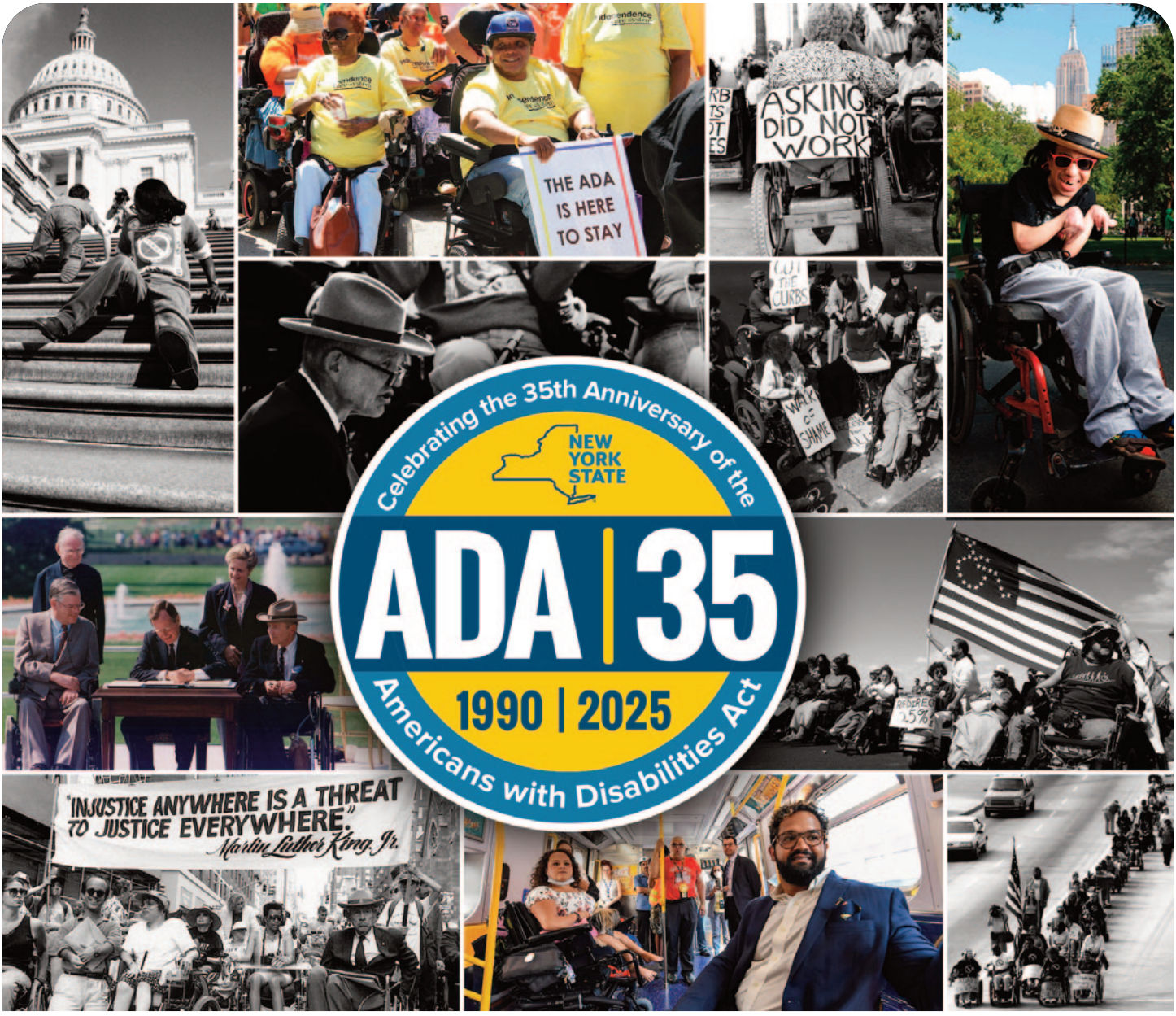


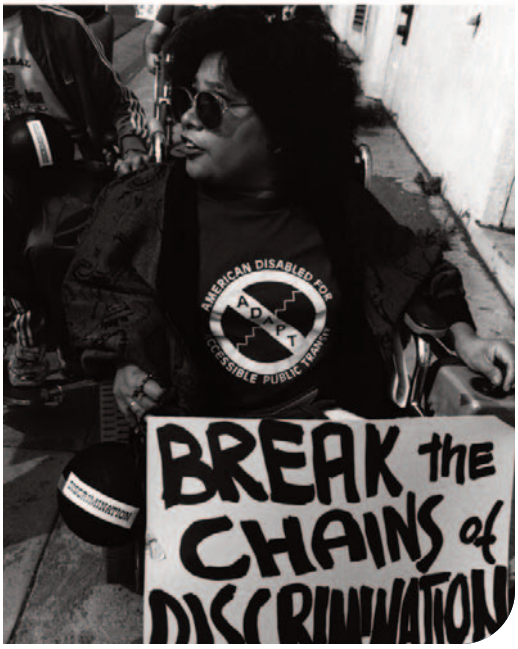
35 Years of Access and Advocacy

Milestones in New York's Disability Rights Movement

NEW YORK STATE

Office of the Chief Disability Officer | Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

35 Years of Access and Advocacy: Milestones in New York's Disability Rights Movement



Introduction

The New York State disability rights movement, rooted in decades of activism and advocacy, has achieved significant progress in making the state more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities. Key achievements include establishing the first municipal office focused on the disability community, founding Disabled in Action, and advocating for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The movement has also played a crucial role in making New York City more accessible, such as through the CIDNY v. MTA lawsuit.

