

Michaels Law Testimony

Josie Badger

Direct caregivers play a crucial role in the lives of individuals with disabilities, providing essential support and assistance to help them navigate daily tasks and participate in various activities. According to the Pennsylvania Homecare Association, almost one million Pennsylvanians receive home care each year. However, despite their invaluable contribution, caregivers often encounter barriers that limit their ability to fully engage in the community alongside the individuals they care for.

One significant barrier is the imposition of entrance fees for caregivers at events and venues. These fees not only place an unnecessary financial burden on the individual or caregivers but also serve as a deterrent to their participation in activities that are vital for the well-being and social inclusion of individuals with disabilities. For many caregivers, especially those with limited financial resources, paying additional fees can be prohibitive and may force them to forego attending events with those they care for. According to AARP in 2023, the state Department of Human Services, Pennsylvania has about 220,000 direct care workers, with a median salary of just over \$11 per hour.

Further, for individuals receiving caregiver services that are paid by the state, few are employed. 18% of waiver recipients under Office of Developmental Programs and 1-2% or those receiving services under the Office of Long-Term Living are employed. A majority of those employed are making minimum wage and working part time. This creates a financial barrier that neither the caregiver nor the person with a disability can overcome.

Individuals who receive direct caregiver services require support to leave their home and be a part of their community. Few individuals with level of need have a choice on whether or not to take their caregiver; instead, the choice is whether to go out or not.

By passing Michael's Law, Pennsylvania has the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to fostering inclusivity and support for all members of our community. This legislation would not only remove a significant financial barrier for people with disabilities and caregivers but also send a powerful message of recognition and appreciation for their vital role in supporting individuals with disabilities.

Humans are created as social beings. Regardless of disability, we want to be included and engaged in our community. Sometimes the most accessible and inclusive events occur in museums, theaters, or other paid events but when two tickets, entry fees, or travel expenses are required, these opportunities are often.

Furthermore, by ensuring that caregivers can accompany individuals with disabilities to events without facing financial barriers, we can enhance the overall quality of life and

well-being of both caregivers and those they care for. Access to community events and activities is essential for promoting social connections, fostering independence, and enriching the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Beyond, it being “the right thing to do” to improve the lives of Pennsylvanians with disabilities, there are significant economic benefits to Michael’s Law.

The economic argument for supporting Pennsylvania legislation that prohibits direct caregivers from being charged entrance fees to attend events for individuals with disabilities whom they are caring for is multifaceted and compelling. Here are several key economic reasons to support such legislation:

1. **Increased Business Revenue and Economic Participation**: By allowing direct caregivers to attend events with individuals with disabilities without being charged entrance fees, businesses stand to benefit from increased patronage. Caregivers often accompany individuals with disabilities to various events and activities, and removing the financial barrier of entrance fees can encourage them to participate more frequently. This, in turn, can lead to higher attendance rates, increased sales of tickets, concessions, merchandise, and other offerings at events, thereby boosting overall revenue for businesses.
2. **Expanded Customer Base**: Accessible and inclusive businesses that cater to individuals with disabilities and their caregivers can attract a broader customer base. By supporting legislation that eliminates entrance fees for caregivers, businesses demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, which can enhance their reputation and appeal to individuals with disabilities and their families. This can lead to increased foot traffic, customer loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth referrals, ultimately driving growth and profitability.
3. **Enhanced Community Engagement**: Businesses play a vital role in fostering vibrant and inclusive communities. Accessible events that welcome caregivers and individuals with disabilities help create a more inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected. This can lead to stronger community ties, increased civic pride, and a more supportive environment for businesses to thrive.
4. **Support for the Caregiver Workforce**: Caregivers provide invaluable support to individuals with disabilities, enabling them to lead fulfilling and independent lives. However, caregiving can be emotionally and financially demanding, often requiring caregivers to make sacrifices in their personal and professional lives. By removing entrance fees for caregivers, policymakers can demonstrate recognition and support for the vital role that caregivers play in our society. This recognition may help attract and retain caregivers in the workforce, ultimately contributing to the stability and effectiveness of the long-term care system.

5. ***Promotion of Inclusive Tourism****: Pennsylvania is home to a diverse array of cultural, recreational, and entertainment attractions. Ensuring that individuals with disabilities and their caregivers can fully participate in these activities promotes Pennsylvania as an inclusive and welcoming destination for tourism. By removing financial barriers to attendance, the state can attract more visitors and enhance its reputation as a destination that values accessibility and diversity.

In conclusion, I urge you to support and pass legislation that prohibits entrance fees for direct caregivers attending events with individuals with disabilities in Pennsylvania. Doing so will align our state with principles of inclusivity, fairness, and support for caregivers, while also promoting the full participation and integration of individuals with disabilities in our communities.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

About the Speaker

Dr. Josie Badger DHCE, CRC received her Bachelor's degree from Geneva College in Disability Law and Advocacy, a Master's from the University of Pittsburgh in Rehabilitation Counseling, and a Doctorate from Duquesne University in Healthcare Ethics. In 2012, Dr. Badger was crowned Ms. Wheelchair America. In 2014 Josie founded J Badger Consulting Inc. where she provides youth development and disability consulting services. She is the National Transition Director for SPAN Parent Advocacy Network, working with RAISE and the National Healthcare Transition Center for Youth with ID/DD. She is the Campaign Manager of the United Way of Southwestern PA's #IWantToWork Campaign, to improve the employment of people with disabilities, is the lead Field Organizer for the Family Care Act that supports paid family leave, and is the developer of TRAIL, a statewide advocacy and lobbying training program. She serves as the Secretary of FISA and co-chair of the Grants Committee. Josie recently founded PEACOCK a nonprofit that will further support the needs of the disability community and diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. With this new initiative, she hopes to be able to support the work of a new commission on men's mental health.