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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Disability Summit 2025 | Tech Accelerator: Providing Access to State Government for All Pennsylvanians
Thursday, Sept. 25, 2025 | 3 p.m.
Representative Joe Hohenstein

3 p.m.	Welcome, member introductions, opening remarks Rep. Hohenstein
PANEL ONE 3:10 p.m.	Jennifer Hale, Bureau Director for Policy & Communications *Office of Long-Term Living, Department of Human Services* Jeremy Yale, Bureau Director for Policy & Quality Management *Office of Developmental Programs, Department of Human Services* Russell Goddard, Staff *Office of Vocational Rehabilitation* ***Q & A with Legislators***
PANEL TWO 3:35 p.m.	Lisa Tesler, Executive Director *PA Developmental Disabilities Council* Nae Vallejo, Technology Solution Specialist ***Q & A with Legislators***
PANEL THREE 4:00 p.m.	Caitlin McKenney, Assistive Technology Professional *Institute on Disabilities at Temple University* Chris Moore, Technology Solution Specialist ***Q & A with Legislators***

Pennsylvania
Department of Human Services

Jeremy Yale, Bureau Director for Policy and Quality Management

Office of Developmental Program, Department of Human Services

Jennifer Hale, Bureau Director for Policy and Communications Management,

Office of Long-Term Living, Department of Human Services

September 25, 2025

Good morning, Chair Bizzarro, Representative Hohenstein and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for inviting the Department of Human Services (Department) to provide testimony on the topic of **technology for people with disabilities.** My name is Jeremy Yale and I serve as the Bureau Director for Policy and Quality Management for the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP); and my name is Jennifer Hale and I am the Bureau Director of Policy and Communications Management, Office of Long-Term Living (OLTL). Given our Offices' close collaboration on this subject, we are submitting a joint statement on behalf of the Department that encompasses both overlapping efforts to improve access to technology as well as details about office-specific activities.

The Department appreciates the Committee's interest in exploring and expanding access to technology for people with disabilities, while remaining committed to working with the General Assembly on this important topic. The Department is highly committed to and actively working with numerous stakeholders to leverage technology to its full extent for people with disabilities and seniors; allowing for greater access to the community, enhanced communication, and increased personal independence.

The Demand for Technology Solutions

The demand for technology solutions has been enshrined in the foundational concepts presented in the President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities Report to the President (2015) citing, "Interacting with technology should no longer be considered optional. . . Access to technology is essential for people with [intellectual disabilities] to promote self-determination and to engage meaningfully in their communities in all major aspects of life such as **education, employment, health care and healthy living, recreation, and civic participation**. New technologies have created opportunities and higher expectations for people with disabilities,

including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities." (p. III, Executive Summary) (emphasis added) The United Nations agreed with this position, finding: "The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes the critical role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) and assistive technology play in enabling and empowering persons with disabilities and ensuring that they fully enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms." (p. 2)

People with intellectual disabilities, autism, physical disabilities, and older adults have historically experienced more isolation and loneliness than other populations. As society increasingly communicates, socializes, and learns how to use technology, the Department has a responsibility to support people with disabilities and older adults so that they have opportunities to learn about technological possibilities and to provide them with access a wide range of technological solutions. According to the Pew Research Center, Americans with a disability are more likely than those without disabilities to say they never go online. The Family & Individual Needs for Disability Supports (FINDS) Community Report 2023 states that, respondents "agreed or strongly agreed that technology helped the person they supported to stay connected to important people (85%), to take part in community activities (78%), to use technology to get where they need to go (69%), and to make personal choices (77%)." (p. 30-31)

The Office of Developmental Programs

ODP supports Pennsylvanians with developmental disabilities and their families to achieve greater independence, choice, and opportunity in their lives. Our vision is to continuously improve an effective system of accessible services and supports that are flexible, innovative, and person-centered.

In July of 2019, ODP implemented a **Technology Task Force** focused on creating a means for stakeholders and systems partners to guide the expansion of supportive technology access and

utilization for individuals with disabilities and their families. The Task Force and its members were charged with developing a strategic workplan, helping to improve ODP's policies and service definitions related to technology, expanding the availability of information and training materials related to technology, and establishing strategic partnerships. All the aforementioned goals were accomplished, including significant changes to ODP's waivers and the development of a statewide cadre of technology champions dedicated to expanding and educating on the use of technology.

ODP's 1915(c) waivers include two services designed to support people with intellectual disabilities or autism to access technology services, specifically Assistive Technology and Remote Supports. **Assistive Technology** is an item, piece of equipment, or product system acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve a waiver participant's functioning or increase their ability to exercise choice and control. Assistive Technology services include direct support in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device, limited to:

- Purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices for the participant
- Selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, installing, maintaining, repairing, or replacing assistive technology devices. Repairs are only covered when it is more cost effective than purchasing a new device and are not covered by a warranty
- Training or technical assistance for the participant, or where appropriate, the participant's family member, guardian, advocate, staff or authorized representative on how to use and/or care for the assistive technology
- Extended warranties
- Ancillary supplies, software, and equipment necessary for the proper functioning of

assistive technology devices, such as replacement batteries and materials necessary to adapt low-tech devices

