Disabilities Corner: Celebrating the Americans with Disabilities Act

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Signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, 1990.

Twenty years ago, on July 26, 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law. Celebration activities will take place all across the nation to commemorate the signing of this innovative civil rights law.

The ADA protects people others believe may have a disability from discrimination based on unfounded information and personal attitudes about disabilities. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled and Congress affirmed that this kind of protection is necessary because “society's myths and fears about disability and disease are as handicapping as are the physical limitations that flow from actual impairments.”

Over the past 20 years, so much has been accomplished. Beginning with the most visible indicators of accessibility, curb cuts, ramps and accessible parking, the ADA has changed the landscape of our world for the benefit of everyone. Curb cuts and ramps, intended for use by people using wheelchairs, have become essential for anyone pushing a baby stroller or riding a bike.

The idea that everyone could use accessible modifications intended for people with disabilities gave rise to the concept of “universal design.” This term refers to a wide range of modifications to buildings, products and environments that are usable and effective for everyone, not just people with disabilities. Some examples of universal design include ranch style homes with no upstairs (no climbing), wider doors (for wheelchair users), flat entrances (for wheelchair and walker users), louver or loop door handles (no grip handles), all of which are useable by the majority of the population. Even with so many modifications to our surroundings, much of our older built environment remains inaccessible to people with disabilities.

As new technologies become available and applied to the needs of people with disabilities, accessibility becomes less of an issue. Many believe the most pressing barrier now is changing attitudes and misconceptions of the public regarding specific disabilities.

The term “disabilities inclusion” was coined to represent the attitudinal interactions between the individual with a disability and a group or the public. Once access is accomplished, the group involved ideally would interact with the individual with a disability just like anyone else. Misconceptions about specific diseases or medical conditions, social myths and personal fears, however, often lead to segregation and isolation for the individual with a disability. Changing these attitudes and fears are much more difficult than replacing bricks and mortar.

So, as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act and all that has been accomplished, we must focus on the continuation of that work along with changing the attitudes of those around us to become more accepting of people with disabilities. Remember, inclusion is an attitude, so keep it positive!