



A conversation with Andrew Imparato

Voice Over:

(Hip-Hop music plays)

Barry Whaley:

Hi, everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to "504 at 50." I'm Barry Whaley. I'm the project director of the Southeast ADA Center. "504 at 50" is a special interview series created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. And in this series, we speak with people who are leaders in the Disability Rights Movement, who advance the cause of equal rights through their tireless work.

On our episode today, we welcome Andy Imparato. Andy is currently the Executive Director of Disability Rights California, and Andy has more than two decades of experience as a disability rights lawyer and policy professional. He's worked with bipartisan policymakers to advance disability policy at the national level in the areas of civil rights, workforce development, and disability benefits.

From 2013 to 2020, Andy was the Executive Director of the Association for University Centers on Disabilities, known as AUCD, and he was the Senior Council and Disability Policy Director for Senator Tom Harkin on the US Senate Committee of Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. Before that, for 11 years, Andy was President and CEO of the American Association of People with Disabilities, a national membership organization working to grow the political and economic power of the disability community. His perspective is informed by his personal experience as someone with a mental health disability. Andy, I am so honored to get to talk with you today. Thank you so much for being with us.

Andy Imparato:



Thanks, Barry. It's great to be here.

Barry Whaley:

So let's start at the start. How did you come to become a disability advocate? I mean, did you fall into it or what happened?

Andy Imparato:

Yeah, I think like a lot of people, I kind of found my way not on a linear path. I studied Italian renaissance culture undergrad, thought about getting a PhD in art history, went to law school, in part, because I couldn't figure out what else to do. And when I was in law school, I was inspired by my classmates who were very social justice- and public service-oriented. So by the time I graduated law school, I knew I wanted to do public interest work, and I went to work for Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services. My wife was getting a PhD at Boston University, so we were in Boston when I started my career. And they put me in SSI advocacy, supplemental security income, representing people who were trying to be eligible for federal disability benefits. And that was kind of my introduction to the world of disability.

I applied for a fellowship, ended up doing it at the Disability Law Center in Boston, which is similar to Disability Rights California. It's a federally funded protection and advocacy agency. And I found when I was there that I loved doing policy work, so I was calling people in Washington all the time. And I ended up coming down to Washington for an interview as my fellowship was ending, and had an informational interview with Bobby Silverstein, who was Senator Harkin's staff director on the disability policy subcommittee. And then he had me come back two weeks later to interview for an opening, and it was just kind of being in the right place at the right time.

I have lived experience with bipolar disorder, which kicked in for me during my last semester of law school. So after I was working at the Disability Law Center for about a year, I started being open and out with my own disability. And I guess I was raised Catholic, and I feel like God gave me this thing to navigate and gave me something to do with it. So in a lot of ways, I feel like I'm doing what I was put on the planet to do.

And I feel like my job really hasn't changed that much in the 30 plus years that I've been working in this field. I see myself as a soldier in a movement whether I'm working in the government or outside the government, and I'm just trying to



improve policy and improve lives for people with disabilities. And help people, like me, with disabilities believe in themselves and believe in what we can accomplish when we work together.

Barry Whaley:

So, yeah, I was wondering when your mental health disability had been diagnosed? So it was the last year of law school.

Andy Imparato:

Yeah. I was a visiting student. I got my law degree from Stanford, but because of my wife's PhD, I did my last year in Boston. So I was a visiting student at Harvard Law School. I actually had local government law with Obama as a student. He was a student there when I was there.

Barry Whaley:

Oh, cool.

Andy Imparato:

And I just went overnight from being a cocky visiting student who talked a lot in class to having no energy, no self-confidence, having a really hard time getting out of bed. And it happened very fast. I had just married my wife Betsy, who I'm still married to. So I feel like I was on a conveyor belt, and she helped me stay on a conveyor belt. I graduated from law school and kind of figured out how to navigate this new existence. But the first few months were really scary. I just-had not had any experience like that before, and I didn't really know what to do with it, but it was very hard for me to imagine that I could have a career as a lawyer feeling the way I was feeling.

Barry Whaley:

Right. And some of the research that Dr. Blanck has been doing with the disability rights community and people who are lawyers and the discrimination lawyers face in the legal profession is just shocking.

