

An Anniversary Retrospective – The Americans with Disabilities Act at 15: A Winning Proposition



Two years ago the ticket office at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC received a call from one of the disability community's leading champions – a man who's been using a wheelchair since suffering an injury during military service. He's not only a devotee of theater and the arts – he loves going to ballgames, too.

When the office told him how much his tickets cost, an awkward moment ensued. He cleared his throat and politely asked why the tickets were more expensive than they used to be. Because the theater had been brought into compliance with current accessibility standards, he was informed that wheelchair users were no longer restricted to the back rows in the upper levels. Since accessible wheelchair seats were now available on all levels, people with disabilities were being charged the same ticket prices as everyone else. Another pause ensued, followed by a chuckle. “Well, that’s the best money I’ve ever spent,” he said. “This is a great day.”

The advancements for patrons with disabilities at the Kennedy Center are just one small measure of the progress achieved under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), now celebrating its 15th anniversary. A generation ago, many public places were not well equipped to handle the needs of people with disabilities. There were few curb cuts, fewer handrails, and virtually no captioning or audio description for the person who was visually impaired or people who are deaf or hard of hearing. And in general, staff wasn't trained in how to offer appropriate assistance to patrons with disabilities.

The Kennedy Center, like many other organizations, began internal examination, and then, hastened by the ADA's enactment in 1990, took a hard look at its physical layout, program access and most importantly customer service policies and concluded it was time to overhaul its approach to accommodating people with disabilities. With advice and technical assistance from the local ADA Assistance Center, members of the disability community and other experts, the Kennedy Center's management realized they could incorporate changes to the design and operation of theatres that were being renovated. Now when people with disabilities arrive at the Kennedy Center, they're offered assistance – if they desire it – from the curbside to their seat and back again. Complimentary wheelchairs are available. And when a patron

with a disability enters a theater at the Kennedy Center, they have the option of sitting in wheelchair-accessible seating on virtually every level. Large print and Braille programs are available along with open captioning and sign language interpretation, assistive listening devices and audio description.

But the story doesn't end there. The Kennedy Center's investments have helped its bottom line. Friday afternoon matinees with the National Symphony Orchestra are just one of many performances attended by people with disabilities. Making a concerted effort to accommodate people with disabilities has opened a substantial new market niche. Patrons tend to stay awhile, dining in restaurants and visiting the refreshment stands and the gift shops. As many businesses have learned, people with disabilities have formidable spending power. The National Organization on Disability estimates that Americans with disabilities possess more than \$200 billion in discretionary income.

Moreover, as the Kennedy Center has learned to its delight, people with disabilities make great employees. Center management were so impressed by a young man with Down's Syndrome who interned in one of their education programs that they hired him.

The Kennedy Center is not alone in realizing the advantages and the vision of the ADA. Countless other businesses (large and small), non-profit organizations, schools, public libraries and others have worked for positive change in ways not imagined when the ADA became law. And the best part is that the change – whether removing barriers in the workplace or making accommodations for customers – has not come at exorbitant cost. In many cases, common sense thinking has triggered solutions to problems that seemed insurmountable.

In fact, while the ADA made specific recommendations in key areas of employment, public access, government and telecommunications services, the spirit of the ADA has extended to many other areas that touch the public at large and have enhanced our lives. How many of us use automatic doors designed to ease access? Or find ourselves taking advantage of curb cuts and ramps? Or are grateful that fire alarms now flash? Or that captioning is available on video programming? Or that self-serve kiosks or ATMs assist us as well as individuals who are visually impaired with voice-prompts?

Still, our society has a long way to go before people with disabilities are more engaged in the American mainstream. Too many gifted people with a disability who would love the chance to prove themselves in the workplace remain unemployed. Too many people with a disability do not have access to a computer or the Internet. Further, too many places still are inaccessible

or have significant barriers. What we have to remember is that change takes time. The ADA was not expected to erase every challenge overnight.

Yet a significant step has been achieved – American’s perception of people with disabilities has changed. This momentum will propel the ADA to places the bill’s authors may never have envisioned. At the Kennedy Center, they are mentoring and fostering the next generation of leaders in the arts community by creating a List-Serve to share their experiences on accessibility and creative solutions to barriers. And each year, the Kennedy Center with support from the ADA Assistance Centers hosts a seminar on ways to make arts institutions more accessible.

The Kennedy Center’s approach has proven to be a model not only within the arts community, but also as an example for other business entities bringing a product or service to the public at-large. Moreover, their example is proof that increasing access and opportunity not only gives people with disabilities better seats – it’s a win-win proposition for businesses and individuals alike.