

House Majority Policy Committee Public Hearing on the Americans with Disabilities Act

House Democratic Policy Committee

10/08/2026, 3:30 p.m., Pennsylvania Convention Center, 1101 Arch Street, Philadelphia

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The committee held a public hearing entitled: “Accessibility: Reality and Law after 36 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).”

Rep. Joseph Hohenstein (D-Philadelphia) opened the meeting, welcomed attendees and asked members to introduce themselves. He framed the session as part of an ongoing annual discussion on disability inclusion and noted the panel would offer consecutive testimony followed by a question-and-answer period.

Rep. Morgan Cephas (D-Philadelphia) thanked Rep. Hohenstein for convening the session, said the event provided an opportunity to be "intentional about the future," and noted her role as Philadelphia delegation chair.

Rep. Regina Young (D-Philadelphia) introduced herself and described the panel as featuring leaders focused on transit accessibility, mental health and community inclusion; she said four witnesses would present and members would pose questions at the end.

Theo Braddy, executive director, National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), told lawmakers that accessibility for people with disabilities extends beyond physical access to buildings. He highlighted his experience of becoming paralyzed at age 15 and later living in a nursing home. Braddy said community-based services and supports were essential to allowing him to pursue an education, career and family life. “Accessibility is not simply about getting through the door,” he added. Braddy credited ADA with strengthening civil rights protections and improving access to employment, transportation, public services and public accommodations. Braddy stated physical barriers remain important and argued that attitudes and assumptions about people with disabilities can prevent equal access to opportunities. He highlighted health care, transportation, employment, housing and direct-care services as interconnected issues that affect whether people with disabilities can live independently in their communities. Braddy referenced the Supreme Court’s 1999 Olmstead decision and expressed concern about what he described as a gradual erosion of community-based living. He urged policymakers to consider the experiences of people with disabilities when developing laws, services and systems that affect their ability to live independently.

Emily Voorde, disability inclusion advocate, discussed her work in civic engagement and her previous role on the National Council on Disability. She told lawmakers that ADA has

not eliminated the barriers faced by people with disabilities. Voorde said there remains a significant difference between spaces that technically comply with accessibility requirements and those that are genuinely accessible. She described several obstacles she encountered during an ordinary day using public transportation, restaurants, businesses and a courthouse. “There is a wide and consequential gap between the space that is compliant and a space that is truly accessible,” she said. Voorde argued that accessibility problems often remain the responsibility of disabled people to identify and report, rather than being addressed proactively by institutions and businesses. She raised concerns about recent changes to federal disability protections, enforcement and funding. Voorde said rights can become “a right that exists mostly on paper” if the resources and mechanisms needed to enforce them are reduced. She called on state lawmakers to strengthen accessibility protections, establish systems for identifying and correcting barriers before people encounter them and involve people with disabilities earlier when setting standards, budgets and timelines. She urged lawmakers to measure equality by the experiences of people with disabilities in their everyday lives, rather than solely by whether buildings, programs and services technically meet existing legal requirements.

Shane Feldman, chief executive officer, Innivee Strategies, discussed his experience as a consultant working with organizations and state governments on strategic planning and community needs assessments. He urged lawmakers to include people with disabilities in decisions affecting their communities. Feldman said needs assessments can document diverse experiences and help ensure that community concerns become part of the public record rather than being addressed only temporarily. He described an assessment of the deaf-blind community in which participants identified communication access, discrimination and the ability to leave their homes and connect with others as significant concerns. Feldman discussed video remote interpreting and said decisions about new technologies can have unintended consequences when the communities using them are not involved in their development. “We have to make decisions about what will happen in the future,” he said. Feldman pointed to the emergence of artificial-intelligence interpreting technology as an example of an area where community input could inform implementation. Feldman called for greater representation of people with disabilities in organizational leadership. He summarized his approach as a “by us, for us” model and argued that people with disabilities should have leadership roles and be directly involved in government and organizational decisions affecting their communities.

