

Pete Denman

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28 SE 28th Ave.
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February 12, 2025
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
Oregon State Legislature

Re: SB 20

Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice-Chair Lithicum, and esteemed members of the Oregon Disabilities Commission,

I am Pete Denman, a fourth-generation Oregonian, and I have been quadriplegic since a spinal cord injury I sustained at the age of 20 at Kelly Pointe Park, where the Willamette and Columbia Rivers meet. Now at nearly 57, I have spent decades in a wheelchair, observing significant shifts in the perception and treatment of disabilities. My journey has provided me with profound insights into disability programs and public attitudes. Today, I wish to share my experiences with the Employed Persons with Disabilities (EPD) program, highlighting both its support and its limitations, and the potential impact of updating this bill.

My accident occurred in 1988, prior to the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was introduced a few years later and implemented over the following decades. The ADA marked a pivotal advancement in securing equal rights and access to essential public services for individuals with disabilities. While I am grateful for these developments, I often reflect on the obstacles I encountered before these freedoms were established, particularly during my travels. This context underscores the critical need to address existing issues and identify new opportunities. While improved access has allowed many to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives, the struggle to find a sense of purpose remains.

Before discussing this further, I want to acknowledge another crucial initiative: the government's vocational rehabilitation program created after the Civil War to support wounded veterans in finding meaningful employment. This program was revitalized alongside the ADA, and I greatly benefited from it, gaining education and valuable skills. While in college, I encountered a new initiative, "Ticket to Work," which was a crucial first step in allowing individuals to work while retaining their benefits. Shortly thereafter, Oregon launched an expanded version called the EPD program, just as I was entering the workforce.

While the EPD program has enabled me to achieve numerous milestones, it has also imposed limitations on my progress. I will illustrate my experiences and the shortcomings of the program through a few graphs:

1. The services I require cannot be fully supported by someone just starting their career, who may never be able to meet all their needs, regardless of

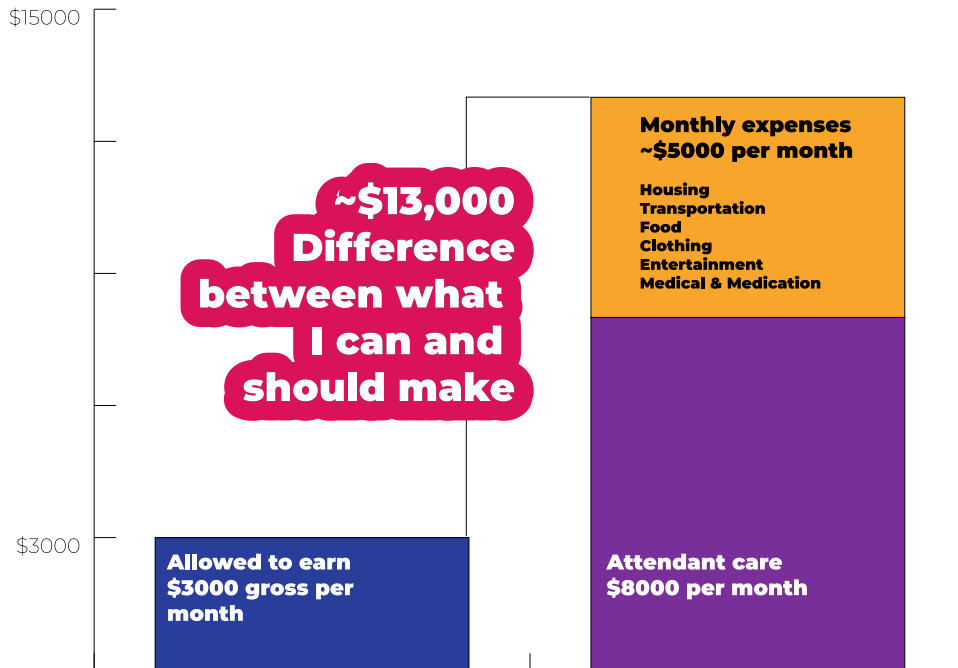
their income. It is vital to explore ways for individuals to retain their essential services while working. The first chart illustrates my current earnings cap compared to my actual living expenses.

2. Everyone needs a financial safety net for emergencies, such as health issues or job loss. Financial advisors typically recommend saving enough to cover three to six months of expenses. However, as shown in the second graphic, individuals are only allowed to save \$5,000, which is inadequate given my living costs.
3. The final graph compares the impact of employment against unemployment. It highlights my monthly contributions to the tax base while working versus the assistance I would require when not working, using average figures to illustrate the disparity.