Remote Supports involve the use of technology that uses two-way real time communication in the participant's home or community that allows staff from an agency who is offsite to monitor and respond to the participant's health and safety needs. Interaction with a professional occurs as needed as part of remote supports services, but it is not the main function of the service. Remote Supports services are provided in real time, not via recording, and includes the following:

- Staff who monitor and respond to the participant's needs
- The technology utilized in the home and community that is monitored by the staff
- The technology utilized for two-way real time communication (if different from above)
- The equipment necessary to operate the technology
- The costs for delivery, installation, adjustments, monthly testing, monitoring, maintenance, and repairs to the technology and equipment necessary to operate the technology

Office of Long-Term Living

OLTL administers long-term services and supports (LTSS) programs for older adults and adults with physical disabilities that offer the opportunity to receive care and services in their homes and communities rather than in facilities, giving them the opportunity to work, spend more time with their families, and experience a better quality of life overall.

Assistive technology is an important option for addressing the needs of the LTSS population, and OLTL is interested in sustaining the work done through the PA Technology

Accelerator initiative by ensuring participants are educated about available assistive technology as a service option during the person-centered service plan (PCSP) process and have resources available to make informed decisions.

The Department currently offers the following technology related services under OLTL's managed care long-term services and supports (MLTSS) program, Community HealthChoices (CHC) and OBRA waiver programs, and Living Independence for the Elderly (LIFE) program.

- Assistive technology – Assistive technology includes coverage of devices and services which are intended to ensure the health, welfare, independence and safety of the participant and to increase, maintain or improve a participant's functioning in communication, self-help, self-direction, or adaptive capabilities. An assistive technology device is an item, piece of equipment or product system — whether acquired commercially, modified or customized — that is needed by the participant, as specified in the participant's PCSP and determined necessary in accordance with the participant's assessment.
- Personal Emergency Response System (PERS) – A PERS is an electronic device that transmits a signal to a central monitoring center to summon assistance in the event of an emergency. The necessary components of a system are:

    1. An in-home medical communications transceiver.
    2. A remote, portable activator.
    3. A central monitoring center with backup systems which is staffed at all times.
    4. Current data files at the central monitoring station containing response protocols and personal, medical, and emergency information for each participant.

- Telecare – Telecare integrates social and healthcare services supported by innovative technologies to sustain and promote independence, quality of life and reduce the need for nursing home placement. By utilizing in-home technology, more options are available to assist and support individuals so that they can remain in their own homes and reduce the need for re-hospitalization. TeleCare services are specified by the service plan, as necessary to enable the participant to promote independence and to ensure the health, welfare and safety of the participant and are provided pursuant to consumer choice. TeleCare includes:

    1. Health Status Measuring and Monitoring TeleCare Service;
    2. Activity and Sensor Monitoring TeleCare Service; and
    3. Medication Dispensing and Monitoring TeleCare Services.

While these services are available to individuals who are enrolled in the CHC and OBRA waiver programs, OLTL has historically seen underutilization due to lack of awareness, education and training.

Technology Accelerator Initiative

The Department, through reinvestments authorized under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) that were approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), implemented the Technology Accelerator to: "Accelerate the adoption of technology by funding a consultant to advise OLTL and ODP [home and community-based service (HCBS)] providers seeking to adopt remote supports and other technology solutions for individuals receiving HCBS. The use of technology to support independence will reduce need for direct care thereby relieving pressure for staffing from HCBS agencies that provide direct care. This initiative is aimed at capacity building through awareness and education." Pennsylvania Spending Plan Update: January

2025 - Section 9817 of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

Through this initiative, ODP and OLTL worked with Temple University and the University of Kansas, guided by the input of a Steering Committee comprised of individuals with disabilities, family members, managed care organizations, housing specialists, advocates, technology specialists, representatives from the Department of Labor and Industry, the Department of Education, and a member of the General Assembly to achieve the following deliverables:

- *Training and Resources about Technology Solutions* – Conduct a series of training courses and develop resources to build capacity for stakeholders and across county behavioral health/intellectual disabilities and autism offices and community HealthChoices Managed Care Organizations.
- *Readiness Evaluation and Tools for Providers* – Development of a readiness evaluation for the successful adoption of remote supports and assistive technology solutions by Pennsylvania disability provider agencies.
- *Technology First Statewide Assessment and Planning* – Development of a Technology First Systems Change state plan through benchmarking and evaluation.
- *Statewide Technology Solutions for Provider Assessment* - Survey of approximately 2,000 providers on technology awareness, planning, implementation, and training resources.
- *Develop Technology First Policies Alongside Technology Champions* – Engage a group of technology champions to participate in the modernization and harmonization of statewide technology-related policies.
- *Technology Summits* – Technology summits were held in the Spring of 2025, on March 6 in Philadelphia and March 13 in Pittsburgh. These summits brought together project

partners, people with disabilities, family members, and direct support and other professionals to increase awareness of current and emerging technology solutions.

