

HSRI Commemorates the 30th Anniversary of the ADA, Reflects on the Need for Its Expansion

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed 30 years ago by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. It marked a major milestone in the fight for the civil rights of people with disabilities to participate in the mainstream of American life. The law prohibits discrimination in broad areas of community and public life—including employment, education, and transportation. The success of the ADA was in large part due to the tenacity of the disability movement that emerged within the larger crusade for social justice mounted by Black Americans and their allies to gain equal rights under the law.

One of the architects of the ADA, Justin Dart, famously said, “Civil rights are not a guarantee of the good life, but an equal opportunity and responsibility to participate in producing the good life for oneself and for all.” Like the larger civil rights struggle, the aspirations of the disability movement that drove the passage of the ADA have been only partially realized 30 years later.

While countless physical barriers to life in the community have been removed, many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, behavioral health conditions, brain injuries, autism, and those with other complex needs are still struggling to create “the good life.” Basic needs such as affordable housing, adequate health and mental health care, and competitive employment are still out of reach for large numbers of people with disabilities. These needs are magnified among those who experience racism and other forms of discrimination.

In addition to basic needs, new challenges have emerged—specifically the primacy of technology. People with disabilities need to be supported to access, manage, and use



Justin Dart, renowned disability rights activist and an architect of the ADA

technology that has the promise of improving their lives and facilitating connection to their communities. Failing to provide these supports may leave them isolated without the tools and the knowledge. To improve the utility of these tools, people with disabilities need to be part of the technology design process in order to assure universal design and access.

This pandemic has shown us the fragility of hard-fought rights. As overwhelmed hospitals began developing protocols for rationing medical care, people with disabilities were relegated to the back of the line for life-saving interventions. As school classes went online, some families were asked to waive their child’s rights under the Right to Education for All Children Act in order to get access to instruction. As evictions escalate, families with family members with disabilities as well as individuals with disabilities who are living on their own may be forced from their homes.

The ADA was an important step on the road to improving the lives of people with disabilities. Yet, with time, societies evolve, people's needs change, and so too our response to these needs must change. Three decades later we need a new wave of advocacy to pass an expanded ADA that reflects current barriers to inclusion and independence and "equal opportunity" to live the good life. As Justin Dart reminded us before he passed, ". . . the revolution of empowerment will go on." It is, after all, up to us and next generations to always "Lead on! Lead on!"

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