

**James R. Langevin**  
**Member of Congress**

**National Council on Disability (NCD) Congressional  
Forum:**  
**“Disability in the Budget: Why It Matters”**

**Thursday, May 12, 3pm**  
**2322 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Congressman James R. Langevin**  
**“Disability in the Budget: Why It Matters”**  
May 12, 2011

Chairman Young, Members of the National Council on Disability, I would like to thank you for hosting this forum in collaboration with the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus and providing me the opportunity to speak on the funding of disabilities programs in our current fiscal climate.

As a member of Congress, Co-Chair of the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, and someone who has lived with the challenges of a disability since the age of 16, I appreciate the Council’s engagement on this incredibly important and timely issue; and I am honored to be here with my colleague, the Republican Co-Chair of the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers.

Our nation is only just emerging from the most severe economic recession in generations. Americans are still searching for jobs, and families everywhere are pinching pennies in order to pay their bills. However, for the 54 million Americans with disabilities, the impacts of the recession have been even more onerous.

According to the most recently available statistics, close to 60 percent of the disabled population is asset poor, meaning they have insufficient assets to remain above the poverty level for more than three months. Median earnings for individuals with a disability in 2009 were about \$18,800. And in April 2011, the percentage of people with disabilities in the labor force was 20.6, compared to those without a disability at 69.6 percent. These statistics provide an important snapshot of the financial and economic obstacles encountered by people with disabilities.

Now, in the face of rampant state fiscal shortfalls and a \$1.5 trillion federal deficit, we face the daunting task of balancing our budgets while simultaneously attempting to promote greater economic security and prosperity. This is particularly challenging for individuals with disabilities, who are seeing employment barriers increase, community supports decrease and health care programs scaled back.

With tax revenues still in decline, at least 29 states and the District of Columbia are cutting medical, rehabilitative, home care, or other services on which low-income individuals with disabilities desperately rely. At the federal level, I have been pleased to see sustained program funding for disabilities programs across agencies over the past few years. However, we are now experiencing increased pressure to cut spending within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Community Services Block Grants, and other discretionary programs that provide support for the low-income, elderly and disabled individuals. On the mandatory side of the budget, our nation’s Medicaid program, the health care safety net for over 8 million individuals with disabilities, is being closely scrutinized and reevaluated for opportunities to reduce federal spending.

As we undertake the considerable responsibility of creating a sustainable budget, we must understand that the choices we make will have very real consequences in lives of

Americans, and particularly in the lives of Americans with disabilities. However, my life experiences have taught me that great challenges can present us with great opportunities. Individuals with disabilities remain one of our nation's greatest untapped resources. I truly believe that we can achieve fiscal balance while investing in education, health care and employment assistance that will empower individuals with disabilities to achieve a higher level of independence, productivity and inclusion within our society.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and accommodations made under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act have all laid the foundation for students, regardless of disability, to receive an appropriate and proper education, which is the stepping stone to a better future. We must continue to invest in, and improve, the IDEA to ensure every student's maximum potential.

Within the area of health care, home and community-based (HCBS) waivers in Medicaid have provided greater flexibility, independence and community integration for children and adults with disabilities to receive care outside of more costly and restrictive institutional settings. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia currently offer services through HCBS waivers. By further exploring and supporting home and community based programs, as well as other community supports like respite care, we can reduce costs to the system and improve the quality of care for individuals with disabilities across the lifespan. That is why I am currently working with my colleagues to reauthorize the Lifespan Respite Care Act, and increase its annual funding. This program decreases the need for professional long-term care, resulting in significant savings for the health care system and taxpayers.

Finally, it is more important than ever that we continue to promote employment by reducing barriers that remain in public programs like Social Security and Medicaid to address real fears that individuals have about going to work at the risk of losing health coverage. We must also educate businesses and connect them with proper resources to create more employment opportunities in our communities.

Businesses across the country are finally recognizing the innate potential of the disabled community. Many individuals have both the desire and capability to work, as well as exceptional talents to offer. All it takes is a little awareness, accommodation and investment, and our economy and society can reap countless economic and social rewards.

Disabilities don't discriminate on the basis of party affiliation, income level or gender; instead, they have the unique ability to unite us in common purpose. Although finding a common path to a balanced budget will require sacrifices on all sides, if we commit to spending our resources wisely, we will not only create a better life for individuals with disabilities in the present, but for generations to come.