Technology First Systems Change

The Technology Accelerator afforded the Department an opportunity to more comprehensively evaluate the current service delivery system through the lens of technology and person-centered planning. This undertaking is the foundation of systems change in adopting technology first practices in Pennsylvania. *The Technology First framework is a systems change model where* ***technology is considered first in the discussion of support options*** *available to individuals and families through person-centered approaches to promote meaningful participation, social inclusion, self-determination and quality of life.* (Tanis, 2019)

In a report published by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS) titled, Technology for People With Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities and Their Families, state intellectual and developmental disabilities agencies identified reasons to invest in technology solutions including: (1) implementation of creative ways to support people's autonomy, inclusion, and quality of life; (2) a means to identify strategies to help address the direct support professional workforce shortage; and; (3) a path to explore cost-effective solutions for providing quality care and outcomes. (p. 3) The report states that 28 states have indicated that they were interested or had already begun the process of becoming a Technology First state." (p.10)

The COVID-19 pandemic opened the doors to technology access through funding made available under the ARPA, which resulted in more than 1,200 proposed activities to enhance, expand, or strengthen HCBS across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The most proposed activity types included workforce recruitment and retainment, workforce training, quality

improvement, reducing or eliminating HCBS waitlists, and expanding the use of technology. (p. 7) Technology Solutions 2.0 In the same report, it was noted that states reported $1.8 billion in total planned spending on expanding the use of technology in the quarter ending December 31, 2022, and states providing training to learn, upkeep, and update purchased hardware, software, or technology solutions increased by 50% across states between 2019 and 2023.

In the Advancing Independence and Community Integration for All: Supporting Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities Through High-Quality Home and Community-Based Services 2024 Report to the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID), one of six principles considered pivotal to strengthening and sustaining the nation's HCBS infrastructure is for states to use the Technology First framework. (p.9)

In conclusion, OLTL and ODP were excited to collaborate together on the PA Technology Accelerator initiative with the goal to expand the awareness of, and access to, assistive technology, and to build capacity of assistive technology users and to measure effectiveness around assistive technology use, access, and service across the Commonwealth.

Our collaboration is an example of what is happening nationally with cross agency conversations around access to assistive technology. Most recently, Advancing States and NASDDDS have partnered to launch the Enabling Technology Engagement Network (ETEN). The purpose of ETEN is to transform LTSS in the technology space through strategic partnerships by bringing together state policymakers, health plan partners, and technology vendors to address challenges, accelerate innovation, and open doors to new opportunities. The need for technology solutions continues to grow as Americans continue to age, and there is increasing interest among seniors and individuals with disabilities in utilizing technology to connect with loved ones, reduce isolation, and improve health outcomes. Ensuring there is continued investment in access to

education, awareness, and training on assistive technology will increase the opportunity for seniors and individuals with disabilities to integrate assistive technology into their daily life.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify to the importance of the PA Technology Accelerator initiative and the investment that the Department has made to meet the needs of Pennsylvania's residents. Thank you for your continued support of Pennsylvania's older adults, and individuals with disabilities.

Pennsylvania
Department of Labor & Industry

Disability Summit – Legislative Panel – September 25, 2025

Good afternoon. I would like to start by thanking the House Democratic Policy Committee for scheduling this hearing and promoting the importance of assistive technology in employment. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Representative Joe Hohenstein for inviting me to testify here today.

My name is Russ Goddard, and I am a vocational rehabilitation specialist at the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), an office under the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry (L&I). I am a certified rehabilitation counselor through the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, and I have been working in the field of vocational rehabilitation for 26 years. I work at OVR Central Office, and my specialty area is deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind services. In my current role, I oversee the provision of vocational rehabilitation services for the deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind population, which includes anything from hearing aids to supported employment services to sign language interpreting services to assistive technology devices and services for this unique population.

OVR is funded by a combination of state and federal funds. Approximately four out of every five dollars OVR receives comes from the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration, while the rest comes from the state budget. The Commonwealth's investment activates the federal dollars through a formula match. OVR uses its funding to assist people with disabilities to find, retain, and advance in competitive integrated employment and gain independence in their lives. To accomplish this, OVR employs vocational rehabilitation counselors, along with clerical support staff, managers, and Central Office staff, such as myself, to provide individualized employment-related services to individuals with disabilities through OVR's 21 District Offices throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

OVR's funding helps pay for a wide range of individualized services for eligible customers, such as short-term training, college and university training, pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities, supported employment services, and the topic of today's testimony, assistive technology devices and services.

OVR understands that assistive technology (AT) is key to assisting individuals with disabilities to find and retain competitive integrated employment within their communities. As the lead agency in disability employment, OVR purchased over six million dollars' worth of assistive technology, assistive technology services, and rehabilitation technology for its eligible customers in the current federal fiscal year. By purchasing white canes, CCTVs, screen reading software for its customers through OVR's Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS), hearing aids and assistive listening devices, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, house and van modifications, and everything else in between, OVR is making an investment in the future of the customers it serves through greater independence, greater self-confidence, and a regular paycheck.

As part of OVR's commitment toward making AT available and accessible, OVR offers in-house assistive technology consultation for OVR customers through the Hiram G. Andrews Center in Johnstown, PA. OVR also works with outside providers of assistive technology devices and services such as TechOWL at Temple University, the PA Assistive Technology Foundation, and the Center for Assistive Technology at the University of Pittsburgh, among other providers.

