

When barriers fall, opportunity rises



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

As we mark this 36th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which is celebrated every year on July 26, we recognize not only what the ADA has done for Americans with disabilities but also for the world.

We celebrate curb cuts that have become pathways for parents with strollers, travelers with rolling luggage, and individuals using mobility devices. We celebrate captions that initially served the deaf community and now assist millions who watch videos silently in crowded settings.

We celebrate automatic doors that open not just for wheelchair users but also for delivery workers, older adults, and anyone with full hands. This is the quiet genius of access: when we design for independence, we improve the lives of all.

We will advocate for this truth in our businesses, cities, and policies. We will defend it in our workplaces and schools. We will defend it not only in principle but in practice — because once access is realized, it must never be rolled back.

Employment tells one of the most powerful stories of the ADA. For decades, talent was overlooked, underestimated, and underutilized — we only had a 22% participation rate. Today, more individuals with disabilities are entering, contributing to, and reshaping the workforce than ever before.

We have reached an all-time high of 42% labor participation rate for PWDs. Companies are discovering what should have been obvious all along: when barriers fall, collaboration rises. Innovation follows, productivity increases, and markets grow, leading to 1.6x more business revenue.

Yet, our work is not finished.

We must advance opportunities in hiring, promotions, and leadership. We are replacing outdated assumptions and invisible ceilings. We will advocate for a labor market that recognizes ability, not perceived limitations — because the ADA did not promise charity; it promised equal opportunity.

Technology has become the new frontier of access, and here too, the spirit of the ADA continues to evolve. From websites to smartphones, from banking apps to virtual classrooms, digital spaces are now as vital as physical ones. Accessible electronic information — such as screen-reader compatibility, voice navigation, and adaptable interfaces — serves not just a subset of users; it enhances the usability of every platform and device.

We will ensure accessibility across technology, code, and in the cloud. We will make it available across platforms and devices. We will guarantee it for those who rely on it—as well as for those who benefit from it without even realizing it. Because in a digital age, exclusion can happen at the speed of a click, and access must move just as swiftly.

The ADA was never meant to stand still. It is a living framework, strengthened by updated guidelines, informed by emerging technologies, and driven by the lived experiences of billions. Each revision, court decision, and new standard reflects a simple but powerful idea: access must grow as society evolves.

We will advocate for standards that exceed the minimum expectation. We will push for policies that anticipate the future. We will promote a culture that views accessibility not just as compliance but as a tool for greater independence.

This is the rhythm of progress. This is the cadence of change. This is the promise we uphold!

Like the enduring resolve captured in Winston Churchill's words, we carry forward a similar determination — not in war, but in the pursuit of economic opportunity and independence.

Because the ADA is not merely a law, it is a lens through which we see each other more fully, and it empowers everyone to contribute at their highest possible level. It serves as a reminder that independence is dignity, access is opportunity, and inclusion is strength.

Today, the message remains crystal clear: when we remove barriers for some, we build a better world for all.

We see this in action as other nations replicate the ADA's principles within their borders, companies, and infrastructure. And so, we move forward — not just to celebrate — but to continue the work with purpose and persistence. When barriers fall, opportunity rises — not just for people with disabilities, but for all of us.

JR Harding is an advocate, author, speaker, and Senior Lecturer at FSU.