

# Eric Arnold: Look both ways before crossing out Medicaid (Opinion)

By Eric Arnold  
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Eric Arnold.  
CHRIS DORST | Gazette-Mail



My favorite story as a 38-year-old man living with Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type II, a form of Muscular Dystrophy that renders me in an electric wheelchair, starts like many great stories: over a beer.

Well, the beer was delayed, and my friend was nonplussed. A car had been blocking the crosswalk — something you learn to get used to when your four wheels travel sidewalks and not roads. When we got inside the bar, my friend asked, “Doesn’t that tick you off?”

I told him it was part of my life. You can’t expect others to accommodate their lives around you, even if it’s a simple consideration.



He explained that, because of knowing me, he’d changed his behavior. He’d ask cars to scoot back and make sure he didn’t pull up as far, because there might be another Eric trying to get to his beer.

Now, I'm sure our politicians would cross party lines to fight anyone who prevented a citizen's access to libations. But, as Congress debates \$880 billion in Medicaid cuts this spring, I am struggling to reconcile how our representatives could now prevent me — and others on Medicaid and waiver-based programs — from accessing life.

See, Medicaid isn't just a budget line. It's the pavement beneath my wheels. In West Virginia, over 510,000 residents are enrolled in Medicaid or CHIP, and roughly 200,000 of them rely on the Affordable Care Act's expansion to qualify. These aren't theoretical figures. They're real people — neighbors, co-workers, families — whose health, stability and potential hang in the balance.

Medicaid's Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waiver programs, in particular, are what make independent living possible for people like me. These programs, like West Virginia's Aged and Disabled Waiver (ADW), allow individuals to remain in their homes with attendant care, rather than being institutionalized. I've used these services not to survive, but to contribute. To work. To live.

But these waivers aren't entitlements. They're capped, and the waiting lists are long. West Virginia's Impairment and Developmentally Disabled (I/DD) Waiver serves approximately 5,000 to 6,000 people, with hundreds more waiting for help. These are people with far more severe disabilities than mine. They don't have the option of cobbling together alternative plans. For many, waiver cuts won't just delay support, they'll close the door entirely.

I was fortunate to have parents who could care for me until I went to college. I developed a plan, depending on my health, to find a job I could physically do to increase my independence (although some might argue that being an attorney is my biggest disability). State waiver programs gave me a shot, one that lets people like me potentially contribute as part of the taxpaying workforce.

But for those more impaired and reliant than me, cutting these programs will irreparably damage individuals and the families holding them up. I was lucky. I had working, able parents to fall back on when things got tough — broken bones, pneumonia, flat tires. But for others? That kind of support is rare in West Virginia.

So, when waiver programs get slashed, families will be forced to adjust their jobs — or leave them entirely — to provide the care no longer funded. The cost of private, in-home attendant care is staggering, especially for a workforce already gutted by the economy and the opioid crisis. Or they'll be left with no choice but to place their loved one in a care facility. Those will quickly become oversaturated, driving demand for help in jobs like certified nurse aides, orderlies and home health techs — roles that already struggle to recruit without substantial pay increases. And those increases? They'll either cut into a family's budget, or the state's.

And here's what every West Virginian already knows: When faced with that choice, most families will walk away from taxable work to become unpaid caregivers.

Look, I'm not going anywhere. I've been blessed with functional capabilities many others in these programs don't possess. I might be one in a thousand, maybe a million. But I'd never have had a chance of being one without programs like these.

So, let's hope our decision-makers look both ways before they cross out the very programs that clear the way. Because, if they don't, they might just see a whole lot of Americans — and West Virginians — helping me get across that street to the ballot box.

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