

We must recommit to spirit of ADA



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Thirty-five years ago, President George H.W. Bush stood on the South Lawn of the White House and declared, “Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down.”

With the stroke of his pen, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became the most transformative civil rights legislation for Americans with disabilities in our nation’s history. He called it “an end to the unjustified segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities,” and in doing so, he gave us more than a law—he gave us visibility, legitimacy, and hope. Today, over 61 million Americans live active and independent lives.

As someone who has lived with a disability for my adult life and worked at the intersection of policy, education, and accessibility, I’ve seen firsthand the impact of the ADA. Before it, the world wasn’t just indifferent—it was designed to exclude. Sidewalks were impassable. Buses and buildings were inaccessible. Discrimination in employment was legal and widespread. Life was dictated by physical and even more formidable attitudinal barriers.

The ADA began to dismantle that “ugly wall of discrimination,” brick by brick. It gave me—and millions like me, the legal tools to pursue an education, meaningful work, and full participation in community life. Personally, I’ve been privileged to serve as a university faculty member, an author, a consultant, and a two-time presidential and seven-time gubernatorial appointee. None of that would have been possible without the foundation of the ADA.

We’ve made real progress, but the promise of the ADA remains unfulfilled. It aimed to ensure full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency. These aren’t just ideals, they are funda-

mental rights. Yet, today, they remain out of reach for too many.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the employment-population ratio for persons with disabilities was 37.4% in 2024, compared to 74.9% for persons without disabilities. While remote work and innovation have led to modest improvements, this gap is still unacceptable.

Employment is about more than a paycheck; it’s about dignity, purpose, and contribution. People with disabilities bring unique perspectives, resilience, and problem-solving skills that enrich workplaces. Our inclusion shouldn’t be seen as charity—it’s a return on investment. Employers who embrace inclusive practices benefit from increased employee retention, customer satisfaction, and innovation.

The 2010 U.S. Access Board Design Standards remain vital, ensuring accessibility is baked into the design process—not tacked on as an afterthought. In today’s digital world, accessibility must also extend to websites, apps, and online services. Accessibility is no longer a compliance issue—it’s a hallmark of forward-thinking design.

Yet barriers remain. Subminimum wages for people with disabilities are still allowed under outdated federal provisions. Many public spaces and digital platforms remain noncompliant. Assistive technologies remain costly and inaccessible for many. And discrimination—though sometimes subtle—continues in hiring, housing, education, and healthcare.

We must recommit—not just to the letter of the ADA, but to its spirit.

That means expanding educational and employment opportunities, modernizing infrastructure and digital platforms, and engaging people with disabilities as decision-makers—not merely as policy subjects, but as policy architects.

The 35th anniversary of the ADA is more than a commemoration—it’s a call to action. It’s a reminder that civil rights are never won once and for all—they must be defended and advanced in every generation.

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