
LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Progress in Developing New Attitudes and Laws to Help Americans with Disabilities

By

President George W. Bush

[The following are excerpts of remarks President Bush presented to the CAPTEC Assistive Technology Center and the U.S. Department of Defense, in Washington, D.C., 19 June 2001]

My fellow Americans, when the *Americans with Disabilities Act* was signed in 1990, our nation made a promise we will no longer underestimate the abilities of Americans with disabilities. We will treat Americans with disabilities as people to be respected, rather than problems to be confronted.

Our nation has made progress in both attitude and law. Navigating through buildings and buses is far easier than it was just a decade ago. Now, the growth of new technologies creates new hopes and new obstacles.

The internet brings a world of information into a computer screen, which has enriched the lives of many with disabilities. Yet, technology creates challenges of its own. The brilliant graphics that add life to many web pages can make it difficult for a visually impaired person to get the information he or she needs from a web site. Video technology is turning many computers into television sets.

Yet, without closed captioning, many see a picture and no words. And complex keyboard commands make it difficult for a person with impaired motor skills to tap a computer's full potential. As a result, computer usage and internet access for people with disabilities is half that of people without disabilities.

Researchers here at the Department of Defense and at other agencies throughout the federal government and in the private sector are developing solutions to these problems. I have just had the opportunity to tour the department's assistive technology center, and I saw technologies that are helping people with disabilities enjoy the full range of opportunities made possible by the technology boom.

Software allows hearing impaired people to communicate with their co-workers by computer. Screen reading technology makes it possible for the visually impaired to access information on a monitor. And voice recognition software unlocks new computing possibilities for people with impaired dexterity.

The technologies on display here have helped more than 20,000 defense department employees enjoy greater access to communications and computing equipment. And they will help countless individuals in the public and private sectors become fully integrated into the workplace. I'm committed to bringing that technology to users as quickly as possible. And I'm committed to ensuring that government web sites become compatible with this evolving technology.

And that is why I'm pleased to announce that when Section 508 of the *Rehabilitation Act*, offered by Jim Jeffords, becomes effective for all federal agencies next Monday, there will be more opportunities for people of all abilities to access government information. Section 508 requires federal agencies to make sure that the electronic and information technology they use is accessible for people with disabilities.

Increasingly, Americans use information technology to interact with their government. They rely on thousands of government web pages to download forms, learn about federal programs, find out where to turn for government assistance, and communicate with elected officials, such as the President. And because of Section 508, government web sites will be more accessible for millions of Americans who have disabilities.

Section 508 will also make the federal government a better employer, as roughly 120,000 federal employees with disabilities will have greater access to the tools they need to better perform their jobs. This is one example of the successful public-private partnerships that are removing barriers to full community participation by Americans with disabilities. I thank the leaders from the technology industry who are with us today for your innovation and your ongoing cooperation.

Full implementation of Section 508 is a key element of an agenda I announced a year ago, and began implementing in February. It is called The New Freedom Initiative, and its goal is to prepare and to help Americans with disabilities realize their potential and to achieve their dreams.

We have asked Congress to increase funding to bring assistive technologies to market more quickly, to help make them more affordable for the people who need them, and to speed research in developing new technologies. We have sought to make it easier for Americans with disabilities to enter the work force by finding new ways to get people to their jobs, relying on new technologies to help people work from their home.

We recognize the small businesses and community groups like churches, synagogues, mosques and civic organizations may have trouble finding the resources to fully comply with the ADA. So we've asked Congress to support efforts to help them make their facilities more accessible. And we understand that new policies will mean little if we don't fully enforce the ADA. So my administration is doing just that.

While these federal efforts are crucial to guaranteeing full accessibility for Americans with disabilities, we must also help them connect with their local communities. So I've signed an executive order requiring full implementation of the Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead Decision. Olmstead and the ADA rightly mandate that individuals with disabilities who can receive support and treatment in a community setting should be given a reasonable opportunity to live close to their families and friends when appropriate.

My executive order directs key federal agencies, like the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Justice and the Social Security Administration to work with states to implement the Olmstead decision and the ADA. It directs those agencies to explore how we can increase community-based services for people with disabilities. And it directs Attorney General Ashcroft and Secretary Thompson to fully enforce Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and ensure that no one is unjustly institutionalized.

Secretary Thompson has also made seed money available to help every state develop a plan for implementing Olmstead. The Olmstead Executive Order will increase freedom for people with disabilities. It is compassionate. It is needed. And it is now the federal official policy of

my administration. Americans must have the opportunity to live independently, work productively and participate fully in community life.

Many Americans achieve this independence through home ownership; but, too often, the high cost of therapeutic care and assistive equipment and technologies make the goal of home ownership unattainable for people with disabilities. That's why I'm optimistic about a pilot program led through the Congress by Representative Mark Green, and soon to be implemented by Secretary Mel Martinez at HUD, that will allow many people with disabilities to buy their own homes. By making the Section 8 low-income rental assistance program more flexible, the federal government can make home ownership a reality for more Americans.

The new Section 8 HUD pilot program, the Olmstead Executive Order, and the full implementation of Section 508 will help eliminate the barriers that many Americans with disabilities face. The proposals I sent to Congress will build on our society's commitment to welcome all Americans as friends and neighbors. When governments, business and individuals work together, to build a welcoming society, Americans of every ability will benefit.