



For Immediate Release

10/25/2022

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Statement on Media Coverage of the PA Senate Race

By Marlene Sallo, Executive Director of the National Disability Rights Network

When Franklin Roosevelt was elected president of the United States in 1933, few people knew he was a polio survivor and a wheelchair user. Roosevelt went to great lengths to keep his disability hidden out of fear the public would deem him unfit for office. Ninety years later, it appears many of our attitudes about disability and public office remain unchanged.

One only has to look at the media coverage of John Fetterman's Senate campaign in Pennsylvania for confirmation. Fetterman experienced a stroke in May which affects his speech and ability to process auditory input. Neither condition would impact his ability to serve in the United States Senate, medical experts have confirmed. But that hasn't stopped the media from speculating on Fetterman's competence, probing his need for a captioning device, or questioning whether he is up to the job.

What Fetterman is experiencing is unfortunately an all-too-common event for the one in four Americans who has a disability. The bigotry of low expectations is pervasive in our schools and workplaces. It creates an environment that counts people with disabilities out before we even have a chance to prove ourselves.

The truth is people with all types of disabilities can – and do – work successfully in every industry, including elected office. In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott uses a wheelchair. Former governor of New York, David

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Paterson, is blind. Fetterman wouldn't even be the first senator who survived a stroke. Current Senators Chris Van Hollen and Ben Ray Lujan both had strokes earlier this year.

The real question should be, how do we get more people with disabilities to run for office.

Disability is a major national issue that impacts every family in every community. Yet, very few people who have lived experience as a disabled American ever runs for, much less wins, elected office.

That must change. We need more elected officials who understand the needs of the disability community. Federal and state governments oversee billions of dollars in services and supports for Americans with disabilities. We need lawmakers who can advocate for the right policies because they themselves know the impact those policies have on education spending, housing, transportation, employment, and the benefits necessary for people with disabilities to live safely in the community of their choice

There is no doubt that people with disabilities can do the job. Roosevelt went on to become one of our most admired presidents, leading the nation out of the Great Depression and winning World War II. It is time we gave more people with disabilities the opportunity to achieve such greatness.