

Last month we marked the 20th Anniversary of the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). Prior to this law's enactment, disabled Americans experienced discrimination in almost all aspects of society. They were denied educational opportunities and employment, denied access to buildings and transportation, and denied basic civil rights.

In passing the ADA in 1990, Congress strove to provide to people with disabilities full participation in society, defeating the false stereotype that they would not be able to live and work independently and self-sufficiently. Today, more than 50 million Americans with physical or mental impairments legally are protected from discrimination in the areas of employment, public accommodation, public services, transportation, and telecommunications. Two years ago, we strengthened the ADA by passing legislation broadening coverage to individuals with disabilities who had been excluded from protection as a result of several Supreme Court decisions.

Our Nation has come a long way since the passage of the ADA. Prior to the law's enactment, even the halls of Congress were not accessible to disabled Americans. On the 20th anniversary of the passage of the ADA, Congressman Langevin (RI-02), the first quadriplegic to serve in Congress, presided over the House, marking the first time a Member in a wheelchair ever has presided over the House of Representatives. I have heard some comment that the Speaker's platform was specially modified to accommodate Representative Langevin. When we made it possible for Representative Langevin to preside over the House, we were not accommodating an individual--we were realizing the dream that any American, regardless of their circumstances, can preside over "the people's House." The same point can be made with regard to construction and modifications in some schools to comply with the ADA. I have heard school officials comment that an expensive change was made for a particular student. I react strongly against that way of thinking. We should all remember that the changes should not rest on a single student; rather, they are part of our ongoing attempt to provide full equality of opportunity in our great country.