

Thousands of Illinoisans with disabilities have benefited from ABLE Act

Celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the landmark federal ABLE Act, but remember that President-elect Donald Trump could weaken civil rights protections for people with disabilities, the Illinois state treasurer writes.

By Michael W. Frerichs | Dec 30, 2024, 2:30pm CST

This month, we celebrate 10 years since President Barack Obama [signed into law](#) a landmark measure that helps people with disabilities avoid chronic financial insecurity by allowing them to save their own money without jeopardizing their federal benefits.

But even as advocates and families mark the anniversary of the Stephen Beck Jr. [Achieving a Better Life Experience Act](#), we must remain vigilant and guard against attempts to gut Medicaid and other programs Americans with disabilities count on.

Why is ABLE important? Before ABLE, people with disabilities who amassed more than \$2,000 in assets would lose their means-tested Social Security Administration Supplemental Security Income.

Living with a disability comes with expenses. ABLE accounts are savings and investment tools that allow people with disabilities to spend that money on qualified disability expenses — assistive technology, housing, transportation, employment training, health care education and the like. Earnings and withdrawals are tax-free when used for qualified expenses.

All told, more than 187,000 people with disabilities and their families have saved more than \$2 billion in ABLE accounts across the country to improve health, independence and quality of life.

In Illinois, more than 6,500 accounts have been opened with more than \$90 million contributed since the program launched in 2017. In addition, Illinoisans with disabilities and their families have paid approximately \$40 million in expenses to build greater self-sufficiency.

Opinion

ABLE accounts are making a difference in people's lives.

"It's great to have money in a safe place I could use when needed," [said Tom](#), an Illinois ABLE account owner. "And it makes me feel independent, and it teaches me how to handle money wisely."

“Saving in my IL ABLE account helps me protect my benefits,” [said Michael](#), also an Illinois ABLE account owner.

No going back on progress

Our work didn’t stop after the law was passed a decade ago. In late 2022, we [successfully fought](#) to raise the age of disability onset from 26 to 46. Starting in 2026, an estimated 6 million more people, including 250,000 in Illinois, will be eligible to save for their disability-related expenses. Previously, ABLE accounts weren’t available if you incurred spinal cord or brain injuries or developed a severe mental illness after age 26.

In addition, my office led negotiations to reduce fees so people with disabilities and their families can keep more of the money they save and invest. We also founded the bipartisan National ABLE Alliance to advocate, which has grown to 18 states and the District of Columbia.

There is more to do. We need to make permanent legislation that is scheduled to expire in 2026 to incentivize workplace savings and provide flexibility for families whose higher education plans have changed because of a disability. And we need to work to remove Medicaid recovery rules that affect ABLE accounts and create uncertainty for people with disabilities and their families.

Most importantly, we must strongly oppose attempts to roll back progress for people with disabilities.

The Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities [recently warned](#) the incoming Donald Trump administration, using Project 2025 as a blueprint, could pursue proposals to restructure Medicaid and impose lifetime eligibility limits on the government health program.

They also could make sweeping changes to the way special education is funded, eliminate the U.S. Department of Education and weaken civil rights protections for people with disabilities, the advocacy group stated.

President-elect Trump has a history of offensive rhetoric on disability issues. He called his opponent mentally impaired and mentally deficient. As American Association of People with Disabilities President and CEO Maria Town [said](#), “Trump holds the ableist, false belief that if a person has a disability, they are less human and less worthy of dignity. These perceptions are incorrect and are harmful to people with disabilities.”

Trump’s alleged [comments to his own nephew](#), that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities “should just die,” is obviously despicable. Presidents shouldn’t dehumanize people with disabilities. They should be figuring out ways to make life easier for them, their parents and their caregivers, like the ABLE program celebrating 10 years.

That’s not Democratic or Republican, it’s American.

Michael Frerichs is the Illinois state treasurer, and his office administers the ABLE program in Illinois.

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