

ADA Report Card: A way to reimagine access and independence



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Imagine a world where you cannot independently cross the street, find a house to buy, or secure employment – I can. As a two-time quadriplegic, I have 40 years' worth of adaptive living experience in a world that was not built for individuals living with disabilities. Worse, many of my fellow citizens have negative pre-conceived notions about the abilities of persons with disabilities (PWDs).

It was just over 50 years ago that America began its journey of greater access and independence for PWDs. On July 26, the nation will be celebrating 33 years of access as marked by the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This landmark civil

rights legislation was groundbreaking and visionary. Our legislature, business community, and citizens collaborated to make both an immediate change to accessibility and laid the groundwork for greater access over time. I believe, as did those pioneers 33 years ago, that access is advantageous for all citizens, regardless of ability.

We can all agree that these laws and standards have greatly improved the physical and programmatic inclusion of all abilities throughout our schools, workplaces, and communities. No longer do we have segregated schools – people with and without disabilities learn side by side. The employment rates of PWD are at record levels. As we further develop our communities with more curb cuts, on-demand vehicles, and greater general access to all of life's choices, everyone will benefit.

However, as I reflect upon this anniversary of the ADA, I believe that we have become complacent with

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our enthusiasm to achieve *unfettered access to the American mainstream* as pronounced by President Bush on July 26, 1990.

Today, I must plan for travel a year in advance to secure accessible accommodations with the appropriate mobility features. Rarely can I find on-demand transportation in my community. The maintenance of our existing infrastructure has become haphazard and dangerous for all.

There are no prohibitions on exceeding minimum standards. It's a choice that we make as business leaders and politicians. A unique aspect of the ADA is that there are no limits to expanding access. It is a tool that can continuously improve our infrastructure, transporta-

tion, policy/procedures, and electronic information. We only must have the will or the economic wherewithal to continue this journey of unfettered access.

Most communities seem to be satisfied with minimum compliance rather than exceeding standards. For example, only 55% of doors are accessible, and curb cuts are only found at the end of the street. PWDs frequently experience greater wait times in restaurants and medical facilities. Adhering to minimum standards rather than utilizing a universal design approach will become increasingly problematic as our country continues to age.

Accessible features like handicapped parking, mobility-friendly hotel rooms, on-demand transportation, access to a doctor's exam room, and yes, even reading your investment portfolio online may become harder and harder if we don't find the courage to make all things accessible.

Some industries, however, have chosen to exceed the minimum standard and these properties are a pleasure to visit – I can use all the rooms, not just some of the rooms. They are easily identifiable and “special directional signs” are not needed.

To help our communities and country achieve unfettered access to the American lifestyle, maybe it is time to introduce an ADA report card that highlights access progress within our communities. Doing everyday activities like going to work, taking a vacation, or shopping should not require a strategic plan.

These indicators would highlight how much access or independence citizens have in their community. Potential measurements could include the following:

- Employment
- Housing
- Transportation
- Leisure Activities/Travel

● Information Technology

These five broad measurements could provide critical benchmarks of inclusivity that are currently or have historically been unequal for the community of PWDs. There could be others, but these general areas capture most aspects of an active life.

With an aging population, we might find ourselves reverting to a segregated society once again – this segregation will be based on ability (those with vs. those without disabilities). We all enter this world needing help, and we leave this world needing help. It is up to each of us, if only for our selfish purposes, to achieve as much accessibility in all activities.

Thus, I challenge each of you to identify and advocate for greater access.

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