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What If the Americans with Disabilities Act Had Never Been Passed?

By Eve Hill and Henry Claypool

Imagine a United States without the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It's not just a legal thought experiment—it's a wake-up call. Without the ADA, disabled people would still be shut out of schools, jobs, public spaces, and basic civic life—not because of their disabilities, but because of society's refusal to make space for them.

Before the ADA, people with disabilities were routinely told they didn't belong. Want to go to school with your peers? Sorry, no ramps – you have to go to a “special” school. Need to ride the bus? Tough luck—no lifts, no stops, no way. Looking for a job? Employers could—and did—say “we don't hire the blind,” or “we can't accommodate a wheelchair.” Without the ADA, that kind of discrimination would still be perfectly legal.

People with disabilities would be forced to stay home, isolated and excluded. Institutions would continue to lock people away—out of sight, out of mind—rather than provide services and support in the community.

When Congress was considering the ADA, disability rights leader Justin Dart collected stories from people with disabilities from all across the country –

- A paralyzed Vietnam veteran who couldn't get out of his housing project, or on the bus, or through his neighborhood because of inaccessibility, and couldn't get a job because of prejudice.
- A woman with cerebral palsy who was excluded from a movie theater because of her wheelchair.
- A blind woman who was excluded from a deli because the manager thought her blindness would depress other customers.
- A breast cancer survivor who lost her job and couldn't get another one because she had had cancer.
- The parents of a child who died of AIDS who could not find an undertaker to bury their child.
- A Deaf man who was denied a modeling job because of his deafness.
- The disabled students of a school system that disciplined them by locking them in wooden boxes.

These were not just one-time occurrences. They happened every day. And at that time, if you spoke up about these injustices, nothing could be done. No law would have your back.

The ADA changed that. It was a sea change. It declared that disabled people are not broken, not burdens—we are full citizens, entitled to equal opportunity, equal access, and equal dignity.

Without it, we wouldn't have ramps and curb cuts, accessible websites, closed captions on movies, sign language interpreters in hospitals, or the right to reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Those things don't just happen because people are nice. They exist because people fought for the ADA—and because the ADA makes them mandatory.

Even with the ADA, we still have a long way to go. Every day, disabled people are forced to sue just to get through the front door, access a website, or sit for a licensing exam. But without the ADA, we wouldn't even have the right to fight.

We've spent our careers as disability advocates. We've seen what happens when the ADA is violated—and we've seen the power of the law when it's enforced. Some critics say the ADA is a burden on business, a checklist, and a set of demands. But we ask: is it a burden to open your doors to all customers? Is it a burden to hire based on talent, not bias? Is it a burden to treat people fairly? The truth is, accessibility helps everyone—parents with strollers, workers with injuries, aging Boomers navigating stairs and screens. Inclusion isn't charity. It's justice.

If the ADA had never passed, we'd still be living in a country where disabled people had to crawl up courthouse steps just to assert their rights. Where children were denied education because they “belonged somewhere else.” Where employers turned away talent because they couldn't imagine a blind lawyer, a Deaf manager, or a neurodivergent coder.

We would be a smaller, meaner, less creative, and less just country.

Instead, we are—slowly, painfully—moving forward. That's not magic. It's movement. It's the legacy of disabled activists who refused to accept invisibility, who chained themselves to buses, who got arrested in the Capitol Rotunda, who said, “Nothing about us without us,” and meant it.

So, the question isn't just “What if the ADA had never passed?” The question is “What can we do to fulfill its promise?”

Because we're not there yet. But thanks to the ADA, we have the tools.