Andy Imparato:

It really is. And I mean, I remember meeting Peter for the first time when I worked for Senator Harkin, in my first stint with him. I worked for him from '93 to '94 and then came back in 2010 after Senator Kennedy passed. But the first time I worked



for Harkin, so that's now almost 30 years ago, I remember Peter wrote an article, or asked Senator Harkin to publish an article in a journal he was doing at the University of Iowa Law School. And I remember working on that article and that's how I first got to know Peter.

Barry Whaley:

Well, you mentioned Senator Harkin, truly one of the great champions of the ADA and disability rights. And maybe if you could talk a little bit more about your experiences with Senator Harkin, and how that helped you in your career and informed your advocacy.

Andy Imparato:

Yeah. Well, when I first worked for him, I was 28 and I had been a public interest lawyer in Boston. My wife and I lived in Jamaica Plain. We had a pretty Boston existence, not too fancy. So to go from that to my desk in Senator Harkin's subcommittee was looking at the Supreme Court. I literally was looking at the Supreme Court from my desk and it was surreal. I was writing speeches for a United States senator that he was giving on the Senate floor. And there was a part of me that was like, "Is this real, or am I having kind of a manic dream here?"

Barry Whaley:

And you're 28 years old.

Andy Imparato:

Yeah. So I just feel very lucky that I worked for Bobby Silverstein. I had my first son a month after starting my job, and Bobby had two sons, and he really modeled for me how to prioritize your children and try to have some time with your family and balance in a city that's not known for work-life balance. And then Senator Harkin, I think he has a deep passion for the disability community, which started in his childhood with his brother-

Barry Whaley:

His brother, yeah.

Andy Imparato:

... Frank. I think his passion has only increased over time, and I think he also is naturally inclined to hire strong staff and listen to them and encourage them to



challenge him, encourage them to speak their minds. So I feel very lucky, I've worked in the executive branch and the legislative branch of the federal government. And I have to say I do better in the legislative branch, because at least in the context of Tom Harkin, I do feel spoiled. I don't know that I could ever find another elected official that I would enjoy working for as much.

But in the legislative branch, if you have an idea, you can tee it up and put it in front of your principal and get a response. Like Senator Harkin took home a packet every night and read all the memos in there and would write handwritten notes back to you. There wasn't a lot of layers between you and the decision maker. And that works better for me. That motivates me as an employee to go farther than if I have to go through five levels of decision making before any decision gets made.

Part of my disability is I don't have a lot of patience. And so I did better in a senate environment. When I worked for him the second time, I was older, he was older, and I felt like the spoiled child. At that point, he had 100 employees, and anything that I wanted -- everybody who worked for Tom Harkin was motivated to say, "Yes." We did 13 hearings on disability topics in two and a half years, and nobody questioned that. When we were trying to figure out a slot for a hearing, the staff director for the committee would often say, "Andy, do you have a disability topic?" And it was never hard for me to come up with topics.

So, yeah, it was a great experience. And I'm still working with him. When you work for a judge, which I have done, or you work for an elected official, you really never stop working for them. You feel connected to them, almost like you're part of the family. I saw him twice over the summer, and he's still going strong and still as passionate as ever about these issues.

Barry Whaley:

Well, in any conversation, hasn't been many, but the conversations I've had with the senator, he's just so approachable. He is so down to earth, right?

Andy Imparato:

I think part of that is Iowa. If you want to be a successful politician in Iowa, you need to be accessible to everybody in Iowa. They all expect to have access to you. So I think part of that's just who he is, that's his personality, but it's also part of why he was successful as a Democrat, getting reelected five times in a state that doesn't always elect Democrats.



Barry Whaley:

Very true. So I first met you when you were the director of AUCD, and then you were at AUCD for a number of years, and then went on to Disability Rights California. And what drew you to that position? Because we miss you on the East Coast.

Andy Imparato:

Oh, well, thank you. I grew up in Southern California. My mother was a LA Times reporter, and that's why my family was in LA. And when my oldest son graduated college, he decided to live in LA and try to build a career as a writer/producer, and he still lives in LA. And when we made the decision to move out here, my youngest son was an undergrad at Pomona College, also in Southern California. So my wife and I were just tired of being three time zones away, 3000 miles away from our two adult children. And we were both kind of ready for a change.

I was in Washington for 26 years, my experience there was a love/hate relationship with the city. I love policy. There are so many people in Washington DC who I love and who I miss being around every day. But I just think the energy in Washington DC is kind of a toxic energy. And no matter whether it's a Democrat in the White House or a Republican in the White House, DC is a magnet for people who are obsessed with power, and it creates bad energy in the city. And I think part of my disability is I'm really sensitive to energy. So I lived in Baltimore the whole time I worked in Washington, because Baltimore has a very different energy.

