



Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Eli Baumwell, and most of you know me as the Policy Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia. The concerns I am here to raise are echoed by the ACLU, given their interest in rights and protections for the disabled and differently-abled. But I'm actually here to speak about a previous era in my life, when my career was exclusively representing claimants in Social Security Disability cases, and why I oppose HB 4001 and ask you to do the same.

I recall representing a man with diabetes insipidus whose uncertain financial and living situation made it virtually impossible for him to control his blood glucose levels. He died a week before a letter came from a judge ruling he was capable of working. I saw a man who was earning 6-figures a year until he crashed the plane he both owned and flew – he shattered 3 vertebrae in his lower back. It was miraculous that he ever regained the ability to walk. Still a judge found his allegation of disabling pain unconvincing. I knew a woman with lupus whose symptoms manifested in heart complications for which she regularly had to be hospitalized. Her own sister did not know about this and did not believe she was disabled.

I saw lives destroyed. I saw people kicked from homes. I saw people who were living in cars, until those were repossessed as well and they were kicked to the streets. I saw people who were forced to put every possession they owned – every item of sentimental value – into storage, and then auctioned them away when they could no longer pay for that.

These people suffered miserably. None would have chosen this if they felt they had a choice. Some died. SNAP was one of the few benefits they had coming to them, and many more would have died without that.

What I found is that people who were granted benefits were actually more likely to return to work. Those who were given stability, and compassion, who were offered opportunities to get back up – who were offered a helping hand – often took it. By contrast those who faced the threat of destitution, those who cowered under the whip of judgment – those were the ones who were least able to overcome.

I only wish I had more time so that I could explain in greater detail what I saw in that line of work, but I invite any of you who want to know more to seek me out, because I would be happy to share my experiences. Thank you, and again, I urge you to be a helping hand rather than the cracking whip.