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Americans with Disabilities Act turns 20 Online survey sheds insight on legislation's impact

HOUSTON - (July 22, 2010) - Hailed as the Bill of Rights for people with disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) has fulfilled much of its promise since it went into effect 20 years ago, according to an online survey of disability leaders, released today. But the findings also uncover new challenges.

Lex Frieden, a professor of biomedical informatics and rehabilitation at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth), authored the non-scientific survey to gauge the ADA's impact on the disability community after 20 years. The survey was conducted from June 22 through July 9, 2010. Eight hundred and seventy participants responded from more than 400 communities in all 50 states.

Frieden, who uses a wheelchair following a 1967 traffic accident in which his spinal cord was severed, helped craft the ADA, which was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990. The ADA was intended to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Requiring shops, restaurants, theaters, hotels and other public places to make accommodations for people with disabilities, the act made it possible for all members of the community to engage in everyday activities like going to school or work and taking public transportation. The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) reports there are 54 million Americans living with a disability.

Frieden leads the Laboratory for Adaptive Technologies at the UTHealth School of Biomedical Informatics, directs the independent living research program at TIRR Memorial Hermann and is convener of the Amerigroup National Advisory Board (NAB) on Improving Health Care Services for Seniors and People with Disabilities.

“Overall, more than 90 percent of survey respondents believe that the quality of life for people with disabilities in communities across the United States has improved greatly since the passage of the ADA,” Frieden said. “But, respondents also pointed out that there are opportunities to be realized and challenges to be overcome.”

Americans with Disabilities Act turns 20

“Two-thirds of the survey respondents with disabilities believe the ADA legislation has had more influence on their lives than any other social, cultural or legislative change in the last 20 years,” Frieden said.

One survey respondent wrote: “I became disabled in 1982. I woke up from a coma to find out I was a 2nd Class Citizen! I could not go anywhere or do anything. I was an RN and lost my license because I was disabled. In 1990, ADA changed all that. To me the ADA means I have my civil rights and liberties back. I’m a real person again just like everybodyelse.”

Nearly 60 percent of those surveyed agreed that access to public accommodations, retail and commercial establishments has shown the greatest improvement since the passage of the ADA. “Almost all shops and restaurants are now accessible in the small community I grew up in. It is wonderful to be able to access these establishments with our non-disabled peers,” a respondent wrote.

Survey respondents also described remarkable improvements in the area of transportation for people with disabilities and credited the ADA with making it easier for people with disabilities to get jobs.

“[The] ADA has enabled my daughter to be part of the workforce and have a sense of purpose. Before, she sat at home with nothing to do. She is now more outgoing and just a totally different person,” one survey taker reported.

According to Frieden, challenges exist. Not all respondents expressed satisfaction with employment opportunities for people with disabilities. He went on to say that the unemployment rate among working age people with disabilities is higher than 50 percent, more than three times the unemployment rate of people without disabilities.

“The survey underscores the need for aggressive action to address unemployment and healthcare gaps,” said Frieden. He also emphasized the need to provide housing and personal assistance services for the approximately 79 million baby boomers who will face the increasing risk of disability as they age.

Results of the survey were announced today at the National Press Club Newsmakers Luncheon in Washington, D.C.

Amerigroup Corporation was also a key presenter, highlighting its work with states to provide health care for the nation’s most vulnerable populations. Amerigroup chairman and CEO James G. Carlson said, “The survey reveals needs that still exist and the importance of providing a comprehensive array of community-based services to support independent living for seniors and people with disabilities. At Amerigroup, we have worked for 15 years to deliver high-quality health care to those who need a little help, and we look forward to continuing – and enhancing – our efforts.”

To access complete survey results, you can go online to: www.declarationforindependence.org.