

House Transportation and Public Safety Committee
April 13, 2021

Chairman Baldrige, Vice-Chair McClain, Ranking Member Sheehy and members of the House Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my story, and ask for your support for Senate Bill 21.

My name is Lauren Thomas and I suffered a stroke at the age of 16 that changed my life forever.

Determined, smart, and caring are just a few words my relatives use to describe me. My twin brother and I lost our mother and father before we turned 11, and volleyball was a way for me to be in my happy place, even when going through difficult times.

July 14, 2018 was a normal day. While doing what I love most with my team at a Youngstown State University volleyball camp, my coach noticed something was off. While I typically push through anything that comes my way, my coach thought my behavior was nothing more than dehydration or perhaps an ankle injury. But when I began to slur my speech and was unable to move my arm, an ambulance was called, and I was immediately taken to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Youngstown. From there, I was transferred to Akron Children's Hospital, a level one stroke center.

My Aunt Marla and Uncle Huck Hughes, my guardians since I was 7 years old, received the call that I was experiencing a stroke shortly after the ambulance arrived. They were both shocked. Never in a million years did they think that a child could have a stroke. In fact, according to the American Heart Association, the risk of stroke from birth through age 18 is slim to none – nearly 11 per 100,000 children a year.

While in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Akron Children's Hospital, my aunt and uncle received heartbreaking news. After a CT scan revealed that I had suffered from a severe left-side stroke that damaged two-thirds of the left side of my brain, they were told that I would never be able to walk, talk, or comprehend anything again.

I was taken into surgery to undergo a craniotomy to relieve some of the pressure from my brain, where my neurosurgeon was unsure if I would survive. After being on a ventilator for 10 days, I woke up on July 24, 2018, unable to move my right arm and leg. When I smiled, there was no movement on the right side of my mouth. I was unable to speak but was able to respond to some commands to lift my left arm. I would soon undergo therapy for about 6 hours each day. Slowly, I began to make progress.

Even though what happened to me was extremely rare, I am a go-getter and I have that "gotta get it done" attitude (as described by my aunt). Several weeks after the stroke, assisted by hard work and determination, I began to gain movement in my left leg, began responding to

questions using pictures, and answers yes or no questions with my fingers. Today, I am talking and walking with very little assistance, and am able to move my right arm. I continue to accomplish things that science said I would never be able to do.

Medical professionals say that strokes can happen to anyone, even healthy children. In most cases, there are no warning signs. During a stroke, every minute counts, which is why it is important for first responders to know and understand the warning signs.

Senate Bill 21 would improve emergency triage and transportation protocols for individuals suffering a stroke. Specifically, the protocols will help ensure patients suffering from the deadliest form of stroke – Emergent Large Vessel Occlusion (ELVO) – are taken directly to the hospital best-equipped to treat them. There are currently no laws in Ohio that require paramedics to transport stroke patients directly to stroke centers. Oftentimes, these patients are taken to the nearest hospital, which may not have the capabilities to provide life-saving treatment. The patient is then transferred, delaying their treatment and potentially jeopardizing their recovery.

To rectify this issue, Senate Bill 21 would help ensure that patients afflicted with ELVO are transported to the hospital best-equipped to treat them and save their lives. Senate Bill 21 builds upon Ohio's initial progress when House Bill 464 was enacted into law in 2018, which established the state's designation system for certifying stroke centers. Should Senate Bill 21 pass, it will improve the state's system of care for stroke patients and save lives.

I continue to make strides in my recovery and hope that my story will raise awareness of stroke, especially in children. I ask for your support of Senate Bill 21 which will improve care for stroke patients of all ages. Thank you for allowing me to share my story.