of treatment that doesn’t feel right, ask yourself what you would do if you saw the person whose honor you would defend being treated that way. If your answer is something along the lines of “I’ll rush to his defense, then you’ve successfully overpowered the damaged portion of your self-image! You’ve scored a victory on your behalf because you — yes, you — deserve the same level of respect as the person whose honor you’d defend. As I said earlier, no one reading or hearing or encountering these words is worth less than or is inferior to anyone else on Earth, past or present. I promise.

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**Medicaid**
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have been turned over to the three remaining managed-care companies in the state. Waiting lists are growing, and many HCBS recipients now living in the community are threatened with nursing homes and other institutions. A total of 630 Olmstead complaints were filed on behalf of individuals in Kansas (In 1999, in the case of Olmstead v. L.C., the Supreme Court ruled that the unjustified institutionalization of people with disabilities is a form of unlawful discrimination under the ADA).

“Texas is different than a California or New York, but each state must organize according to their unique circumstances. If the centers in a state are not united, they are in danger of becoming marginalized. If ever there was a time for CILs in every state to come together, it is now.”

Janine Bertram Kemp is a writer, advocate and president of the Disability Rights Center, a member of ADAPT and a former communications director of AAPD.

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**Lifelines**
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be things such as painting, thunderstorms, sports, family, comedy, clouds, weather patterns, spiritual or religious affiliations, joyous memories, and so on. You have a right to know all is not lost even when it feels like it is. As they say, feelings aren’t facts beyond their specific terrain — the emotional condition you’re in at a given moment. They are that and nothing more.

Don’t let feelings of loss trick you into thinking all is lost. It’s not. Sit back, identify all that is still present in your life and, if you give yourself some time, you’ll notice that you are not alone in the world and all is not lost. And that, my friend, is the good news you deserve.

Peter Kahrmann is a writer and an advocate for people with disabilities.
of forgiveness for judicial appointments and rulings such as that.

A current case in point is Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash. Her 4-year-old son Cole was born with Down syndrome. McMorris Rodgers’ official office website states: “I believe that every American should have the opportunity to pursue their dreams to the limit of their abilities, determination, and desires. As Congress discusses critical topics such as job creation, health care, and education, Americans with disabilities should be a part of the conversation.”

McMorris Rodgers speaks with pride on her website about being founder and co-chair of the Congressional Down Syndrome Caucus. In the last Congress, McMorris Rodgers also served as co-chair of the Bipartisan Disability Caucus in the House. The other co-chair was Rep. Jim Langevin, D-Rhode Island, a politically progressive quadriplegic who is a full-time wheelchair user.

The primary purpose of the disability caucus is “to inform, educate and raise awareness on issues affecting people with disabilities.”

But a deeper look at the McMorris Rodgers website reveals a staunchly conservative philosophy and agenda. She refers to the Affordable Care Act as “radical, job-killing” and a “government takeover” of health care. She states that she voted several times for bills seeking to repeal or defund the ACA. But the ACA contains two provisions that have made it exceedingly popular among disability rights organizations. It prohibits insurance discrimination against people with pre-existing medical conditions. There’s also the Community First Choice Option, which provides states with significantly enhanced Medicaid matching funds if they make home- and community-based services and supports available to nearly every Medicaid-eligible person with a disability in the state.

Disability rights leaders and organizations have been equally adamant in their opposition to the Path to Prosperity Republican federal budget proposal touted by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis. This proposal calls for converting Medicaid to block grants, which many disability rights leaders fear would result in severe cutbacks in Medicaid coverage. McMorris Rodgers has been a co-sponsor of this legislation, and she often can be seen standing in solidarity behind Ryan, Speaker John Boehner and other conservative Republican House leaders as they push this agenda.

McMorris Rodgers also strongly supports a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget, which would increase the incentive to cut federal programs serving disabled people. “The only way to get our fiscal house in order is to reduce government spending. Washington has a spending problem, not a revenue problem,” she says on her website.

A vote for McMorris Rodgers is a vote for all of that. (McMorris Rodgers’ office did not respond to a request for an interview.)

Republicans also are under pressure to satisfy a sector of their conservative base that is extremely hostile toward disability rights. This was on full display when the Senate failed to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December.