But as I kind of entered this phase of my life, probably one more big job, one or two more big jobs in me, I was attracted to the idea of going to Disability Rights California, the biggest protection and advocacy agency, much bigger than anything I had ever managed, and try to help them be as good as they can be. And I started a month before the pandemic. So it's been an interesting time to have a transition.

AUCD, we had 30 employees on a \$6 million budget. Disability Rights California has over 300 employees and a \$43 million budget. So-

Barry Whaley:

Fantastic.

Andy Imparato:

... it's just a lot bigger and it's fun. I feel like we're overflowing with talent. We also have more kind of hard funding than I've ever had, so I don't have as much



pressure on me to go out and raise money, and it feels good. It feels like at this stage in my life, there's so many people that are kind of rising stars in my organization, and if I can help them on their journey, and then all of us collectively can help California do better, given the size and scale of our state, it feels like a good place for me to be right now.

Barry Whaley:

But there are some common threads, whether you are in California or in Maryland, in terms of the issues that people with disabilities face. But I'm wondering, are there any issues that are different or more specific to California than perhaps in other parts of the country?

Andy Imparato:

Well, it's funny, one of the things that I particularly like about Los Angeles is that Los Angeles often deals with issues that are going to be issues for other parts of the world-

Barry Whaley:

Interesting.

Andy Imparato:

... but often is dealing with them early. So I think if you look at the impact of climate change on the state of California, we're dealing with really serious issues with wildfires and just all kinds of climate change, drought, heat waves, you name it. And so I don't think they're unique to California, I think no matter where you live, you're going to be affected by climate change. People in Iowa are dealing with flooding. I mean, anywhere you are, climate change is going to affect you. But I do think California is coming at it with a progressive, unified government, a big budget, deep state coffers, and they're trying to tackle what is probably the hardest policy challenge of our time.

Nobody knows exactly how to tackle it. So that feels like a very relevant issue that certainly disproportionately affects a lot of people with disabilities and older people.

And then I just think the immigrant rights issues in California, all the border related stuff that's playing out across the country. Again, California is a border state with a progressive government that is trying to do progressive immigration policy. That



feels very relevant to me. If we can figure out how to do that and how to welcome folks into our country and treat them with dignity and respect, or not discriminate against them based on disability or any other characteristic, that all feels relevant. So I would say we're one-tenth of the population of the United States, and we deal with issues sometimes before other states or other communities. And oftentimes we come at them with a more progressive, unified government. Not to say that our government is unified on these issues, but certainly compared to Washington DC, I don't see the division in our government that I saw every day in Washington DC.

Barry Whaley:

You don't feel that toxic energy that you felt in DC.

Andy Imparato:

No. Sacramento has its own challenges. We can be kind of a good old boy city. There's a lot of backroom deals that happen in Sacramento. But nowhere near do I feel the intensity. DC is the most Type A place I've ever been, and it just didn't feel healthy to me.

Barry Whaley:

I live in Kentucky, so I'm no stranger to the good old boy network.

Andy Imparato:

Absolutely. I mean, the problems I have with Sacramento, I would have these challenges in any state capital. State capitals tend to be insular. They tend to be, you got to know the right people, you got to know the culture.

Barry Whaley:

Sure.

Andy Imparato:

So part of it is, I'm coming with my DC obnoxiousness and I'm learning the culture of Sacramento.

Barry Whaley:

Well, when you took that job, first I paused and said, "Oh, darn, Andy's going West." And then I thought, what a perfect pick. I mean, I see that as such a great fit for you.



Andy Imparato:

Well, thanks. It feels healthy. I mean, the pandemic puts an asterisk on everything, but it feels like a healthy place for me. And I think for my wife and I, we're learning to love Sacramento. And we're appreciating, I think, sometimes it's just helpful to have a change of venue, to keep things fresh in your life. Everything has a season, and I feel like my season in Washington was incredibly meaningful to me, but I was ready to move on. And I feel like my wife, she's an academic, but she felt similarly.

Barry Whaley:

So I'm curious, you take the job in 2020, and then immediately the pandemic shuts everything down. What a challenge to be new at a job and then just have to deal with all that, send everybody home and figure out what to do next.