In addition to the benefits of AT for employees with disabilities through increased confidence and independence, enhanced productivity, improved communication, and better mental and physical well-being, AT also benefits employers. With assistive technology, employers gain greater access to a more diverse talent pool, higher productivity and revenue, and improved employee retention.

Despite OVR's continuing commitment to assist individuals with disabilities find, retain, and advance in employment and gain independence in their communities, more could be done to educate Pennsylvanians of the advantages and benefits of assistive technology. Legislation at the state level can go a long way toward making assistive technology more visible, accessible, and available for members of the general community, regardless of their disability or disabilities.

On behalf of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Department of Labor and Industry, I thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the record, and I thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions the Committee may have.

House of Representatives
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
House Majority Policy Committee Hearing

Disability Summit: Technology Accelerator
Philadelphia, PA
September 25, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Bizzarro, Representative Hohenstein and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Lisa Tesler. I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council.

The PA Developmental Disabilities Council (PADDC) engages in systems change, advocacy and capacity building to improve the health, educational, social, and economic well-being of all people with developmental disabilities and their families. Established by the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act) and Governor's Executive Order, the Council is both a planning group and a funding body. We empower individuals with developmental disabilities and their families to help shape policies that impact them.

PADDC is honored to serve as a member of the Statewide Steering Committee for the Pennsylvania Tech Accelerator initiative. Our role on the committee is to fulfill our purpose as defined in the DD Act: "to assure that individuals with developmental disabilities and their families participate in the design of and have access to needed community services, individualized supports, and other forms of assistance that promote self-determination, independence, productivity, and integration and inclusion in all facets of community life."

The Council supports a coordinated, cross-systems, person-centered and community-focused approach to promoting the use of technology for those with developmental disabilities.

PADDC views technology as a conduit to the community. People in our society use technology to engage in routine day-to-day activities. It is used for skill building and learning; in formal educational settings; to find employment opportunities, apply for jobs, and succeed at work; to navigate our communities and public transportation systems; to communicate with family and friends; to read the news and keep informed; to stay connected to one another through social media; to find recreational, arts, cultural, sports and fun activities; and for civic engagement. Most of us use technology as a tool to improve our lives, enrich our experiences, maintain relationships, and understand the world around us. The digital divide between those with and without disabilities is a barrier to accessing technology – and therefore, a barrier to fully participating in the community.

The Technology Accelerator project examined ways for Pennsylvania to eliminate barriers, overcome current challenges, and increase access to technology solutions. PADDC supports this effort so that people with developmental disabilities can live everyday lives in their communities.

As you learned from the first panel, there are ways for the government systems to change the way they do business which will increase access and use of technology. The Technology First Systems Change model provides the framework to move our state forward. There are no easy answers, but with a clear plan, adequate resources, changes to policies and practices, consistent data collection and analysis of outcomes, PA can become a Technology First State and invest in a future where technological solutions are available for all who need them.

Technology can be a game changer for individuals. It opens doors to the community and independent living. Technology offers the promise of effective communication, new options for transportation, accessible information, relationships, smart home supports, gainful employment, and financial stability for people.

Technology solutions can help most people. A dedicated effort to increase the number of people who are using technology is important, as is understanding who they are, how old they are, where they live, what they use and how they use it. The data should be public and available in easy-to-understand formats so that all people understand what it means. Systems must use the data to plan for now and the future. Pennsylvania should design a system for the present that can expand and create opportunities far into the future. There is no ‘once and done’ - I

don't believe there is one policy change or single dollar amount that will transform Pennsylvania into a "Technology First" model. This is a complex issue, and it will take careful planning, a commitment over time, and dedicated ongoing investments to ensure stability and growth in the system, especially as new technologies emerge.

What are the positive aspects outlined in the Technology First Systems Change Blueprint?

1. Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families will continue to participate in policy development as part of the steering committee.
    a. People with disabilities and families are experts and need to be at the table where decisions are made.
    b. Those with lived experiences are the most valuable voices when evaluating system change efforts.
2. The systems change efforts will be guided by a set of core values.
    a. People will commit to a shared mission and vision about the "why".
    b. Progress is measured against the intended purpose.
3. Resources will be allocated and sustainable across systems.
    a. Will ensure equitable access to technology for all.
    b. Reduces discrepancies based on funding streams or eligibility rules.
4. The communication and capacity building plans include people with disabilities and their families.
    a. Knowledge and understanding are essential for the adoption of new technologies.
    b. Users need information geared specifically for them.
5. Individual and family experiences and outcomes are essential.
    a. Data collection from users will show results of investments.
    b. Decisions can be made with a clear understanding of the impact on real people.
6. Systems are held accountable for results.
    a. Agencies, providers, and decision-makers play an important part in this initiative.
    b. Benchmarks and evaluation will hold everyone accountable.

