

# U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

## **Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement** ***"Empowering People with Disabilities to Live, Work, Learn, and Thrive."***

Good morning, everyone. The Senate Special Committee on Aging will come to order. We want to welcome to the final hearing of the Aging Committee in the 118th Congress. The name of this hearing is *"Empowering People with Disabilities to Live, Work, Learn, and Thrive."* This is my last hearing as Chair of the Committee. I have been honored to serve as chair and as a long-time member. I have served as a member of the Committee for these 18 years, four of those as Ranking Member and four as Chair.

I am proud of the work this Committee has done. We have accomplished much under my tenure, and I am sure years before that, I am thankful for the support of my colleagues on both sides of the dais, and it has been a pleasure to work with Ranking Member Braun. We wish him the best of luck as he starts his new work as the Governor of Indiana in January.

For more than 60 years, this Committee has championed issues facing older adults, including: Protecting against frauds and scams, ensuring nursing homes provide safe, quality care, and advocating for older workers. Many of these efforts have been bipartisan.

In the last eight years, the Committee has expanded its reach to champion the rights of people with disabilities. People with disabilities deserve the opportunities that all Americans have and access, the same access that is available to each and every American. This means the opportunity for a person with a disability to secure a quality education, to receive comprehensive care, to earn a living wage, and to save for the future.

We have seen great progress in these efforts, with the leadership of strong advocates, many of whom are here today and their families. Today's hearing will focus on that work and opportunities still ahead. Let's start with home and community-based services, known by that acronym, HCBS.

Americans with disabilities and older adults continue to need access to reliable long-term care services and supports. There are more than 700,000 people on wait lists for Medicaid home care services, and they have to wait over four years – on average – to begin those services, to have the benefits of those services. The workers who provide long-term care services, in all settings, earn approximately \$15 an hour, and nearly 50 percent of these workers rely on public services, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for support.

We should not have seniors and people with disabilities waiting for years, years to access supports to live in their own homes and be active members of their own communities. And we should value the workers who provide care and support for people with disabilities and older adults.

Direct care workers should be earning a livable wage and not relying upon public assistance to survive. I am grateful for the work of the Biden administration to make home and community-based services a priority as did I and a number of Members of both the House and the Senate. There is still much work to be done in the years ahead.

Today's hearing will also focus on people with disabilities in the workplace. While the number of people with disabilities who work has increased in the past ten years, their participation in the labor force is still just over half of that of the general population. During the pandemic, thousands of people with disabilities continued to work in grocery stores, warehouses, and hospitals, conducting essential services for all Americans while they put their own health and often their lives at risk. We need to ensure people with disabilities have the resources, accessibility, and accommodations they need to be successful workers. Likewise, we need to ensure that government services, at all levels of government are accessible to people with disabilities.

Several years ago, I learned about Ron Biglin, a veteran from Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, my home county, Lackawanna County. Ron was unable to access his health benefits at the VA, Department of Veterans Affairs', at their website because that website wasn't accessible to Mr. Biglin and many others. Through my oversight efforts, we learned that, in 2019, only eight percent of the information on the VA's website were accessible.

The remainder of federal government websites and other technology were no more accessible than the VA. In that year, 2019 we took a close look at it. So, we are making progress, but we have a long way to go. Much more work to be done to improve access. So, whether it is improving access, eliminating discrimination, and providing accommodations make it possible for people with disabilities to be full participants in our society. This is the work that must continue.

When we work on these issues, it also makes our society a better place for all of us, people with disabilities or not. During my time in the Senate, people with disabilities and their families have shown me and demonstrated more than once, the power of advocacy, determined advocacy.

They have championed the rights of people with disabilities to serve in the workforce and to save for their futures. They have fought for people with disabilities to be able to live in their homes and to be strong members of their communities. And they have successfully defended against cuts to Medicaid and Social Security and other programs. Our witnesses today have been central to that work. I look forward to hearing from them about some of the achievements of the disability community and the goals ahead.

As a part of this hearing and beyond the scope of today's hearing, I am issuing five issue briefs. I will just hold them up in summary fashion, I won't read through all of them. These issue

briefs will deal with a number of topics, two of the topics we will hear about today: access to home and community-based services and government accessibility. The other briefs do address lowering prescription drug costs, ensuring economic security for older adults, and improving nursing home care.

This Committee, the Aging Committee has a legacy of providing resources to our Senate colleagues and to others throughout the Nation about issues facing people with disabilities and older adults. Many of these resources are available in English and Spanish. I hope these issue briefs will be similarly valuable to the future work of the Senate. We all need to continue the work to support people with disabilities and older adults so that they can thrive in their communities.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the work ahead. Now, I turn to Ranking Member Braun for his opening remarks.