Andy Imparato:

This is where I feel like my prior experience as a CEO was really helpful to me. The 11 years at AAPD and then the six and a half years at AUCD, one of the things I learned in the 17 plus years before coming to California is to not be a top-down manager to really try to sound people out, to not micromanage. So whatever we did to navigate the pandemic we did as a team. I leaned hard on my direct reports and other folks on the staff, and I feel like we made good decisions and we're still making good decisions.

But yes, it is hard. And I'll give you an example of a challenge that I'm having right now. We own our building in Sacramento, which is a great thing. It's in a great neighborhood. We own a parking lot, and we own the building, but we don't really have lots of people who want to come and use it on a regular basis, so we're trying to figure out, should we keep the building and repurpose it? Should we sell the building and downsize? These are the kinds of issues that when I started the job, I would not have anticipated.

Barry Whaley:

Well, I'm sitting in my office at University of Kentucky today, but I am rarely in this office, and I find that I am far more productive working from my office at home than I ever am here. So it's-

Andy Imparato:



Yeah, I think lots of us have learned the pros and cons of working from home. Keep in mind, you're talking to somebody who had a three-hour commute every day for 26 years. So it's really nice not spending so much time commuting, but I also really like having meals with human beings occasionally and getting to know them as people. And that's harder to do when nobody's ever together.

Barry Whaley:

Some people thrive in the COVID environment or separate environment. I know I have. My wife has not. She's like you, she really craves that personal contact with people and collaboration down the hallway and what have you.

So I wanted to ask you about the advisory committee for National Center on Cultural Competence at Georgetown. I understand that you do work on this advisory committee, and I don't know much about the work of NCCC, and if you could talk about that and what its vision for disability inclusion is.

Andy Imparato:

Sure. So that is the kind of brainchild of Tawara Goode, who runs the University Center for Excellence and Developmental Disabilities out of Georgetown. So her UCED, University Center for Excellence, is based at Georgetown. And Tawara and that UCED have been doing national work on cultural and linguistic competence for decades. They've done a lot of work in the mental health space, including the children's mental health space.

So I think when Aaron Bishop was the commissioner for the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities under President Obama, he decided that he really wanted to lean into cultural and linguistic competence, and Tawara successfully competed to run the center that has a focus on the intellectual and developmental disability community. And she put together some advisors. I felt like I was there, in part, based on my lived experience with bipolar disorder and just my connections to the civil rights community.

One of the things that I did when I was at AAPD that I really enjoyed is I served on the executive committee of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and I was the only disability leader on there. So I had an opportunity to connect with civil rights leaders in every category of civil rights.

Barry Whaley:

Sure.



Andy Imparato:

Those relationships were relationships that I really cherished and have tried to maintain. But, yeah, I mean, I think there's a lot of different words that people use to describe that work. Sometimes people call it cultural and linguistic competence. Sometimes they call it cultural humility. Sometimes it gets framed around equity, health equity. In California, we call it about disparities for service, access, and equity. But I think the basic concept is in the disability community and in the intellectual and developmental disability community, there are people who get more resources and people who get less.

And it's not always based on the need of the person. Sometimes it's based on the socioeconomic status of the person, their education level, where they are geographically. So I think Tawara is trying to help the whole IDD field, including the folks in California who serve the IDD community, just do a better job thinking through all the issues that you have to think through in order to really serve a population as diverse as California or as the IDD population in any state or territory. And I feel like we've had a number of moments as a country where we've started to take these issues more seriously. Certainly, the George Floyd murder was one of those moments.

But I just appreciate that Tawara has been doing this work for decades, and that Aaron had the vision to really make an investment in this work, recognizing that the whole IDD field could benefit from it. So I love Tawara. She was one of my strongest allies and relationships when I was at AUCD. I was sorry that right as I left, she was becoming the president of the board of the AUCD, so I didn't get a chance to work with her as the board president. But she was very supportive of me taking this job. And we've found ways to keep working together since I've been in California.

She does a leadership retreat at a Native American owned hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I was in one of the cohorts that went through that leadership retreat. It was like a four-day retreat. So it was really nice to get to see her and her element there trying to help everybody be better leaders, and think about cultural and linguistic competence, diversity, equity, inclusion, whatever terminology people want to use. But I just see her as an elder who's been doing that work for a long time, and the world is starting to catch up with her, although it hasn't. Every time we feel like we're making progress, then we also have setbacks. And I'm very, very worried about where the Supreme Court is going to take us on some of these issues.



