

**James R. Langevin**  
**Member of Congress**

**Hearing Testimony:**  
**“Americans with Disabilities Act at 20 – Celebrating  
our Progress, Affirming Our Commitment”**

**Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil  
Rights and Civil Liberties**

**Thursday, July 22, 2010**

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**Hearing Testimony: Americans with Disabilities Act at 20 –**  
**Celebrating our Progress, Affirming Our Commitment**

Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner and members of the committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to offer my testimony as we commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Today, many of us have nearly forgotten an era in which it was commonplace for a person to be denied employment because she was blind, or unable to attend a university because he was in a wheelchair. Yet it was only a generation ago when the societal norm was to treat individuals with disabilities as second-class citizens.

As a member of the United States House of Representatives, Co-Chair of the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, and someone who has lived with the challenges of a disability both before and after the ADA's enactment in 1990, I have experienced, first hand, the profound changes that this law has effected within our society.

This groundbreaking legislation codified the collective ideal that no one should suffer discrimination because of a disability. It shattered countless barriers, empowered millions of Americans to flourish in their personal and professional lives, and provided a greater level of productivity and inclusion within our society.

Changing the hearts and minds of a nation only comes with extraordinary leadership and vision. I'd like to take a moment to recognize my colleague and mentor, the House Majority Leader, Steny Hoyer. Twenty years ago, he was instrumental in passing the bill that would become the single most important civil rights law to individuals with disabilities across the country. It is due in large part to his dedication that I have the honor to be here today.

Of course, he was not alone in his ambition to guarantee equal rights for the disabled. He was joined by such visionaries and civil rights pioneers as Alan Reich, Justin and Yoshiko Dart, former Congressman Tony Coehlo, Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Ted Kennedy, the distinguished Ranking Member of this Committee, Jim Sensenbrenner, and many others.

They all played an unmistakable role in passage of the ADA, which has empowered over 50 million Americans to live more productive and fulfilling lives, and mine is no exception.

I was injured at the age of 16 when a gun accidentally discharged, severing my spinal cord and rendering me quadriplegic. The accident occurred in 1980, 10 years before the enactment of the ADA. For many individuals with disabilities, this meant that they did not have access to buildings like schools and libraries, they couldn't find employment opportunities, and they didn't have legal protections against discrimination. This would

ultimately affect where I received my own education because Rhode Island College was my only school of choice that could make the appropriate accommodations. Although they weren't perfect, they were years ahead of their time. But accessibility was not yet considered a civil right in 1981, and I know that many students with special needs across the country were not as lucky as I was.

Rhode Island College provided me with a great education and the opportunity to put some of my new dreams to the test. Additionally, the tremendous outpouring of support that my community showed after my accident made me want to give back. It inspired me to run for public office in 1986, which began a long and fulfilling career in public service that has included a seat in the Rhode Island General Assembly, two terms as Secretary of State and my eventual election to the United States Congress in 2000.

My work in government has always flowed from the fundamental idea of personal empowerment. As someone who lives with a disability, I know all too well the challenges that people with disabilities face in their daily lives. However, I also am keenly aware of their *abilities* and their limitless potential when given the opportunity to contribute.

Today, students no longer have to make choices about their education based on ramps and doorway width. They can make these choices based on the same criteria their peers use – the quality of education and the dreams they want to pursue.

Employers are learning how to make workplaces more accessible, utilizing assistive technologies to open doors for employees with disabilities. Businesses across the country are finally recognizing the innate potential of the disabled community. Many individuals have both the desire and capability to work, as well as exceptional talents to offer. All it takes is a little awareness and accommodation, and our economy and society can reap countless economic and social rewards.

We are also making progress in the Halls of Congress. When I arrived ten years ago, as the first quadriplegic ever to serve in the House of Representatives, some changes had to be made to accommodate my service. The historic buildings of the Capitol weren't built with today's accessibility standards in mind. But beginning with Speaker Hastert and continuing under Speaker Pelosi's leadership, I have been overwhelmed by the commitment to making the Capitol complex fully accessible to members of Congress, staff and visitors.

I am particularly happy to report that the Speaker's rostrum at the front of the House chamber has just been made fully accessible to wheelchair users. In the very near future, I will have the truly humbling honor of presiding over the House Floor for the very first time. I have often said that I may be the first quadriplegic member of Congress, but I certainly won't be the last. It is my hope that this historic development will serve as a reminder to others that there are always new obstacles to surmount and new heights to be reached.

We have made tremendous advances in accommodating citizens with disabilities. However, commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ADA is not just a time to celebrate our achievements, but an opportunity to reflect on how we might improve upon them.

It was with this conviction that Congress passed the ADA Amendments Act in 2008, a bill to reaffirm the original intent of the ADA and ensure that its protections apply broadly to all individuals with disabilities, even to those whose conditions might not be visibly apparent, like diabetes, epilepsy, and various developmental disabilities. It is with that same conviction that we must embrace fresh ideas and seek new paths of advancement.

Individuals with disabilities remain one of our nation's greatest untapped resources, and they continue to face challenges in accessing employment, transportation, housing and even health care. This will only continue as we see increasing numbers of veterans returning with Traumatic Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and other disabling conditions.

It is more important than ever that we educate businesses and connect them with proper resources to create more employment opportunities in our communities. We must collaborate with local and state governments to ensure that transportation is available and accessible to everyone so they can get to their job, or the doctor, or the grocery store. We need to provide more resources for our teachers so that every child can receive a proper education, which is the stepping stone to a better future.

We must also continue the development of assistive technologies and make sure that computers, PDAs and phones are fully accessible for the vision and hearing impaired. We must focus on income and asset development so families have the means to become productive members of their communities. Finally, we need to inform individuals with disabilities of their rights under the ADA, as well as what recourse is available to them should they face discrimination at any level.

Mr. Chairman, we have come so far, but we have much more work ahead. Disabilities don't discriminate on the basis of party affiliation, income level or gender; instead, they have the unique ability to unite us in common purpose. If we act with the same courage and commitment as our predecessors, then we will provide the means for every individual to fulfill his or her potential and realize the true promise of the ADA on its 20th Anniversary.