In closing, it is important to remember that people with developmental disabilities and their families want what we all want – a home of our own, time with family, good friends, having a purpose, good health, a good job, and feeling welcomed and included in community. Those are the outcomes the system should be designed to achieve and that technology can impact. So, as we move forward, we need to ask the right questions, like: Does technology make lives better? Does it increase freedom, choice and control? Is it adding something that is meaningful and fulfilling? Is it empowering people to live more independently and improving day-to-day experiences? It's more than just adding new services, it's about quality of life. The only people who know what quality means are the people served and their families. They are vital to all deliberations, decision-making, and conversations about Technology First system change.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing today. I appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective. I am happy to take questions.

Respectfully Submitted,

Lisa A. Tesler
Executive Director
PA Developmental Disabilities Council

Attachment:

PADDC Technology Principles

Technology Principles

Everyday Lives

People in our society access technologies to engage in major aspects of life such as education, health care, employment, recreation, and civic engagement. It is a common part of everyday life for most people.

Using technology that is the same as what most other people are using should be the top priority. When people with disabilities are supported to get devices and adopt strategies all people and communities use as the first option, they are part of the mainstream of society. Specialized or customized items designed to meet person-centered needs should be usable and compatible with generic systems when possible.

Technology is a conduit to community. Finding, exploring, and connecting with others is a key feature of technology today.

Students with disabilities must learn about technology alongside their peers so that they are able to participate and engage as equals.

Empower People

Ensure individuals have control of and engage with technology on their own terms. Using technology is a choice, and no person should be coerced or mandated to use technology. Individuals must have freedom and control; those who do not communicate with words or speech must have decision-making authority and ways to express their choices.

Technology can modify individual homes and the environment to increase a person's ability to live as they wish. Using person-centered approaches, teams should design plans to incorporate technology that maximizes independence and supports self-determination.

Relationships

Assure technology isn't a replacement for needed human resources, like direct support staff, friendships, and co-workers. Technology should not be used solely as a cost saving measure, which could result in reducing services, loss of effectiveness of services, or limiting real world experiences.

The joys of face-to-face connection with one another, reciprocal relationships, and inclusion is important to quality of life. Technology use must be balanced against the risk of losing in-person interactions and decreased time in the community.

Relationships built through online communities are real, authentic, and meaningful and should be treated with equal status and value as direct in person friendships and relationships.

Security, Privacy and Risk

Individuals exercise their rights, make their own decisions, protect themselves, and take risks. Each person should have individualized support, information, education, and services to safely access technology.

We oppose surveillance without consent.

Privacy is a human right. Digital communications should not be monitored or controlled by others.

Security must be assured to protect civil rights and human dignity.

There are risks with online communities, such as cyber bullying, financial exploitation, and other negative aspects of anonymous social interactions. People should plan how to keep safe and protect themselves.

Learning, Education and Ongoing Support

Expertise is built through experience. We need many ways to learn, explore and grow over a lifetime. Exploring technology in schools, with peers, is the best time to start. Students access to technology should not be limited to school settings alone.

We must close the digital divide – Access to technology devices, internet service, cell phone data plans, broad band, and Wi-Fi are essential to day-to-day life.

Training, knowledge, skill building, and learning must be continuous and ongoing. Education must be provided in ways that are accessible to individuals with disabilities and their families.

Ongoing services and resources are needed to maintain technology and equipment. Generic community businesses should learn to repair and fix specialized equipment used by those with disabilities. This capacity would overcome common barriers and help ensure people can resolve problems quickly.

Written Testimony of nae vallejo (they/he)

House Democratic Legislative Policy Hearing on the PA Tech Accelerator

Disability Summit — September 25, 2025

Introduction

Cheers everyone. my name is nae vallejo (i use they/he pronouns). I have light brown skin, short black curly hair, and tattoos visible on my arms, head and neck. I am wearing a blue geometric patterned shirt, an arrow head necklace, and a shark tooth earring in my left ear. Roady, is a black labrador retriever wearing an orange harness with various working identification patches attached to it. i am a Black Native, autistic, and hard of hearing service animal guardian. i am also an accessibility strategist, experiential archivist, and a technology solutions specialist as part of the PA Tech Accelerator statewide initiative.

i live at the intersections of many access needs — not as theory, but as daily reality. when technology fails, my access collapses. when technology is resourced, i get to belong fully.

Technology as Infrastructure of Belonging

Access is not abstract. it is textured, felt in the body. for me, technology was once a hearing aid that let me catch the tunes to my father's laugh. it is now captioning that makes public hearings like this one possible. i notice the difference in my whole nervous system when captions are missing — my energy drains quickly, my comprehension dips, my ability to participate vanishes. captions restore not just information, but dignity- the difference between being a full participant or an afterthought.

technology is also the ways i navigate my own body: when the mobility and dexterity in my hands shift, i rely on voice control across my phone, ipad, laptop, and even a tv.

those features are not luxuries — they are what allow me to send an email, finish a report, or simply connect with my comrades.
technology is also deeply relational. my service dog, Roady, is trained to assist me with many tasks one of which is to alert me to sounds i cannot hear, but it is only through technology — vibrating alerts, captioning, voice control — that i can pair Roady's presence with the digital tools i need to move through the world- as vital as any ramp or curb cut.

technology is not extra. it is infrastructure. it is as fundamental as ramps, as water, as electricity. when legislators prioritize technology-first approaches, they are not offering luxury — they are building belonging.