As you can see, I take great pride in being both an Oregonian and an American. Oregon, along with the broader United States, has long been a leader in advocating for civil rights and creating opportunities through the programs I've discussed today. I hope that Oregon can once again take the lead, joining other states that have already embraced this vision. By doing so, we can demonstrate to the nation and the world that individuals with disabilities have so much to contribute. Supporting these individuals not only reduces or eliminates the costs associated with their care, but also enables them to live purposeful lives, maintain better health, and generate wealth for themselves and their communities.

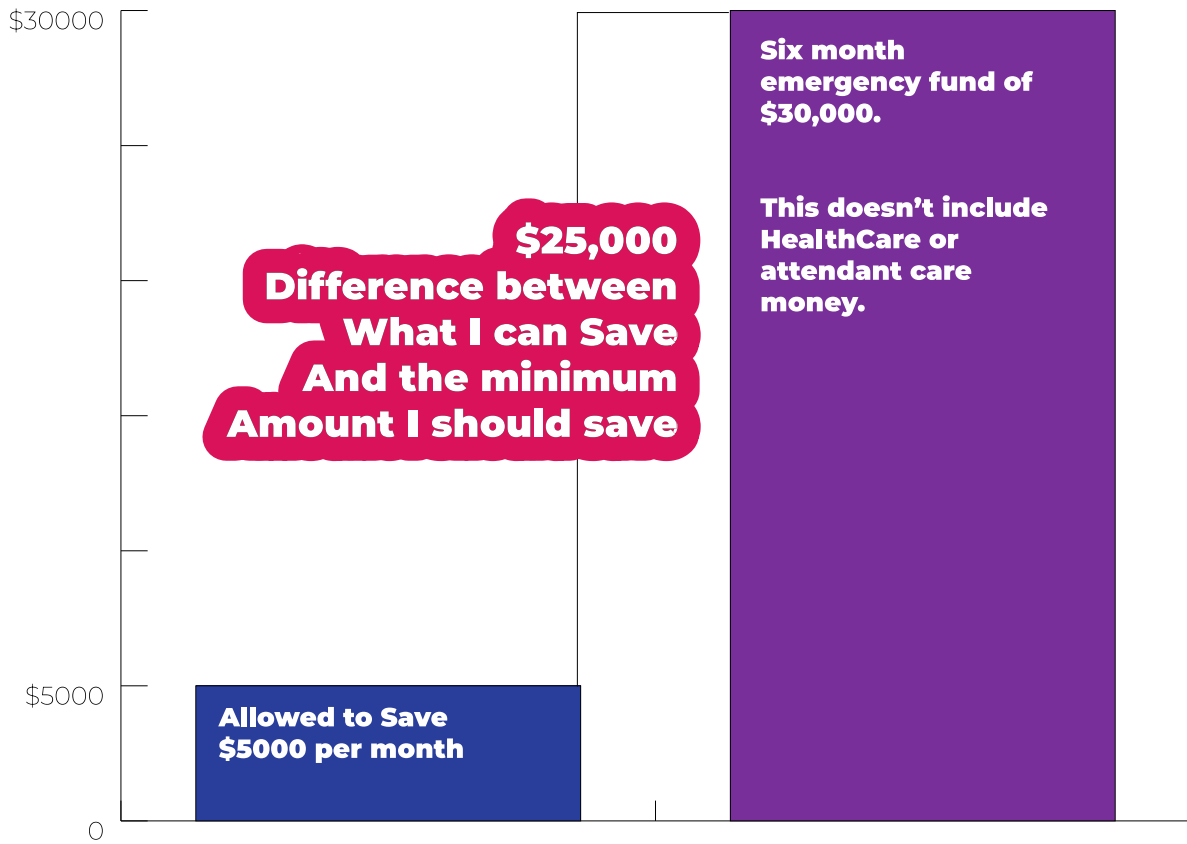
In conclusion, let's talk about Universal Design. This concept ensures that everyone can benefit from the same features of a given space or item. For instance, where there were once steps, we now have ramps, thanks to the ADA. This allows mothers with strollers, people with shopping carts, cyclists, and scooter users to access the same areas as those using wheelchairs, often without anyone noticing the difference. Implementing these changes requires dedicated, thoughtful individuals. With the ADA and initiatives like the Ticket to Work, we've created ramps of opportunity; now we just need to open the door at the top of the ramp and allow everyone to thrive. Thank you for your attention.

**Allowed to earn approximately \$3000 per month
need approximately \$13,000 per month**



Support SB 20

Not allowed to save money for anything other than retirement



Support SB 20

Amount of Government Assistance Needed, Monthly Support SB 20

