

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act

On July 26, 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This landmark civil rights law prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. In the two decades since, our society has taken many important steps forward toward the full inclusion of the 43 million Americans with disabilities. The 20th anniversary of this law is a good opportunity to celebrate the progress we have made and to recommit ourselves to realizing the full vision of the ADA.

Before the ADA, private businesses, including restaurants, could order disabled people to leave, just because they feared the sight of them could drive customers away. It was widely believed that individuals with disabilities could never fully participate in our society.

The ADA, which defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially affects a major life activity,” called for many changes to enable those with disabilities to get around more easily, as well as not be excluded from housing, schooling, employment and recreational opportunities due to their physical or cognitive limitations.

As President Bush stated when he signed the law, “Three weeks ago we celebrated our nation's Independence Day. Today we're here to rejoice in and celebrate another ‘independence day,’ one that is long overdue. With today's signing of the landmark ADA, every man, woman, and child with a disability can now pass through once-closed doors into a bright new era of equality, independence, and freedom.”

The ADA was the world's first comprehensive declaration of equality for people with disabilities. It sent a clear message that millions of Americans with disabilities are full-fledged citizens and as such are entitled to legal protections that ensure them equal opportunity and access to the mainstream of American life. The ADA reflects our deeply held belief that the greatness of our country lies in realizing the full potential of all our citizens.

We see the changes that have resulted from the ADA around us every day -- ramps to building entrances, sidewalk ramps, automatic doors and accommodating seats in movie theaters and at sporting events, and many more. Individuals with disabilities are now participating more fully in our society and living more productive lives than ever before.

Yet, much work still remains to be done. Efforts to improve accessibility and combat discrimination continue at the federal, state, and local levels.

Close to home, we secured a major victory earlier this year when the MBTA agreed to upgrade the Wedgemere Commuter Rail Station to make it accessible to all riders. This project is being funded with \$2 million in federal stimulus funds. The effort was led by Jean Batty and the Winchester Disability Access Commission, working in partnership with the Town of Winchester, MBTA, and state and federal officials. The project is a significant victory because Wedgemere will be the first train station to install a “mini-high platform” to enable disability access. This solution is much less expensive and more practical than a complete renovation of the station, and could pave the way for similar accommodations at other train stations in Massachusetts and around the country.

Another project that is underway in our communities is at the public swimming pool in Stoneham which is managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation. The DCR is working with local residents to expand accessibility for disabled individuals. The project entails creating more space around the pool edge, as well as easing the transition into the pool for those in wheelchairs or other mobility enhancing equipment.

Other initiatives that need to be pursued in the years ahead include further accessibility improvements to buildings and housing, enhancements to playgrounds, audible cross walk signals, and accessibility improvements to hospital and medical equipment. We also need to continue to improve our ability to integrate children and adults with cognitive and emotional disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act remains one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. Let’s celebrate two decades of progress and recommit ourselves to this important work so that all people can realize their full potential and live their lives with dignity.

I welcome your feedback on the Americans with Disabilities Act or any other issues. Please visit our website at www.RepJasonLewis.com. You can also reach me at (617) 722-2060 or by email at Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us.

Author’s Note: This column was co-authored with Jean Batty, Chair of the Winchester Disability Access Commission.

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