

To Our Legislators, Partners, and General Community Members:

We are writing to you as community leaders and advocates for people with disabilities, on behalf of those we serve and the many who are too afraid to speak up for themselves. People On the Go Maryland (POG) is a nonpartisan organization, and our goal is to educate people with disabilities and others about issues that impact our community. **We are very concerned about the growing effort to erase marginalized groups and the harm this causes.** We would have this concern regardless of party or who was in office. Losing visibility affects mental health, public trust, and civil rights.

In particular, **we observe that the proposed closing of the Administration for Community Living (ACL)** and spreading its services across three other agencies, is equivalent to stealing a car, stripping it down, and selling-off its parts. This agency was established to promote inclusion and the idea that people with disabilities can and should live their fullest lives within the community. **We cannot ignore the deep and widespread effect, intended or otherwise, on the people supported, though these actions.**

As we apply for nonprofit status, we also worry that if we do not comply with quiet but deliberate pressure to remove LGBTQ+ and other identities from our websites, data collection, and services, **we could lose our recognition and funding necessary to continue our work.** This concern is not unfounded. The pressure to preemptively comply with potential future directives—despite no formal requirement—has created an atmosphere of fear and coercion, where **organizations must choose between their values and their survival.** As a result, we feel trapped between the responsibility to speak up for our rights and the rights of others and the need to maintain funding. But we speak up on this issue regardless of the fear this causes us because **it's who we are and it's what we do.**

This issue is real and is happening now. The people we work with have asked us to make sure they are counted, and yet we have been pressured to remove the very language that acknowledges their existence. The reason given was that this change is necessary to protect vulnerable groups from future harm, but in reality, it only makes our tools less accessible and removes people from the data. And **removing vulnerable groups from data collection has historically been the basis for removing their consideration from policy decisions and priorities.**

This is happening all over the country. Hospitals have stopped trans healthcare, corporations have erased identity-based holidays, and institutions are making a show to comply before even being asked. And after. **This administration's message is clear: hide or be eliminated. Our message is just as clear: silence is death.**

A mouse that shrinks itself inside a snake's grip only invites tighter constriction. History shows that preemptively following oppressive orders does not stop oppression—it makes it come quicker. **We are watching this unfold in real time.**

We do not want to work in an environment where fear tell us who we can acknowledge. We are writing to you not only for ourselves but for others, many of whom are afraid to speak out against the funding freezes and restrictions being quietly imposed. History has shown that when groups don't speak up in order to keep themselves safe, it often does the exact opposite. As people with disabilities, **we do not have the luxury of staying silent, and that means we must speak up.**

At People On the Go Maryland, the statewide organization run by and for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and who serve people who communicate in different ways, we know that **behavior *is* communication.** The behavior we have witnessed from institutions is both shrinking and silence, which communicates the fear that those who wish to oppress us want to evoke.

We instead ask you to acknowledge we exist and deserve respect and ensure our inclusion; communicate your opposition to our erasure through your actions. As historian Timothy Snyder warns, *'Do not obey in advance.'* Preemptive compliance only emboldens those who seek to diminish the rights and dignity of marginalized people. **We must resist now before the pressure to comply becomes an expectation.**

We have seen this before in history. The disability rights movement has fought too hard to ensure our inclusion in society—whether through Section 504, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or protections for home and community-based services—to allow ourselves to be erased now. **We will not go back.**

As Martin Niemöller famously stated:

***First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.***

We ask you to stand (or sit) with us and join our campaign—spread the word that you will not tolerate the abuses we have seen and will continue to see.

This does not stop with the most marginalized—it never does. If you do not stand with us now, you will face this same battle later when fewer people remain to fight it. **We can do this together, but we have to do it now.**

Sincerely,

Mat Rice

Executive Director

Tracy Wright

Deputy Director and Director of Training

James Orman

Program Coordinator

Cody Drinkwater

Policy Specialist

Rosanna Tufts

Administrative Specialist