# Bob Williams, CommunicationFIRST

Prepared comments for DC Developmental Disabilities Council Meeting, March 17, 2022

Good morning, I am pleased to have, this chance, to speak with you, today.  I want to thank, Carol, and Alison, for inviting me.  For those who are not viewing me, here is my, selfie.  I am an older white man.  With a hint of, graying hair. My pronouns are he, him, and, his. I am speaking to you, from my, home in Southwest, DC.

using, what is called.  A speech generating device.  It is one of a great many.  Tools and natural ways.  that about 5, million, children, youth, working-age, and older persons, in the U.S. must rely on to effectively communicate.  Due, to disabilities.  that make it, impossible, for us to, rely on, our own speech, to express ourselves in ways most can understand. which, occur at various life stages.   like developmental disabilities, as well as stroke, ALS and other conditions.  Collectively, these tools, are referred to as forms of augmentative and alternative communication.  Or AAC which I will refer to it as from now on.

Growing up in, the sixties, and seventies.  Technology like the device I use existed.  Only in. comic books.  What I had going for me, though, are my late, parents, who instilled in me. I had a lot to say.  we played 20, questions.  I, pointed at things.  Grunted.  Used whatever, clear, words, I could say.  And anything, else, I could to get my point across.  Then one, day, I was poking keys on an electric, typewriter.  When someone, just, happened to notice, that I was typing out words. It changed my life, forever.

I am thankful that someone, noticed, this.  But, the right and ability to express one self, should, never, rest on.  Sheer. serendipity.  And, the fact is that even today, it does for far, too many, people, both in our city.  And, the entire, country. this afternoon, I would like to begin, what I hope will be a continuing conversation, on what we can do, together.  to make certain, that children, transition-age young people, and adults, with intellectual and developmental disabilities.  who require AAC and other support.  Have access to the opportunities, tools and supports. to express themselves effectively.

Because  I can tell you, that absent, these things.  Everything in.  the developmental disabilities, act.  And, the A D  A, on what, individuals, should have access to, and have, a right, to.  Are, empty, promises.  CommunicationFIRST, the national human and civil rights, organization.  I helped to found, and now serve as it is Policy Director.  Is led by those, like me, who use AAC, and deeply believe.  That all who require it should have access to it.  and, to the full range of equal opportunities.

We are eager to find ways to work with you here, in the District.  for 3 reasons.  The first is personal.  Since the eighties, I have spent about one third, of my life, working to improve the lighves, of folks with intellectual and developmental disabilities, here in the city.  Beginning as a court monitor at Forest Haven.  Later working at DDS.  And, most recently, helping.  Along with many of you to pass.  The developmental disabilities, equity act.  I am proud of what we have, accomplished.  And I am equally aware, of the work we still must do.  This is at the top of my, bucket, list.  Second.  Research shows, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and those whose language is not English.  Are more likely to have developmental disabilities, and other conditions.  That can require them to use AAC.  And, also, more likely, to have greater difficulties, and, disparities, accessing and using it.  I believe the District, should become.  A critically needed.  Laboratory, for better, understanding the reasons this is the case.  And, beginning to take action to remedy it.  finally, I believe, the DD equity legislation.  Mayor Bowser will soon sign.  Provides both the opportunity and, the obligation, to do so.  I apologize for droning on so long. Thank you.  Now, if there is time, I’d like to open it up.

# Bob Williams Biography

Bob Williams helped co-found CommunicationFIRST in 2019, after retiring from a distinguished four-decade career in federal and state government and the nonprofit sector, most recently as Director of the US Independent Living Administration at the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). He is a nationally recognized leader on policy issues relating to supporting people with the most significant disabilities to live, work, and thrive in their own homes and communities. When Mr. Williams was born with significant cerebral palsy in the 1950s, his parents were told to put him in a state institution and to never look back. His parents rejected that advice; he did not enter that institution until he was an adult assisting with the lawsuit that closed it down. As a teenager, he led a successful strike of students in his segregated special education class to fight for equal educational opportunities and inclusion in regular education classes. After graduating with a degree in Urban Affairs from George Washington University, he joined the team appointed to monitor the closure of Forest Haven, the District of Columbia’s institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, advocating on behalf of 120 residents with complex communication, developmental, and health needs. Mr. Williams has also served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of HHS for Disability, Aging, and Long Term Care Policy, and Commissioner of the US Administration of Developmental Disabilities. He was HHS Secretary Donna Shalala’s principal advisor on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and he co-led the task force that developed the US government’s successful arguments in the [Olmstead v. LC](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=1057318245348059744&q=Olmstead+v.+L.+C.&hl=en&as_sdt=6,47) case before the US Supreme Court. Subsequently, he led HHS’s efforts to facilitate state implementation of the Olmstead decision to reduce the unnecessary institutionalization of people with disabilities and ensure they receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs. Mr. Williams has also served as head of the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Office of Employment Support Programs, Senior Advisor to the Deputy SSA Commissioner for Retirement and Disability Policy, and has held positions with the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Youth Policy Institute, and the US Senate Subcommittee on the Handicapped. He has served on the Boards of TASH, Quality Trust, and Hear Our Voices. A video of [Mr. Williams answering questions about the passage and implementation of the ADA on its 20th anniversary](https://youtu.be/fLg533x8vKE) can be viewed on YouTube. For over 60 years, Williams has relied on an array of AAC strategies, including a series of speech generating devices over the past three decades. He lives with his wife, Helen Rader, in Southwest Washington, DC, where they enjoy visits with the grandkids, walking along the riverfront, Netflix binges, and all things Springsteen.