**Please note that outdated terminology may be used when referring to a given name of an organization or past formal use.*

Upstairs in Blindman's Alley | Library of Congress

Deinstitutionalization for people with mental health diagnoses

Willowbrook Protest

Tonight, as a public service, we're going to make you sick.

This is a picture of a place called Willowbrook. It made news recently. Bad news.

You see, Willowbrook is a mental institution run by the State of New York. And what is happening there *is* enough to make you sick.

A series of reports about Willowbrook was originally seen on segments of the Eyewitness News program.

The series caused a public uproar.

And already some good has come of it.

Tonight, we're putting the entire Willowbrook story together on one program in the hope that more people will watch it.

And that more good will come from it.

Willowbrook: "The Last Great Disgrace."

An Eyewitness News special report with Geraldo Rivera. 7:30 tonight on WABC-TV

Public Service Announcement

Key milestones and organizations:

1913: The New York State Commission for the Blind (NYSCB) is established under Chapter 415 of the Laws of 1913 to help people who are legally blind find employment, research the causes of blindness, and advance blindness prevention.

1950s: The deinstitutionalization movement for people with mental health diagnoses begins.

1960s: The deinstitutionalization campaign for people with developmental disabilities begins, assisting people to move from large institutions to smaller group homes and community-based services.

1968: The nation's first municipal office focused on the disability community is established in New York City.

1970: Judy Heumann and other activists with disabilities found Disabled in Action.

1972: The Willowbrook Lawsuit (New York State Association for Retarded Children v. Rockefeller) is filed following a series of investigations that revealed the inhumane conditions for residents.

1973: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act - The first federal civil rights law protecting people with disabilities is enacted and states that no one with a disability can be excluded from programs that get federal money.

1973: The Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities in New York City is initially established in 1973 as the Mayor's Office for the Handicapped by Executive Order 81.

1975: Congress enacts the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to ensure that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. The law was renamed to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990.

1975: Congress establishes the Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities program, marking the beginning of the Protection and Advocacy national network to uphold the rights of people with disabilities.

1975: New York Governor Hugh L. Carey signs the Consent Decree, establishing that residents of the Willowbrook State School have a constitutional right to be protected from harm and requiring New York to take immediate actions to improve living conditions.

Mid-1970s: Disabled In Action protests the lack of lifts on MTA buses.

Section 504 Support Protest

President Ford signs the Education for All Handicapped Children Act

Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities program

Disabled in Action Button

504 Sit-ins

MTA Photos

Playground for children

Willowbrook closure plaque

1977: 504 Sit-Ins - People with disabilities protest for 25 days in San Francisco to force the government to sign Section 504 regulations, which prohibit discrimination against people enrolled in federally funded programs. It becomes a landmark moment for disability rights.

1978: The Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities was created to implement the Willowbrook consent decree and the resulting closure and downsizing of institutions. The name was later changed to Office for People With Development Disabilities.

1978: First Independent Living Center in New York State, Center for Independence of the Disabled in New York is opened.

1984: NY Accessible Transportation Act is signed into law, providing for MTA paratransit services and more lift access in MTA subway stations.

1984: America's first playground for children with and without disabilities is built in Queens, New York City.

1986: Congress passes the Air Carrier Access Act, which prohibits airlines from discriminating against passengers with disabilities.

1987: Governor Mario M. Cuomo declares Willowbrook State School on Staten Island "officially and forever closed."

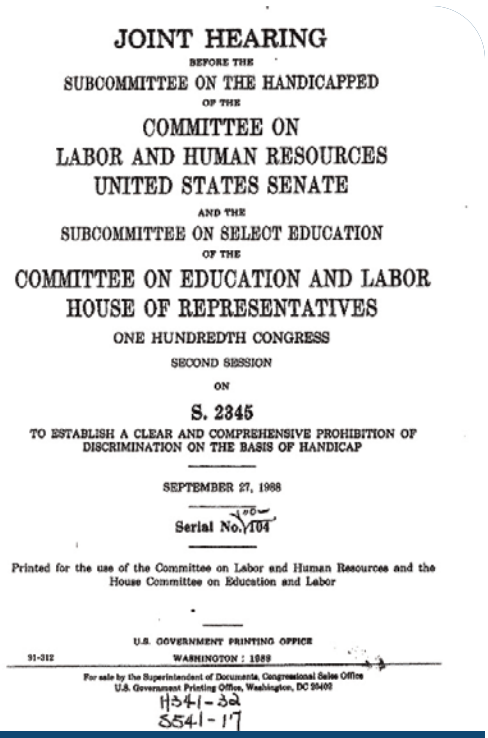
1988: The Americans with Disabilities Act is introduced to Congress - Congress begins working on a new law to protect civil rights in all areas of life, not just federally funded programs.

