

**Annie Lloyd's Witness Testimony for United States Senate Special Committee on Aging  
and Disability  
"Before Disaster Strikes: Planning for Older Americans and People with Disabilities in All  
Phases of Emergencies."**

**June 15, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. My name is Annie Lloyd, and I would like to tell you about my family and our experience with the East Palestine Train derailment.

We moved to Darlington, Pennsylvania after my husband served in Naval Special Forces as a Lieutenant with 11 years of service. His tour was chaotic, as I gave birth to both of my children during that time and we had moved twice. Darlington, Pennsylvania and Beaver County as a whole was the perfect place for us. My son Teddy, a toddler at the time, was showing signs of developmental delays, so we knew a quiet, private, and rural life would benefit him (and quite frankly, us.) We purchased a high-altitude, 6-acre property so my son can be free to be his active, rambunctious self.

He would later be diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum, with additional symptoms of anxiety and ADHD. Now 9-years-old, he is incredibly active, imaginative, and very funny. He can land a punchline like no one I've ever met. He is also dependent on special education services that include access to his school's Autism Resource Room, a special education teacher, a paraprofessional for his time in general education classes, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and special transportation.

Immediately after news broke that a train derailed in East Palestine, 5 miles away from our house, it became very clear to me that finding reliable information to keep our family out of harm's way would be difficult to secure. You see, I have a journalism degree and have worked at multiple media outlets throughout the country over the last 15 years. Living in a rural area, smack dab in between Youngstown, Ohio and Pittsburgh places us in a news/media barren desert. Beaver County newspapers are a shell of what they once were due to staffing cuts, so most of what they cover centers on the middle-to-southern part of the county, closer to Pittsburgh. Residents of my community often end up relying on social media "neighborhood watch groups" to try to figure out what's going on, and as you can guess, the posts and comments can be riddled with rumors and false information.

On the morning of the explosion, we received a message from Blackhawk School District that sending my kids to school was optional. I could surmise from the information I was gathering that the pressure building up in the derailed train cars was becoming increasingly concerning. At the time, I had concluded that the major concern was shrapnel from an anticipated explosion, so sending my kids to a school that was FURTHER away from the derailment than our home was the sensible thing to do.

Not long after, we got the call that our kids were being sent home from school early. Instantly I grew concerned. If officials didn't think my kids' school was safe, how was my home, even closer to the derailment, going to be safe?

I considered driving to my extended family's home in Youngstown, Ohio, but unfortunately the street our property is on was the furthest West anyone could drive. Officials blocked off all Westbound roads at my house, something I didn't realize until I saw barricades. If my street was the closest to the derailment site that anyone could get, was I now in the immediate evacuation zone? In all my panicked sifting of available information, I could not say for sure.

My son arrived home with a note from his Special Education teacher that she told him he was being sent home because a train was "stuck." She often responds to Teddy's anxiety and meltdowns with brilliance and expertise, and her precise, subtle explanation met Teddy's needs and was greatly appreciated by all of us.

My son came home totally stoked to be off school early and immediately took to running in the yard, as he often does after school to help him regulate his emotions, anxiety, and need for movement.

But today, I said, would not be a day he could get his running in.

"It's not raining, though," he said.

"I know, but we need to go inside to be safe because of the stuck train."

It wasn't long after that the black cloud erupted from the "controlled explosion." We had a clear view from our high-altitude property. The initial neighborhood sentiment of relief that we weren't hit with shrapnel quickly devolved into concern about our air, well-water and soil and the possibility of chemical contamination. Those concerns began immediately after the explosion and continue to this day. Even though we have taken all official steps to request testing of our well-water and soil, no testing has been available to us and no one has told us about the conditions of the air and soil around our property.

Senators, we desperately needed better, more reliable information. We needed clear communication from authorities with intimate knowledge of the train derailment of what the danger was and who needed to take active steps in protecting themselves.. Evacuating disabled kids from their schools and hoping that they will navigate their way out of harm's way in an emergency is simply not enough. No disaster is ever truly expected, but everyone should be prepared for by our local and county emergency response authorities. And first in line in those preparations should be the needs of our most vulnerable.

At moments like these, I am reminded as my child's caretaker that I will not live forever. And that there will be a day where he will be navigating emergencies on his own. It's a perpetual feeling in the pit of my stomach, having struggled MYSELF, a non-disabled person, with figuring out what to do to stay safe during the explosion, to know that someday my son will be doing this without me.

Senators, I am asking you as a mother of a son with a disability and a friend of many disabled people, ALL of whom make unique remarkable contributions to our communities, to put forth a comprehensive accommodation plan for our disabled citizens for times of emergencies and disasters. There is nothing more fundamental to a dignified life than the capability of self-preservation. What is freedom if not an equal ability to survive?

Thank you for your time.