Candice Davis, disability advocate, discussed her experience as a quadriplegic and quadruple amputee

after a severe case of COVID-19 in 2021. She told lawmakers that accessible technology is essential to independence and participation. Davis described using voice assistants, speech-to-text, phone accessibility features and prosthetics to communicate and manage everyday activities. She said the accessibility protections established by ADA must extend to the digital spaces increasingly used for education, employment, health care and business. “Accessibility must follow us into those spaces as well,” Davis said. She noted

that inaccessible websites, applications, online forms and videos can prevent people with disabilities from independently accessing services and opportunities. Davis said emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, could create new opportunities for communication and independence but warned that innovation alone does not guarantee accessibility or affordability. She urged technology companies and organizations to involve people with disabilities in product development, testing and leadership, saying their experiences can identify barriers that others may not encounter. Davis concluded that technological advances can either expand access or create new barriers and said disabled people should be involved in shaping the technologies that will affect their lives.

Rep. Hohenstein asked what state legislators can do or consider to address “threats” happening at the federal level. Braddy urged the appointment and elevation of leaders with lived experience and said lawmakers should place people with disabilities in decision-making positions to prevent ableist assumptions from shaping policy. He emphasized that non-disabled decision makers often mean well but can cause harm without lived-experience input. Voorde added disabled people not be siloed into discussions only about disability-specific issues. “Don’t assume that our expertise ends in conversations on disability,” she said. Voorde argued that people with disabilities bring expertise across policy areas and should be included broadly in leadership and policy deliberations.

Rep. Cephas asked whether Pennsylvania has a state-level structure comparable to NCIL. Braddy said, “We have recently had the governor appoint an Office of Disability.” He commended its creation and called it a “great” step. Braddy noted how Pennsylvania has a Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council and roughly 18 centers for independent living that are state and federally oriented. He added those networks are not always elevated to positions where they can make major funding and program decisions.

Rep. Cephas asked about Delaware’s recent action to codify federal protections and whether Pennsylvania has taken parallel legislative steps. Voorde said she was not a Pennsylvania resident and did not have a complete update, and she urged members to review neighboring states’ approaches. Jeremy Yale, director, policy and quality management, Office of Developmental Programs, Department of Human Services (DHS),

addressed state-specific fiscal impacts that complicate codification without additional funding. Yale said the risk from federal changes is “real,” warned that state agencies face implementation of community integration requirements amidst federal policy shifts. He mentioned a DHS projection that the fiscal impact of the federal bill under discussion would exceed “over 20 billion dollars” over the next 10 years. He noted outreach and training can mitigate some harm, but the scale of the projected shortfall makes complete mitigation unlikely without legislative action.

Rep. Hohenstein noted states can build beyond federal floors and stressed that home- and community-based services are typically less costly than institutional care. He suggested

creative state-level funding solutions will be necessary to backfill federal reductions and credited the governor with public statements opposing recent federal actions.

Rep. Ana Tiburcio (D-Lehigh) asked witnesses about affordability for technology and training. Davis said assistive technologies and adaptive equipment are expensive, recommended engagement with insurers and manufacturers to expand coverage and urged that disabled people be part of conversations about which tools are necessary. Braddy recommended revising Medicaid asset limits that constrain financial independence. He stated current limits prevent people from saving and create disincentives to work. "You can't save more than \$2,000," he continued. "You save more than that, you're ineligible for Medicaid." He argued changing eligibility rules would reduce the financial penalty for people with disabilities who seek employment or savings. Feldman proposed a different affordability model and described a state-level pooled or insurance-like approach that spreads the cost of disability support across everyone. He noted similarities to Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme. Feldman suggested Pennsylvania could design a novel mechanism so that all residents contribute to and benefit from a shared fund if disability needs arise later in life. Braddy added a research-based cost point and said people with disabilities incur additional expenses. He mentioned a figure that people with disabilities have "28% more expenses than people without disabilities."

Rep. Young said the broader context is political and civic engagement. She emphasized, "Elections have consequences." She urged disability constituents and advocates to educate themselves about candidates and appointed officials, to hold administrators accountable and to use civic power to shape policy outcomes.

Rep. Tarik Khan (D-Philadelphia) apologized for a late arrival and described legislative priorities in the House Democratic Caucus to ensure provider rate increases reach frontline direct-care staff. Rep. Khan said caregiver pay is too low, provider increases must translate into higher wages and warned that federal cuts could produce large coverage losses. He noted estimates that "500,000 people" could lose Medicaid coverage in Pennsylvania and said lawmakers must prepare for increased uninsured and unmet needs.

Rep. Hohenstein closed the public hearing by reiterating the need to defend gains under ADA and related case law, to engage disabled people early in policy and technology decisions and to explore state-level policy and funding tools to protect access as federal enforcement and funding shift. He thanked panelists and members and adjourned the meeting.