What I Witnessed in the Tech Accelerator

As technology solutions specialists, much of our work happened in peer groups- bringing together people with lived experience, service providers, and advocates.
this process, what i like to personally refer to as village-care, revealed the conditions, stories, and access gaps that policy must be built around.

one of my most valuable takeaways was learning directly from peers. I discovered accessibility features across devices—on iPhones, Androids, iPads, and laptops—features many of us had never been shown by providers. We explored voice-to-text dictation, magnification and zoom, captioning, screen readers, text size adjustments, dark mode, and shortcuts that make daily navigation smoother. I also learned so much from others' lived practices: one specialist shared how vital his communication board is for expressing needs, while another comrade showed me her Livescribe Smartpen that records lectures so she can return to any point she needs. Learning from one another showed me how simple shifts in design, training, or tools can open whole worlds. It reminded me that accessibility isn't just about technology existing—it's about people being resourced, trusted, and invited to share what they know.

for me, that learning mattered in very tangible ways. my mobility and dexterity shift — some days my hands can navigate a keyboard, other days i rely on voice control on my devices. being able to move across platforms with the tools already built in makes the difference between isolation and participation.

Barriers Named by Our Groups

- Funding structures that don't meet real needs –money is often made available, but the rules around it are rigid and don't match what people actually need. For example, a grant might cover new equipment but not the staff time to train people how to use it. Budgets are often created without dedicated accessibility lines, leaving out captioning, interpretation, plain-language materials, or other supports. These mismatches mean that resources don't reach communities in the most useful way. They mean inherent retrofitting to what should have been written within their infrastructure- community led and community driven praxis.

- Training systems that overlook plain language and easy reading – information is often shared in ways that are too complex or not made for different learning styles. When materials are not written in clear language or designed for easy reading, people can be excluded from fully understanding and participating. Training should be built so that everyone can access the information without barriers.

- Broadband inequities that fracture whole communities – many people still do not have fast, affordable, or reliable internet. Some neighborhoods get strong service, while others are left behind. This creates a divide that makes it hard to join online meetings, use telehealth, apply for jobs, do schoolwork, or connect with friends and family. Without internet access, entire communities lose out on opportunities to learn, work, connect and care for one another.

Just as importantly, we imagined what could shift if providers and legislators centered disabled people's lived expertise from the beginning.

The technology solutions specialist program itself was a model — showing how collaboration across disability communities and providers can produce the grounding that policy makers and service systems need if they are serious about building equity.

Centering Equity and Community

i want to be clear: access is not evenly distributed. Black, Brown, Native, disabled and senior communities are often last in line for resources and first to feel the harm of gaps in access. a technology-first policy that does not address racial and economic inequity will only deepen existing divides. we must ensure that the legislation you consider includes:

- Dedicated funding that reaches marginalized communities – money must be set aside specifically for those most often excluded. This means creating budgets with accessibility lines built in for captioning, sign language interpretation, assistive technology, language translation, rural broadband, and other supports. Without this, funds tend to stay with large institutions instead of reaching the people who need them most.

- Accountability structures that track who benefits – it is not enough to fund programs; we need transparent systems that show whether resources are actually reaching Black, Brown, Native, disabled, and senior communities. This could mean public reporting, equity audits, or requiring data broken down by race, disability, income, and geography to make sure inequities are not being hidden.

- Ongoing feedback loops with community members, not just providers – policies work best when those most impacted shape them. Communities should be asked directly what is working, what is missing, and what needs to change. Feedback must be built in continuously, not as a one-time survey. This means listening to community members alongside providers and making changes when gaps are identified.

Technology can be the bridge — but only if we build it with equity at the center.

Closing

as you take in what I and other panelists have shared today, I invite you to embody technology not just as gadgets or devices, but also texture: the way access holds shape in disabled people's lives, in all lives. investing in technology-first policies means investing in our collective future — one where belonging is not conditional, but guaranteed.

thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today. i am honored to contribute both my story and my expertise to this urgent work.

in care and service,

nae vallejo (they/he)

Remarks to the PA House Majority Policy Committee

Caitlin McKenney, Assistive Technology Professional
Institute on Disabilities at Temple University

September 25, 2025

Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Hohenstein, and members of the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's policy hearing. My name is Caitlin McKenney. I serve as the assistant director for emergency management in the Institute on Disabilities, part of the College of Education and Human Development at Temple University. My background is in special education and I hold a masters degree in Assistive Technology Studies and Human Services. Within the scope of my work here at the Institute, I play a vital role on the TechOWL team.

TechOWL, which stands for Technology for Our Whole Lives, is the federally designated Assistive Technology Act Program for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Our job is to provide education about and access to assistive technology for people all across the lifespan. We have an amazing, talented team here in our Philadelphia office – speech therapists, occupational therapists, a certified low vision specialist, myself a certified assistive technology professional – several of whom have direct life experiences related to disability in addition to our professional expertise.

