

**Legislator Forum 2007**  
**Concerning**  
**People with Disabilities on Employment & Assistive Technology**  
**By James Rapp**

Hello, my name is James Rapp. I have had cerebral palsy since birth. I am currently living in one of the apartments adjacent to the disAbility Resource Center in Fredericksburg since 2002.

Today, I'd like to discuss two issues that people with disabilities are facing and what we can do to try to solve these issues, so everybody, including me, can have access to resources without facing so many obstacles. I'd like to tell you some of my experiences with employment and assistive technology.

Before I graduated from high school in 2000, I was the Student Government Association Representative for the Physical Disability Department of Falls Church High School for three years and their student body president for one year. I went to the regular Student Government Association Representative meeting with the mainstream student representatives and reported back to the other students in the Physical Disability Department. By being a Student Government Association Representative, I used a speech program using the laptop to report back to my fellow classmates. After graduating from high school, I went to the job vocational training in the accounting field at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center. I was there for eighteen months to learn basic accounting and other business skills in that job field. In addition to my training, I had an internship program in the real workplace for the last six weeks of my training and graduated in 2002.

During my training at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, an evaluation was done to determine what kind of communication device I would need, which was the Pathfinder. Purchasing my communication device through Medicaid was the second most important goal in my life before I'd move and live on my own. This device helps me to communicate with other people in my life and in the community. If I didn't know about Medicaid or Medicare, it would have been impossible for me to purchase the communication device with the help from Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center; and it would be difficult to live independently by myself. Also, there would be no way for me to share my thoughts with you concerning employment and assistive technology for people with disabilities and would be impossible for me to speak with you about these issues as well. While staying at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, I was able to present my PowerPoint presentation on accounting, teach Bible study lessons, and become a guest speaker at one of the church congregations using my communication device.

After the completion of my training in 2002, I moved to Fredericksburg and tried to find a job with help from the Department of Rehabilitation Services. Even though I had some good interviews over the past few years, it has been hard for me to find a job related to my training. However, I did have two job experiences during the first two years that I lived in Fredericksburg. Neither job lasted due to my disability and communication barriers. Also, there was another occasion when I had a good interview and I was accepted at a job in Stafford, but I could not get there due to lack of public transportation services. So, although I have been very active in my high school career and my post-secondary education, I still have communication and transportation barriers.

Over the last three years, I have volunteered at a couple of businesses and organizations in the Fredericksburg area as a bookkeeper, administrator, publisher, and web designer. Currently, I'm volunteering at the disAbility Resource Center as co-chairman and newsletter editor for the Community Action Specialists Group. Even though I'm active volunteering in my community and receiving some government funding, it is still difficult for me to live independently without a job.

Everybody, including people with disabilities, have gifts of talents and skills to offer each other and their community. We see everywhere that people work together as a team. Unfortunately, it is hard for people with disabilities to fit in this category. Why do some people with disabilities have obstacles to be employed? People with disabilities can have a difficult time becoming employed due to disability, suitable transportation, and other issues. It doesn't mean we cannot work together to overcome these barriers.

I use a Pathfinder communication device to communicate with other people. It is important for me to use assistive technology in the home, workplace, and community. I have strong computer skills. For communication, I use the Virginia Relay System, e-mail, Instant Messenger, and Pathfinder communication device. Using assistive technologies and computer programs are extremely important parts of independent living for people with disabilities and necessary communication tools.

I have also developed a Christian website that reaches out to people with disabilities, which is called the Ministries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I've been doing this since 2001. Even though the name of the website does not sound like it relates to people with disabilities, I believe it is important for those who are disabled know that they are not alone in going through physical and spiritual challenges. Everybody needs encouragement from family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and even from your religious family.

About 17.5 percent of the Fredericksburg area's populations are people with disabilities. Some of them may want to work and live independently as I do, but there may be some barriers prevent them from reaching that goal. People with disabilities are not different from non-disabled citizens. We all face many problems throughout our lives and want to live as independently as possible.

I'd like to reiterate, we are not all that different from each other, except for the kind of *abilities* we all have. We may become disabled, whether we like it or not through accidents, illnesses, or the aging process. I already have a disability and have to face the same challenges everyone has. I need a job, I have bills to pay, and I have transportation needs. Statistically, four out five of us will have some disability in life and will need special accommodations to meet certain goals individually.

What can we do to help to overcome these barriers for people with disabilities in our community and also for ourselves? We can do plenty. We can work together to eliminate barriers for people with disabilities by contacting our city managers and legislators about the problems that we are facing. For example, we need city planners and legislators to plan for and provide more funding for more accessible public transportations, employment opportunities for people with disabilities, affordable housings, and curb cuts on the sidewalks so wheelchair users can use a sidewalk smoothly. But we cannot work in our community until we begin to work on eliminating some barriers for others to get jobs, such as communication and transportation barriers. Also, some of us may need assistive technology to become more independent, but we'd need some financial assistance through Medicaid or Medicare to purchase the assistive technology. We can make differences in our community for people with disabilities and also for our next generations.

Thank you for taking your time to listen some and for your consideration of these matters for people with disabilities.

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