

30 years of civil rights for people with disabilities: Celebrating the ADA

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In what was a challenging summer regarding racial justice, violence, and health disparities among BIPOC, there was one strong reminder that organization, protesting, allyship and advocacy does create lasting change. On July 26, the nation celebrated the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law. This monumental legislation literally and figuratively opened doors for people with disabilities to gain equal access in employment, education, and public resources and programming.



Logo for Celebrate the ADA30 (1990-2020) Americans with Disabilities Act - July 26, 2020

Background of the ADA

To understand the importance of the ADA and its impact, looking back to 1973 is helpful. It was then that Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability for any entity that receives federal funds. What's less known about Section 504 is that it took four years and a 28-day sit-in by disabled activists to have the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to put any regulations into place. Without the regulations, the legislation didn't have any teeth, thus allowing courts to interpret it however they'd like. The sit-in was modeled after earlier civil rights movements, and was well-supported by the Black Panthers, Chicano Mission

Rebels, and the LGBTQ community in San Francisco, highlighting the importance of allyship as well as the intersection of disability in all identities and backgrounds.

Section 504 led to increased accessibility within transportation, schools, housing and other federal programs. However, comprehensive civil rights protections for disabled people was still lacking, as many segments of life were not covered in the legislation. Section 504 also built momentum for the disability rights movement of the 1980s and the eventual conclusion by many Americans, and more importantly, government officials, that there was indeed a need for additional civil rights legislation for persons with disabilities. The signing of the ADA provided just that.

Impact of ADA

Not only does the ADA prohibit discrimination by local and state governments and in the workplace, it provides access standards for private businesses and commercial facilities. Additionally, it ensures equal access to healthcare, transportation, telecommunications, and social services; these are things that able-bodied individuals don't often have to think twice about. It also allows for further organization, power and advocacy from the disability community. This led to amendments in 2008 that made it easier to gain services and reduce the burden of proof on disabled people. The 2008 amendments also expanded the definition of disability to include individuals with substantial limitations in major bodily functions, such as those of the immune, digestive, respiratory and endocrine systems. This lent itself to greater protections for more people around the nation. As a result of ADA and its amendments, the 20% of Americans who experience disability have increased likelihood of employment and higher education, connected not only to higher economic status but well-being and purpose. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 19.3% of people with disabilities are in the workforce, compared to 66.3% for those without disabilities (pre-COVID).

“Disabled people” is used interchangeably with “people with disabilities” throughout this piece to highlight pride in the disability experience, reduce stigma around disability, and to reflect language commonly used by the disability community.

Person first language is still recommended until a person's identity is known.

For the University of Wisconsin and the Division of Extension, the ADA guided the establishment of a formal process for people with disabilities to request accommodations to fully and meaningfully participate in education, services, and programs. The formal accommodation process is protective for both the university and people with disabilities, as it upholds the interactive process outlined in the ADA, thus allowing the Division of Extension to achieve compliance. More importantly, the ADA lends itself to increased intentionality about accessibility, and a focus on ensuring people with all abilities can gain from Extension programming. It allows for the opportunity to be proactive by designing programs and events with disability in mind, and making it explicit that people with disabilities are considered and welcomed. That means letting people know that we can meet accessibility needs, whether that is sharing that an event can be captioned, a sign language interpreter can be provided, or a location is accessible. While these examples pertain to specific, and often apparent disability experiences, it notifies people with non-apparent disabilities that their experience is also considered and valued.

The Division of Extension has a long history of reaching many people around the state and supporting their unique needs, whether disability-related or not. This approach, and the mission of Extension in general, has likely limited the need for formal accommodations, as demonstrated by having fewer than 10 disability accommodation requests in the past year. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted programming in general, but when we consider the overall number of programs and people served, this number suggests a disparate impact on access to programming for people with disabilities. However, by utilizing taglines to direct participants toward the [disability accommodation request form](#), or by directly connecting with the [Division's Disability Access Consultant](#) to explore disability-inclusive practices, we have the opportunity to demonstrate our dedication to inclusion, accessibility, and compliance.

Space for Inclusion

Broadly speaking, the ADA is often celebrated as a law that affirmed the inherent dignity of people with disabilities. In enacting the ADA, the country began the long process of recognizing that having a disability, or being

disabled, does not diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society, while also recognizing that people with disabilities are frequently precluded from doing so because of attitudinal, societal and institutional barriers. Like other civil rights legislation, the ADA paved the way for positive change for a marginalized population to be recognized and granted rights. However, like other civil rights legislation, rights haven't meant being truly accepted and included. The disability experience is still often stigmatized and sometimes pitied. This isn't to deny that having a disability can be challenging; rather, it's to note that attitudinal barriers can make access and inclusion more difficult. Ultimately, the ADA is the minimum standard. We are still striving to create full access, and truly honor the spirit of the law, and its precedent to normalize the inclusion of people with disabilities. We are continually improving at examining our practices and programming to make them inclusive and welcoming, and at the same time, we need to continue to normalize and celebrate disability.