

## Testimony on Maryland House Bill 865

### Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance- Coverage for Orthoses and Protheses

**To:** Delegate Peña-Melnyk and Health and Government Operations Committee

**Date:** 02/14/2024

**Position:** Support/Favorable

Dear Delegate Peña-Melnyk and Health and Government Operations Committee:

My name is John-Edward Heath and I am a Left Below-the-knee amputee. I am a professional athlete (Paralympic and Adaptive CrossFit athlete), United States Marine Corps Veteran, Mentor, Coach, and Maryland native. I became an amputee on May 21, 2021, after getting injured in 2016 while still on active duty. Navy Medicine attempted to salvage my limb which caused me to undergo 13 lower extremity salvation surgeries and finally get approved for an amputation.

With my amputation, I regained my life once again, and having a mission and purpose, I would begin my road to recovery. It wasn't until I encountered my first issue as a fully disabled person that I got a true sense of what I would be up against for the rest of my life. I was released from the hospital 3 days post amputation and was told zero to no activity for the first 3 days of discharge. For my mental sanity, I was counting down the days until I was able to return to the gym, even if it was just for social interaction. I wanted to see how much of a recovery journey this was going to be, so I did a one-legged power clean and posted it on social media. The video would go viral and I received so many positive messages from so many people. However, the gym owner/manager did not agree, embarrassing me and discriminating against me, telling me I was a liability for training while not having a prosthesis. I posted a video about my feelings and the situation to social media, where I was surprised with hundreds of messages from disabled individuals telling me their own personal discrimination stories. This is where my advocacy began for the disabled community.

My experience as an amputee has been completely different from that of many individuals dealing with limb loss. I am an athlete by nature and with 10 years of service under my belt, I was to ensure I was in the best physical shape for Marine Corps standards and deployment. I have been around many amputees, many of whom became amputees from doing heroic actions in theater. The terms "amputation" and "amputee" are not foreign to me. I have witnessed individuals going from traumatic situations regain their lives and some regain a sense of normalcy. When it was my turn and amputation was my fate, I had many positive memories and hopes for my future.

That being said, in the 2 years and a half that I have been an amputee I have learned that access to this technology is not common to the everyday American citizen. I have learned that many amputees have not been physically active because quite frankly, it is too expensive to do so as a disabled person. That is why HB0865 and what it stands for is so important to me. It is

my job and duty as a leader, as a person with a missing limb, and as someone with a voice. A person with a disability should not have to request permission to be physically active. This initiative is larger than just providing equipment for those who are missing limbs. When we go through something as traumatic as losing a part of our body, when hope seems unlikely, we find the light at the end of the tunnel when we can run, lift, walk, and carry on.

You can give the power back to that child, the power to help that mother chase her children, or that grandparent be able to go run a 5k with their grandchildren. If this was your child or family member being told they cannot have a physically active prosthetic because it is not seen as a medical necessity, how would you respond?

Being physically active is not a luxury. I ask you to stand with me and the disability community and support HB0865.

John-Edward Heath