Outside of our Philadelphia office we partner with eight other disability-centered organizations across the state to provide regional assistive technology resource centers to ensure that Pennsylvania residents have equitable access to TechOWL services. I want to take a moment to name those, so that the committee members can recognize our partners in their jurisdictions:

- Philadelphia County – TechOWL Community Space (*serving Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, Philadelphia*)
- Lehigh County - Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living *(serving Berks, Carbon, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Schuylkill)*

- Cumberland County – United Cerebral Palsy of Central PA *(serving Adams, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Perry, York)*
- Lycoming County - Center for Independent Living of North Central PA *(serving Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, Union)*
- Lackawanna County - United Cerebral Palsy of Northeast PA *(serving Bradford, Lackawanna, Pike, Susquehanna, Wayne, Wyoming)*
- Elk County – LIFT Life and Independence for Today *(serving Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean, Potter)*
- Erie County – Community Resources for Independence *(serving Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Forest, Mercer, Venango, Warren)*
- Allegheny County – CLASS Community Living and Support Services (serving Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Indiana, Lawrence, Westmoreland)
- Washington County – Transitional Paths to Independent Living (serving Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Somerset, Washington)

Every day these places are introducing Pennsylvania residents to tools that they didn't know existed, reducing barriers and increasing independence in ways that someone didn't think was possible. That's what I love about my job.

Sometimes assistive technology is something big: a wearable sensor that detects electrical impulses from the brain, or an innovative mobility device that prevents falls. Often it is something small. Consider the impact of a can opener or a button hook in the life of someone for whom that is the difference between whether or not they have access to a favorite food or a professional wardrobe.

Here at TechOWL we cover the whole continuum of assistive technology: low-tech and high-tech, generic consumer goods as well as customized and specialized solutions. That's possible in large part due to the dedicated expertise of our professional staff. It would be impossible for any one person to be an expert in mobility, hearing, and vision equipment; a tall order to stay on top of the newest innovations in fabrication and to keep up with the evolving landscape of AI and smart devices. We need collaboration and we need systems of referral and knowledge dissemination.

In that same vein, Pennsylvania consumers need both variety and cohesion on the topic of assistive technology at the state level. I assist residents in identifying tech solutions that are ultimately funded by a wide range of sources but among them are ODP consumers, OVR clients, and students of the public education system. A lack of consistent policies and procedures across entities makes it harder for me to do my job.

Without legislative movement, Pennsylvania is going to fall behind when it comes to supportive technologies. As you consider what it would mean to adopt Technology First frameworks, there are two areas that I want to emphasize as an assistive technology professional: 1) the value of including non-traditional partners and 2) the importance of consistent language use across policies and programs.

To my first point, I invite the committee members to visit the TechOWL community space. This is a street-level storefront at a major intersection one block from today's venue. We have open hours four days a week during which anyone can come in off the street and explore the breadth of what assistive technology has to offer. I can't tell you how often in the past two years of its opening I have been able to give durable medical equipment to someone who never would have found us otherwise. The most memorable occasion was a day soon after our opening, when a couple of older ladies from the local north Philadelphia community came by. We chatted about their changing needs and the goals that were important to them: keeping up with a grandchild, staying independent in their shopping. They both went home with the tools they needed that day. And about two hours later, I received another visitor. Then another. These ladies had sent us their neighbors.

None of these people had attempted to use more formal venues for service access. This underscores for me that we need to meet people where they are. We need to collaborate with the people and organizations that are trusted members of the community, doing on the ground work.

My second ask to the committee is that you give weight to language use around the topic of supportive technologies, enabling technology, remote supports, and assistive technology. As an Assistive Technology Professional, certified with that title by a professional society that spans North America, and working for a federally designated Assistive Technology Act Program, I have a strong sense of the phrase assistive technology. I understand that it is a broadly encompassing term, inclusive of many things that do not require prescription or professional recommendation. But I also recognize that it serves us well to have other words both for accessibility's sake and for specificity, when policies and procedures differ based on the type of tech at hand. It's just critical that we roll out terms in consistent ways so that consumers know what their rights are and where to turn for help. Rehab professionals should be part of that conversation.

As I conclude my remarks today, and look forward to your questions, I want to thank you again for your time. Technology itself is ever-changing but I know that together we can create a lasting framework for access.

Chris Moore

Technology Solution Specialist

Tech Accelerator Program

"Good morning members of the Assembly- thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Christopher Moore, and I serve as a Technology Solution Specialist for the Tech Accelerator Program. I am here today to offer testimony on how technology has personally enabled my professional development, and to share observations on how technology has significantly impacted the disability community in Pennsylvania."

I. Personal use of technology

I have been introduced to and used many assistive technologies that have helped me in my personal life. With help from an education program at the Upattinas School, I was able to take classes at Montgomery County Community College and finished my high school credits to get my diploma. From learning the basics of quickbooks accounting software I was able to get an online certificate. Assistive technology has kept me organized and created a more accessible pathway for learning and studying.

I have used a Lifescribe pen to record lectures and play back certain parts by touching the pen to the text. This allowed me to keep up in class when otherwise I would have struggled to write at the same pace as the lesson being taught. When I thought that I did not take enough notes during an accounting class I used the pen to listen to the lecture so that I could be able to add notes that I did not write down so that I could better understand the lesson taught.