It takes a two-thirds majority of the Senate to ratify a treaty. Nevertheless, it seemed pretty certain that this United Nations-sponsored treaty written by international disability activists would make it through. The treaty already had been ratified by 155 countries, including Afghanistan and China. Some Senate Republicans, including Arizona’s John McCain, were enthusiastic in their support for it.

The treaty should not have been controversial or threatening because its value is purely symbolic and it is not legislatively enforceable. It would have made no immediate difference in the lives of Americans with disabilities.

But right-wing backlash swelled, fueled by former Pennsylvania Republican senator and failed presidential candidate Rick Santorum. He said there was an “offensive” provision in the treaty that read, “In all actions concerning children with disabilities, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” Somehow, Santorum concluded that this language threatens parental rights because this places “the government, acting under U.N. authority, in the position to determine for all children with disabilities what is best for them.”

The far right seized upon another provision that declares the right of people with disabilities to “free or affordable health care, including the area of sexual and reproductive health and population-based health programs.”

Bradley Mattes, president of the International Right to Life Federation, said: “This is a misleading measure in that it does nothing to protect life. It is disguised as a way to ‘help’ the disabled. Instead it intentionally sacrifices the most vulnerable – the disabled and the unborn – all in the name of population control.”

So Republican senators were bombarded with opposition from their base. The treaty went down to defeat when only eight Republicans joined every Democrat in voting for ratification. Even Hatch voted against it. And Santorum wrote in an email to supporters, “Your petition signatures (over 20,000!), phone calls, emails and tweets about CRPD’s flaws made the difference.”
“My name is Angela Young, and I live in Philadelphia.”

“What brings you here?”

Both women, unemployed college graduates, say they want to hear the president speak.

I ask, “What do you want the president to accomplish?”

“I want the president to develop policies that create jobs for disabled people, policies that improve educational opportunities for us, and policies restricting the types of guns and gun clips that people can buy,” Thomas says.

Young agrees.

About 15 minutes later, I see three men in wheelchairs near 14th and Constitution. They are Samuel Holliday, Michael Lawrence and James Smith. Holliday is an editor for a major book publisher, Lawrence is a certified public accountant, and Smith, a hunter, is retired on 100% disability.

This is their first trip to Washington. While here, they say they intend to lobby their senators and their House representatives to pass a jobs bill and to prohibit the sale of military-style assault weapons and ammunition.

When asked what they want to see President Obama accomplish over the next four years, they echo the answers of Young and Thomas – create jobs, improve educational opportunities for veterans with disabilities, and outlaw assault weapons and their accompanying ammunition clips.

Lawrence, a Maine resident and former deer, rabbit and peasan hunter, says, “Let people buy the guns they want, but stop manufacturing the bullets.”

Two blocks away, I meet Austen Jacobs, a 24-year-old with cerebral palsy. He graduated from the University of Miami in 2011 and works part time as a cashier in a bookstore in Miami. He is with his father, mother and sister. The whole family, all former Republicans, want to see Congress pass an infrastructure bill that would rebuild the nation’s bridges, roads and buildings.

Former NRA members and avid hunters, Jacobs and his father, Frank, support background checks and the banning of clips that hold more than seven rounds.

“You don’t need assault weapons to hunt animals,” Jacobs says. He shows me a photo of his first killed deer, which he bagged when he was 16.

Gerald Rhome, 25, is deaf. He is a cartoonist and has been unemployed for 18 months. He lives with his parents near Boston. He came to see the president sworn in because he believes he will never see another African-American president in his lifetime.

He hopes the president can rebuild the economy and thus create millions of jobs. He wants to see an energy independence program passed by Congress and stricter laws that limit the sale of assault weapons and their accompanying ammunition.

Of education, he says, “Young men and women with disabilities need an education so we can be tax producers.”

Later, I speak with other people from all parts of the country who have disabilities: Shelia Matson (visual impairment), Tommy Mason (stutter), Betty Colson (spinal cord injury) Celeste Dante (armless) and Daniel McCormick (multiple sclerosis). Like the others, they want to see the creation of millions of jobs, more education for people with disabilities, a healthier environment and bans on assault weapons and ammunitions.

How meaningful are jobs to people with disabilities?

Says Mason, “When I work, I feel that I am a full citizen.” He works full time at a Target store in Atlanta, Ga.

Carlson wants the president to appoint a person with a disability to a position of stature and visibility in his administration. She suggested Judy Heumann for undersecretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

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