Barry Whaley:

I think that we all are, it certainly is a different environment than what we've previously been used to. Keeping with that theme, Andy, just the idea that underserved populations, Latinx communities, African American communities, Native American communities, those people with disabilities, their voices in the past have not been heard. So it's just really important to encourage and have those opinions as part of the conversation.

Andy Imparato:

Yeah, it's interesting having been in Washington during most of the Clinton administration and the Obama administration, it's interesting to contrast the work that was done in those two administrations and just how the country has evolved. I feel like in the Clinton administration, and maybe this was true of the Carter administration too, I don't know, that was before I got to Washington, but in the Clinton administration, there was a commitment to diversity in the disability space and outside of it. But oftentimes we wanted people of color in leadership positions as long as they espoused the same agenda as the white people who had been leading the disability movement for a long time.

In the Obama administration, it felt like we were open to the agenda changing, and it did change. The disability community started to focus more on criminal justice reform and immigration reform and other issues that the white leaders of the disability movement had not always prioritized. So I feel like the Democratic party also has been on a journey on these issues. The Obama appointees that had important roles in disability policy were way more diverse racially and ethnically than the Clinton appointees.

But, yeah, I mean obviously this work never ends. We're hiring a director of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access for Disability Rights California, the person's going to report to me. But from my perspective, we have a very diverse staff, although there's always room for improvement. But we have a ton of work to do just to make sure everybody on the staff feels welcome and valued and feels like they have equal access to career ladders. And I just know that there's no disability organization that I'm aware of that doesn't have diversity, equity, and inclusion issues they still have to grapple with.

Barry Whaley:



Same with us, very much so. To kind of move this forward, we look back over the past 50 years and we see that things have gotten better. 504, the Rehabilitation Act, certainly improved the lives of people with disabilities, but as you said, there's still so much more to do. So I'm curious what Andy Imparato thinks are challenges as we move into our next 50 years of including people with disabilities.

Andy Imparato:

I think it's a good question, and we should all have some humility as we try to answer that question, because it's hard to predict what's going to happen. I mean, just look at how our world has changed because of COVID, and that was not on many of our radar screens in 2019. I believe that the biggest kind of opportunity for our community is to align our most expensive disability benefits or long-term services and supports programs with the ADA, IDEA, the Rehabilitation Act. We've got laws, most of which came through the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee that have a big bold vision for what's possible for people with disabilities.

And then we have laws, most of which came through the Finance Committee in the Senate or Energy and Commerce and Ways and Means in the House, where the laws are trying to sort out who are the worthy disabled people that deserve benefits from the government. And the primary way that we still sort that out as a country is we ask people to prove, with medical evidence that they can't work, that they're disability prevents them from-

Barry Whaley:

Exactly.

Andy Imparato:

... engaging in substantial gainful activity. That definition was written in 1956, and it has not changed since 1956. It's a very hard thing to fix, because there are hundreds of billions of dollars that turn on that definition. And you get actuaries at Social Security and people at the Congressional Budget Office that anything you do to make it a more attractive definition and make the program more attractive, then people are going to come out of the woodwork who are not currently on the program and it's going to break the bank. So I'm hoping that states like California can innovate, maybe Kentucky could innovate too here, and come up with better ways to support people that don't require them to prove that they can't work.



Figure out how to calibrate it so that people can move on and off benefits as they need it.

And maybe the long COVID population is a big enough population that will drive change in this area. But I feel like right now, our disability benefit programs and our civil rights laws are not aligned. And I don't think this is unique to the United States. I think lots of countries grapple with this. I think most of us in the disability movement feel like we could have higher labor force participation rates as a community, if the programs that are designed to support us also expected us to participate in the labor force, and fully supported us to do that. And recognized that many of us are going to move in and out of the labor force and are going to have ups and downs connected to our conditions, and that the disability benefit system should be able to flex with us as we need it to.

Barry Whaley:

You raised such an interesting point, because really it's the incongruity of our social welfare system clutching on to a medical model of disability. And, meanwhile, the disability community has moved on to a social model of disability. And at that point, that's where I see the conflict being.

Andy Imparato:

No, I agree, because I've worked on this in a lot of different capacities, including when I was on the Ticket to Work and worked at Senate's advisory panel for the Social Security Administration. I just know that this is not an easy problem to solve. It's very easy to articulate the social model versus the medical model. It's not easy to replace the medical model with another model that will get Republican support and will stand the test of time. And that that's the work that we have to do as a community to figure out another model that can actually work and be implemented.

