

## THE 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADA: HOW SHOULD WE CELEBRATE?

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Bipartisan cooperation was alive and well in the 1980s and 1990s when it came to disability policy. Members of Congress and staffers from both parties talked to each other, worked out differences, and enacted a great deal of legislation -- amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Rehabilitation Act, the Deaf Education Act, and the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Right Act and drafted the Assistive Technology Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The 30th anniversary of the ADA is on July 26th this year. With the pandemic, what could we do to celebrate the ADA's birthday? Demonstrate a renewed commitment to bipartisanship.

Currently we have in Congress, modest legislation introduced by Representative Titus (D, NV) and Young (R, AK) in the House and Senator Robert Casey (D, PA) in the Senate that would make permanent the Office of International Disability Rights in the State Department. It was originally established, by Executive Branch action in the Obama Administration, and President Trump has continued it. This little office is doing amazing things. Check out these recent articles the *State Department*

*Magazine*: <https://statemag.state.gov/2020/07/0720office/?fbclid=IwAR1KoneYLQMRnphY298bipeit3OsyPoeTIP5pAgkZwATBVw54d6T3wsXgWQ>; <https://statemag.state.gov/2020/07/0720feat02/>.

The House and Senate bills would make this office permanent, give it a leader, and help train employees of the State Department about the importance of disability rights and how to advocate for these rights through their work around the world.

In the House, H.R. 3373 passed out of the Foreign Affairs Committee on a voice vote and is awaiting Floor action (a full House vote). The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has not yet considered S. 3880. The biggest difference between the two bills is that in the House bill the leader of the office is a special advisor to an assistant secretary (like in the Obama Administration) and in the Senate bill the leader of the office is an ambassador at large. President Trump has not designated an official leader for the office.

Because of the pandemic the amount of time Members of Congress are in session between now and the election is very brief. Unless we push very hard and are very vocal about the merits of this legislation it will not be enacted. Then in January 2021 in the new Congress, we will have to start over again from scratch.

This legislation is a good idea and it is not controversial. It only affirms the value of an existing office in the State Department and gives it a leader. What level that leader is surely can be negotiated in conference between the House and the Senate.

The Office of International Disability Rights would help the U.S. guide and promote disability rights worldwide. Through this office the U.S. could bring about transformational change. If individuals with disabilities and their governments learn to work together — poverty will be reduced, how to decide and implement inclusive economic empowerment will become commonplace, and respect for disability rights will be understood, protected, and respected. Now with the pandemic and the demand for sustainable social justice, Americans desperately need to see something on which elected officials work together and support — legislation that promotes rights, stimulates empowerment, and potentially strengthens U.S. standing in foreign lands.

Making this office permanent has real traction and provides us with a way to measure impact. For one thing, all State Department employees will be trained in disability rights. Just think about the capacity building reach of this one action!

Let's work together to enact this little piece of legislation. It will have such a powerful impact. Some opportunities transcend partisan-driven outcomes. This is one. By advocating for disability rights, we demonstrate our collective commitment to reach others worldwide through our State Department to address a clear, longstanding need — marginalization of people with disabilities and its high costs to societies.

Please call your elected officials in Congress and ask them to support this legislation and ask that it be given a vote in both the House and Senate before they close down for the election. Especially contact Chairman Risch (R, ID), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Ask him for speedy committee consideration of S. 3880. We can be on the right side of history by passing H.R. 3373/S. 3880. This is a concrete, dynamic way to celebrate the ADA's 30th year.