

# **Disabilities**

**by**  
**U.S. Senator Bob Dole**  
**April 14, 1969**  
**(His first speech on the U.S. Senate floor)**

“Mr. President, my remarks today concern an exceptional group which I joined on April 14, twenty-four years ago, during World War II.

It is a minority group whose existence affects every person in our society and the very fiber of our Nation.

It is a group who no one joins by personal choice – a group whose requirements for membership are not based on age, sex, wealth, education, skin color, religious belief, political party, power or prestige.

As a minority, it has always known exclusions: maybe not exclusion from the front of the bus, but perhaps from even climbing aboard it; maybe not exclusion from pursuing advanced education, but perhaps from experiencing any formal education; maybe not exclusion from day-to-day life itself, but perhaps from an adequate opportunity to develop and contribute to his or her fullest capacity.

It is a minority, yet a group to which at least one out of every five Americans belongs. Mr. President, I speak today about 42 million citizens of our Nation who are physically, mentally or emotionally handicapped.”

July 26, 1990 was one of the most rewarding days of Senator Dole’s life – the day the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. The act was one that Dole had worked toward for 30 years. A landmark piece of civil rights legislation, the act decreed “that persons with disabilities ought to be judged on the basis of their abilities; they should not be judged nor discriminated against based on unfounded fear, prejudice, ignorance or mythologies.”

Dole was a fitting advocate for people with disabilities. In an interview with ABILITY Magazine, Senator Dole described the effect of his war injury:  
“Experiencing a disability yourself, you could almost walk around with a blindfold and pick out the other people with disabilities....Having a disability changes your whole life, not just your attitude.”

In 2000, in its final form, the ADA prohibited discrimination in public or private employment, in public entities (such as public universities or hospitals) and in places of public accommodation (such as hotels and restaurants). It introduced a new concept of nondiscrimination: reasonable accommodations. It required that businesses protect people with disabilities from discrimination, such as allowing guide dogs or making structural changes to allow wheelchairs. According to the bill, qualified individuals with disabilities must be accommodated in the workplace and in the public. It also protected employers from extreme expense with an “undue hardship” clause, which states that if an alteration or service to accommodate a disabled person is prohibitively expensive, the proprietor is not required to do it.

On July 26, 1990, more than 3000 people attended the signing ceremony on the White House lawn. As he signed the bill, President George H. W. Bush said: “Every man, woman and child with a disability can now pass through the once-closed doors into a bright new era of equality, independence and freedom....We will not tolerate discrimination in America.”

**Dole added: “This historic civil rights legislation seeks to end the unjustified segregation and exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream of American life.”**