

Enabling Everyone for Equality of Access

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/disability-students-s460.jpg>



Sen. Smith writes about the Americans with Disabilities Act, which sought to ensure that all Americans have access to public spaces by creating accommodations for those with disabilities.

MADISON - The definition of disability is a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses or activities. That definition covers many conditions that might be considered a disadvantage. Being limited by blindness or by using a wheelchair may be some of the first things that come to mind, but barriers are not just physical or visible and are sometimes hard to detect. Many people face barriers in their lives to access things others take for granted, and you may never know that person is right next to you.

July is Disability Pride Month, marking the anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Like other communities, disability advocacy groups struggled to gain the same freedoms the majority of us never think twice about. On March 12, 1990, sixty activists slipped out of their wheelchairs and crawled up the steps of the Capitol to demonstrate the need for fair access to public spaces.

This collective action was later dubbed the "Capitol Crawl." Over 100 people were arrested for civil disobedience that day. It was a dramatic and effective demonstration which brought this issue to the attention of many, increasing the visibility of individuals with disabilities. These action of these activists spurred a solution that led to greater access to an independent life for those with abilities that may diverge from the norm.

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The concept of Disability Pride is based around reworking negative narratives and biases which often affect our perceptions of those with disabilities. Disability Pride counters the social stigmas and ableism that pervades our society.

Instead, Disability Pride honors the contributions people with disabilities have made to our society. It breaks with the traditional perception of people with disabilities as shameful or burdensome and instead celebrates the incredible diversity of all that people are able to accomplish.

People are only considered to have disabilities because our society presumes a “normal” person is able to engage in certain activities. When someone is not able to engage in an activity others consider “normal,” they are considered to have a disability.



But what if we changed our physical spaces and our society to embrace the diversity of abilities each of us has? Once we look at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for people with disabilities, we can build a world in which we all have access to living our most independent life.

For instance, someone in a wheelchair wants access to a building but is unable to use stairs to access the entrance. Under the ADA, public buildings are constructed with ramps so those using wheelchairs can access those spaces. Or someone with a learning difficulty wants to live independently in their own home. While years ago the medical establishment would expect that person to live in a communal home, they now can access care which allows them to live independently and support themselves.

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Even audiobooks can be viewed as a social intervention, giving folks access to media they'd otherwise be unable to access. After the ADA, many of these solutions are taken for granted, but before the law was passed it was not always so.



Like any freedoms, they come with costs and are always at risk. Recently, ballot drop boxes came under attack by election conspiracy theorists harnessing misinformation to call our elections into question. We've made tremendous strides in access to the polls for those with disabilities, from Braille ballots to curbside voting. The least we can do is ensure that people with disabilities, who just as much as any of us depend on our elected officials to represent them, have unrestricted access to the ballot box.

We must be vigilant in protecting everyone's access to public accommodations, from restaurants to parks and schools to elections. After all, it was over two and a half centuries ago that our nation declared "All men are created equal." That tenet should and must remain at the center of how we create and structure public policy.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.