



In Iowa's Interest:

Marking the 21st Anniversary of the ADA

by Senator Tom Harkin

July 26th, 2011 marks the 21st anniversary of the landmark legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which helped change the lives of millions of people across the United States. In its simplest description, the ADA improved accessibility and inclusion, and prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities. I consider passage of the ADA legislation the proudest moment of my career.

During hearings here in Washington D.C. 21 years ago, I remember listening to stories about people having to crawl up staircases on their hands and knees, being unable to go swimming or even buy a pair of shoes because of their disability. Smart, capable Americans were unable to achieve the American Dream. My late brother Frank, who lost his hearing at a very young age, was also prevented from enjoying the things in life most Americans take for granted. Today, with the help of ADA, those individuals have the necessary tools to live a full and prosperous life, unburdened by the architectural and attitudinal barriers of life before ADA. Today with the ADA, all Americans, with or without disability, have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

So much has changed over the last 21 years. It is hard to imagine a world without accessible entrances and restrooms, curb cuts, ramps, and a vast number of examples of universal design features that make the United States more accessible to all of its citizens. Before the passage of the ADA, people with disabilities routinely encountered physical barriers – such as stairs or not having enough room to park their specialized vehicles. Today, public buildings, sports stadiums, hotels, sidewalks, theaters, and transportation options are routinely accessible to individuals with disabilities, and auxiliary aids and services are available to provide equal access to every American.

We mark the 21st anniversary of the ADA, mindful of the significant progress that we have made to date. The United States now has more accessible areas and activities for individuals with disabilities than anywhere else in the world. Not only has the physical world changed, but opportunity has increased dramatically and discrimination has decreased. Americans are recognizing that every individual has the potential to make a difference and improve the nation in their own distinct way. We continue to advance the four great goals of the ADA: equal opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency.

Tell me how the ADA has impacted your life by visiting my website at harkin.senate.gov or my Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/tomharkin>.