I have also used the software program Kurzweil, which is an assistive learning technology that integrates supports into textbooks. One main feature is the ability to convert textbooks into PDFs and then highlight key points in the PDF that are important to the subject matter. It also reads the text out loud to me so I can follow along at my own speed, can create brainstorms and outlines, and helps me with citing sources. It helped me understand what was being written in my textbooks and it made it easier for me to do classwork and assignments in school. The digitized textbook has been a more accessible way for me to put together study guides and be prepared for class and exams.

I have utilized Google Calendar to add appointments and maintain schedules. These scheduling tools have ensured that I am on time and prepared for classes, appointments, and trainings in my educational, professional, and personal life.

I have made use of Microsoft Excel to create timesheets for self-advocacy work and databases for my volunteer administrative assistant job at Compassus Hospice. With my excel timesheet for SAU1 in google docs I am able to write down the times that I worked during each day and every week I am able to email it to my boss to ensure that I get paid for the time that I work, keeping me organized and accountable. This would be much harder if not impossible without technology.

In my work with Self-Advocates United as 1 (SAU1), I used Zoom and Microsoft teams for meetings especially while we were quarantined during the covid pandemic. These programs allowed my self-advocate colleagues and I to have a way to meet together when we could not meet in person. These video meeting softwares also have functions like transcribing, recording, and a chat function that allow participants to take in content in a variety of ways and be able to revisit the meeting another time to retain information.

My family and I had to find assistive technology for me independently and then get approved to use it in class. It was a struggle for my family and I to convince schools to allow me to use assistive technology in the classroom from [starting point] through college as part of my accommodations. If I had not been aware of and obtained the technologies that I used and continue to use today and if schools did not allow me to use the tech accommodations that help me, I would not be as successful in my professional and personal life.

II. What I have learned about Technology as a Technology Solution Specialist

In my time as Technology Solutions Specialist, I have learned how to format and publicly share my story on technology with other people, the benefits and challenges to artificial intelligence, how technology is funded and supported, and what it means to be technology first when it comes to legislative policies.

Our team created a one-pager on Artificial Intelligence. With feedback from my colleagues and I we were able to describe the benefits and challenges from AI with people with disabilities as well as the risks of using AI and how to spot AI images. By learning the concept of plain language the document will be easier for people with disabilities to understand what is being said about AI. The more informed the disability community is on AI, the more individuals and their loved ones can use

the technology to their benefit as well as keeping themselves safe from the more dangerous aspects.

I got to research technologies that exist for people with disabilities and I shared it with the group. From using the techowl technologies list, I shared about fitness and sports technologies for people with disabilities like adaptive bikes for people with wheelchairs. Being technology first is important because we have evolved to using technology since it was introduced, and there are less people with disabilities using technology compared to the people that do not have a disability. Before today, I did not know or have any active roles in advocating for policy changes nor did I have any stances or opinions on changes in policies. The tech accelerator program taught me not only how to be a better self-advocate when it comes to technology, but also to help others get access to technologies in the way that fits their own personal lives. When I learned that Pennsylvania was drafting a technology first bill from the tech accelerator program I was hopeful that I could help in finding a way to get more people access to technologies that are available in the state. I also had the opportunity to share my personal experiences with technology at a tech summit in Pittsburgh. All of this would not have been possible without the support of the tech accelerator program.

III. Importance of Technology to People with Disabilities

Access to technology is essential, yet many people with disabilities and their families are unaware of the tools available or assume they are too expensive to obtain. My work at SAU1 focuses on promoting these technologies so that individuals can access them, improve their quality of life, and achieve greater independence. I feel that many people, especially in the disability community, don't necessarily know how accessible and impactful technology can be when used right. People with disabilities and providers should know how to use certain technologies to make individuals lives easier.

I also believe that self-advocates and people with disabilities should be the technology champions and be included in the discussions of legislation because our voices are just as important as the people working on the legislation of the bills being passed. We live in a country where all people's voices are important and should be heard and this includes people with disabilities like myself. I like my other tech solutions colleagues got to speak at a technology summit and share my experiences with using technology in my life. What I have learned from

the tech accelerator program is that technology can be important from all aspects of life and that there are plenty of resources for which technology can be promoted. And this wouldn't have been possible without the state investing in Technology First and prioritizing self-advocates. Passing a Technology First bill would help this work continue into the future.
I have presented trainings around Charting the LifeCourse. I have taught them that technology plays a role in every domain of living and can help people reach their goals in all of those domains including employment, education, health, social inclusion, etc. For example, technology can be the way that some people communicate when they cannot talk. Writing stuff all the time would be tiring and painful for some. People would not be able to read some peoples handwriting if we took away technology. For people who cannot talk they would not be able to communicate their thoughts and feelings that other people do.

IV. Closing & Call to Action

"In closing, technology has not only shaped my own career but has been transformative for Pennsylvanians with disabilities. I urge the Assembly to continue investing in inclusive technology innovation, strengthen support for digital accessibility legislation, and expand public-private partnerships to ensure Pennsylvania leads in building a digitally equitable future for all."