

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE
U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND WELLNESS

"LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN THE UNITED STATES: A SNAPSHOT"

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Personal Story

Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. My name is John Register and I am the Director of the Paralympic Academy, a national outreach program of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) that enables children with physical disabilities to become more active in life.

Before I lost my leg in a freak hurdling accident, I was a three time all-American and graduate of the University of Arkansas. I twice went to the Olympic Trials. In 1988 I went as a 110 meter high hurdler and in 1992 I went as a 400 meter hurdler. I also was a soldier in the United States Army and served in Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield.

While preparing for the 1996 Olympic Trials in the 400 meter hurdles, I misstepped one hurdle and landed wrong. The landing dislocated my left knee and severed my popliteal artery. A vein graft 11 hours later was unsuccessful and after inadequate blood flow to my leg for 5 days, the decision was made to amputate.

My first reaction was not if and when I would compete in sport again, my first reaction was personal identification. Who was I now? Was I still a husband to my wife? Would she still desire me? Was I still a father to my then 5-year-old son? Was I still a son to my father and mother? How would I now be looked upon? Would I be accepted by society? Most importantly, could I continue my job with the United States Army?

Not only did I need to work through my own depression and attitude toward disability, I had to confront federal policy and program expectations that assumed that I would not return to work. Though I was accepted to Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia for an October 1994 start date, it was assumed by the Army that I would take a medical retirement and accept a disability check for the rest of my life.

Current Outlook

Fourteen years after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities continue to face physical, attitudinal and economic barriers to work and full participation in society. While physical barriers are being addressed, the attitude barrier remains pervasive in our society.

To begin to address the attitude barrier, a change must take place in the national consciousness regarding disability. The government attitude toward disability must set the standard. Federal programs and policies assume I cannot work and cannot perform along side a non-disabled person, therefore our policies do little to make-work possible.

Just 18 months after my injury, I competed in the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta Georgia, and 4 years later I earned the silver medal in the long jump in Sydney Australia. That silver medal jump was equivalent to bounding over a single lane highway. Prior to losing my leg, my longest jump was equal to leaping over a two-lane highway. Whether it is with one leg or two, long jumping these distances takes hard work, discipline and skill. All of which are critical elements to succeeding in life.

Some 14 years after passage of the Americans with Disabilities act, the employment outlook for people with disabilities is still grim. Today, 99.8% of people with disabilities who receive Social Security benefits never achieve employment and 70% of working age people with disabilities are unemployed. Additionally, lack of access to physical activity, health promotion and health management programs as evident by the following statistics present additional barriers to full participation in society:

- 75% of children with physical disabilities in the U.S. do not participate in physical education programs at school or health and wellness programs in there communities.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 56% of people with disabilities get no physical activity whatsoever
- Per capita health care costs are four times greater for people with disabilities than for those without.
- People with disabilities have higher rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes, depression, high blood pressure and obesity.

Opportunity

I have seen personally the positive impact health and wellness has on my peers with disabilities and how that transcends to other aspects of their life, especially employment. As a former Olympic-level athlete and current Paralympic athlete, I have seen the impact of the Olympic and Paralympic programs on eliminating attitudinal barriers.

The USOC through its Paralympic Division, is committed to addressing quality of life issues for people with disabilities through the Paralympic Academy program. As its program director, I understand how the Paralympic Academy can address quality of life issues for people with disabilities. The Paralympic Academy objectives are to:

- Partner with existing leadership organizations in all 50 states to enhance programming, training and support of comprehensive health and wellness programs for children with disabilities;
- Provide cost-effective and turn-key preventative health and wellness programs in 50 states;
- Provide train-the-trainer programs for physical education teachers and program directors in all 50 states;
- Provide more than 50,000 cost-effective sport wheelchairs to students throughout the U.S.;
- Develop a national message promoting the abilities of children and adults with physical disabilities, and
- Provide recognition and incentive state-wide and nationally for outstanding programs, teachers and students that are having impact in all 50 states.

In 2005, the USOC will select children with physical disabilities and coaches from all 50 states to attend a National Paralympic Academy establishing a network of ambassadors who promote the importance of a healthy, active lifestyle.

The USOC also is conducting a series of sports clinics with soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with permanent disabilities to demonstrate that there is life after a serious injury. Soldiers have the opportunity to connect with local adapted sports programs to pursue their interests in sports and remaining physically fit.

I know that for many others, and me there is no question that sport was the path to successful employment, as well as, to well being for my family and me.

Proposed Action Steps

The USOC would like to:

- Become a strong partner in developing and implementing comprehensive programs with Congress, Federal Agencies and the White House.
- Secure a legislative amendment in IDEA to fund a research study quantifying how involvement in health and wellness programs can impact the achievement levels of children with physical disabilities.
- Engage Congressional leaders in supporting adapted sports programs in your Districts and recognizing and creating awareness of constituents who are delivering or participating in health and wellness programs.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before your Subcommittee today. In closing, the U.S. Olympic Committee looks forward to working with Congress to expand participation and contributions of people with disabilities in this country.