Barry Whaley:

That's well said. I did want to ask you, Andy, especially because of your experience with Senator Harkin, his retirement created quite a vacuum in the Senate as far as disability rights, and who would become that champion? Certainly, to a large extent, Senator Casey has, but who are the other champions that you see on the legislative side?

Andy Imparato:



Well, first a lot of people don't always note who else retired at the same time as Tom Harkins. So he left Congress in January of 2015, the other folks that left the same time were Senator Rockefeller, who was one of the most important champions for poor children on the Senate Finance Committee. And his Medicaid staffers were always among the most progressive and important voices for people on Medicaid. And then Henry Waxman from the House retired at the same time, and he was the Medicaid guy in the House. So to have all three of them retiring at the same time... George Miller retired around the same time, too, who was like the education person in the House. These are people that had decades and decades of experience and knowledge that came from that.

So that's just a huge loss collectively. And I bring up the Medicaid folks because Medicaid is so important to the disability community. And if we want to have a robust Medicaid buy-in program for the whole country, we need people who understand Medicaid, understand disability, and are able and willing to do the hard work to make that happen over time.

But I think if you look at some of the rising voices post-Tom Harkin, you're absolutely right that Bob Casey is at the top of the list. Part of it is based on staffing. His disability policy director Michael Gamel-McCormick, worked for Senator Harkin, deeply, deeply committed to these issues, very connected to the community, deep love for the disability community. His legislative director Derek Miller was Senator Harkin's legislative director. So you've got two key Harkin people that are in key roles with Senator Casey. And then again, I think Senator Casey has a real heart for this work.

To be fair, when Senator Harkin was in the Senate, he didn't really want other people leading on disability issues. He was very turf-y about it. So people like Senator Casey probably would've been leading earlier but didn't necessarily feel welcome to do that. When Senator Harkin left, it created an opportunity. I think there was pent up demand where people wanted to lead on these issues. A lot of them are on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, but not all of them.

Senator Duckworth, obviously, has lived experience with a disability, is passionate about these issues. So notwithstanding her committee assignments, she's an important voice on these issues. And she single-handedly stopped the ADA Notification Act the last time that it made it through the House and was making its way to the Senate. She wrote a letter to every Democrat in the Senate and said, "Over my dead body," basically, "is this going to pass the Senate?"



I think Maggie Hassan, who's also on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, she's got an adult child with a developmental disability. She's a strong champion for the disability community. I think Elizabeth Warren has definitely stepped up on disability issues and had a great platform when she ran for president. And then in the House, I feel like there's a lot of newer members of the House like Ayanna Pressley or Katie Porter who are very progressive, who are very kind of outspoken, and who really want disability to be part of their progressive agenda and their progressive platform.

So the beautiful thing about our movement is we are constantly finding new allies. Disability touches so many elected officials and appointed officials in so many ways that I'm not worried that we're not going to have a new generation of leaders in the House and the Senate who carry this work forward. I saw that Jim Langevin is retiring in the House. I'm sorry to lose that voice, another important person with lived experience in Congress.

But I'm confident that the Jim Langevins and Tom Harkins of the world will get replaced over time with more leaders with lived experience, and more leaders who have passion around this issue. And the other person that I should mention, Cathy McMorris Rodgers. Cathy is a parent of school-age child with Down syndrome, and if the Republicans take over the leadership of the House after this election, she will be the chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee, or at least she's in line to be the chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicaid and the Developmental Disabilities Act, and lots of other things that matter to folks with disabilities.

And Cathy has shown herself over time to be a strong ally for the disability committee. There are a lot of times where she ends up voting lockstep with the Republican Party on issues, or she's not always lined up with the community, but she has a lot of personal passion around it. She likes working on a bipartisan basis on disability issues, and I consider her a personal friend. So I'm kind of excited to see if she does move into a leadership role in Energy and Commerce, are there things that we can do with her around expanding the Medicaid buy-in, expanding access to home and community-based services, having more self-determination for people in the Medicaid program? I'm hopeful that there are things that we can work with her on.

Barry Whaley:



Andy, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. It's always an honor to speak with you, so thank you so much.

Listeners, you can access this interview and more interviews at the Section 504 at 50 website. That web address is section504at50.org. The 504 at 50 series is produced by the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and is a collaboration with the Disability-Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.

(upbeat music)

