

WASHINGTON VIEWS

Rehabilitation Act Reauthorization: CCD Testimony on Personal Assistance Services

On February 20th, the U.S. House Subcommittee on Select Education, chaired by Representative Major Owens (NY), held a third set of hearings on issues related to the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act. UCPA Policy Associate Bob Williams gave the following testimony relating to inclusion of personal assistance services (PAS), on behalf of the PAS Task Force of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for offering me this second opportunity to come before you to discuss the tremendous need to rethink, revise and, yes, in some critical areas, to completely revamp the Rehabilitation Act. I enjoyed appearing before you in New Mexico last fall to discuss the critical importance of assistive technology and I am pleased to be able to do so today on behalf of the Consortium For Citizens with Disabilities (CCD)'s Task Force on Personal Assistance Services. Over twenty national organizations are represented on this task force, which is co-chaired by Judy Heumann of the World Institute on Disability (WID), Paul Marchand of the ARC and myself from UCPA. For the past year, its charge has been to explore both systemic and incremental approaches to expanding access to personal assistance services to Americans with varying disabilities of all ages.

Towards this end, while we do not view amending the Rehabilitation Act as the entire answer to meeting the personal assistance needs of Americans with disabilities, it is certainly an essential part of a much larger solution of addressing this vital challenge in our Nation. I am here to primarily share with you several recommendations CCD has for increasing access to on-the-job or other related personal assistance services by improving upon and strengthening the Rehabilitation Act in a number of key areas. But before doing so, I just want to give you a snapshot view of what being an extensive user of on-the-job and other related personal assistance services has come to mean in my own life and career.

Let me begin by making a confession or, rather, what in the gay community is known as "coming out." Until recently, I did not consider myself as requiring much personal assistance services on or off the job. In fact, I avoided using PAS like the plague. How? By doing what many, if not most, other people with disabilities of my generation do. I simply got by. I got by, expending many times the energy in dressing myself and organizing my desk than you or most others typically would exert during a typical morning. I got by, by appearing more disorganized and disheveled than I am or wanted to be. And, I got by, by dreaming less and being less than I knew I could be. In a word, I got by, or thought I got by, by "passing." Passing for what? Passing for what I perceived to be, quote, being independent, end quote.

Independence. That has always been a powerful, emotion-packed word in our land and especially in the lives of Americans with disabilities like myself. And, rightly so. But,

whatever else the word independence may mean, the one thing I now know is that it never should be taken to mean trying "to go it on one's own." Trying to go it alone. For, with the gentle insistent probing of friends and family members like my Dad Judy Heumann, David Bauer, Helen Reisner and others, I am increasingly coming to see independence in an entirely different light. And, I am coming to see that **independence is really about** having choices; about making **decisions and having control** over one's life. That it is really about being all that one can be and going where you want to go, **with whatever support and** assistance it may take along the way.

This is where personal assistance services can and must come to play an increasingly major role in our Nation. This is especially true in respect to breaking down the economic and societal stonewalls that still keep fully two-thirds of all working-age Americans with disabilities out of the labor force and needlessly dependent on others. As you know, there is increasing attention being paid by the civil rights community, as well as by Labor Secretary Lynn Martin, to the need to dismantle the glass ceiling which hinders the employment prospects of many, if not most, women and people of color in our land.

Mr. Chairman, I am here as living proof to say that for many Americans with disabilities, it will take another kind of effort to smash through the glass ceiling imposed by others' lower expectations of what we can and cannot do both on and off the job.

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission Chairman, Evan Kemp recently told the Senate Labor Committee that he could not hold his position or any other job for that matter, if he did not have assistance getting out of bed and throughout his hectic day.

American workers with disabilities, like all other workers, should be judged on their merits. Not on whether they require assistance with using the lavatory or eating lunch at the office. It is time for yet another glass ceiling to come crashing down in America.

Personal assistance services and assistive technology can be powerful sledgehammers in enabling individuals with even the most significant disabilities to accomplish just this feat.

This is why, then, since the ADA has become law, so many of us have come to view passage of comprehensive federal Personal Assistance Services (PAS) legislation for Americans and access to comprehensive health care as the next big challenges to address on the disability rights agenda. For, if we see the ADA as our Nation's Dream for promoting equal opportunity for Americans with disabilities, then, PAS must be relied upon more and more as an effective means for achieving that Dream. And, this is why CCD views providing increased access to assistive technology and personal assistance services as two critical post-ADA, second-generation civil rights concerns which your panel and the entire U.S. Congress can and must begin to address in the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act.

Let me share CCD's preliminary recommendations for increasing access to on-the-job or other related personal assistance services by amending the Rehabilitation Act in a number of key areas. Let me also hasten to add that while these recommendations are preliminary in nature, we ask that our proposals for change and innovation be viewed for what they are: an attempt to spark increased ideas, intent, and activity in addressing some, though by no means all, of our Nation's personal assistance services needs.