1988: Congress passes the Fair Housing Amendment Act, which extends the protection of the original Act to include people with disabilities and families with children.

1988: 'Deaf President Now' movement at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. - Protestors demand that the world's only university for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students should have a president who is deaf.

1988: Association of People Supporting Employment is founded, establishing equitable employment opportunities for all people.

1990: The first Disability Pride Day takes place in Boston, shortly after the Americans with Disabilities Act is signed into law. It was organized by a coalition of disability rights advocates who wanted to create a space where people with disabilities could come together to celebrate their achievements and push for further progress.



JOINT HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE HANDICAPPED
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON
LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SELECT EDUCATION
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDREDTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
ON
S. 2345
TO ESTABLISH A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF HANDICAP
SEPTEMBER 27, 1988
Serial No. 104
Printed for the use of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources and the House Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
91-312 WASHINGTON : 1989
For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, Congressional Sales Office
U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402
H341-32
S541-17

Drafting and introduction of the original ADA Bill

Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University

Boston Disability Pride Day

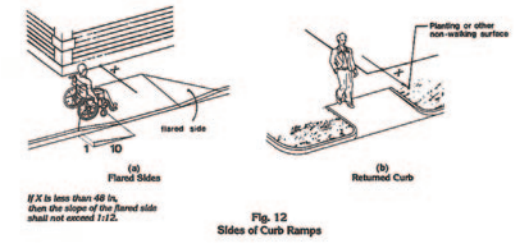
Capital Crawl Protest

1990: On March 12, over 1000 activists march from the White House to Congress demanding Congress pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. Some protestors take part in the ‘capitol crawl’ to demonstrate the public buildings’ inaccessibility.

The ADA signed into Law.

1990: The Americans with Disabilities Act is signed by President George H.W. Bush, a landmark federal law prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities on July 26, 1990.

1990: New York City Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities is established through Executive Order No. 17, renamed from the Mayor’s Office for the Handicapped.



New ADA standards

1991: Americans with Disabilities Act regulations go into effect - businesses, transit systems, and state and local governments must begin removing barriers and making public areas accessible.

Taxis for All Campaign

1992: Disabled In Action sues the Empire State Building to make it accessible.

1996: Taxis for All Campaign launches to lobby for an accessible NYC taxi fleet.

1996: Federal Telecommunications Act is enacted, requiring computers, telephones, closed captioning and many other telecommunication devices and equipment be made accessible.

1999: Olmstead Decision - The U.S. Supreme Court rules that people with disabilities have the right to receive services in the most integrated setting possible. This has been credited with helping many people leave institutions and live in their communities.

2002: New York's Most Integrated Setting Coordinating Council (MISCC) is created to guide the implementation of the Olmstead decision. It meets quarterly, continuing to the present day.

2004: Chicago's Disability Pride parade is first held, with over 2000 people attending

2006: Americans with Disabilities Act comes to the internet, putting tech accessibility on the map. The courts rule on a class action, finding that the Americans with Disabilities Act can be applied to websites.

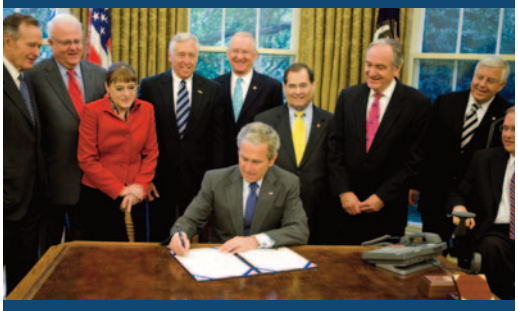
2008: Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act - The law is updated to restore broad protections. It makes clear that more people are covered, including those with invisible or chronic conditions.

Lois Curtis was one of the plaintiffs in the landmark Supreme Court case Olmstead v. L.C. (1999)

MISCC Meeting

Chicago's Disability Pride parade

ADA Internet Compliance



ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA)

Disability history starts to be taught

Rosa's Law is signed into law

DSPs in New York State enhance job performance.

Employment First policy

2008: Disability history starts to be taught in schools. West Virginia becomes the first state to mandate the teaching of the disability rights movement in schools from K-12.

2010: New Rules for Physical and Digital Access - The U.S. Department of Justice issues new Americans with Disabilities Act standards. Websites, parking lots, hotels, and more are now held to updated accessibility standards.

2010: Rosa's Law is signed into law, replacing references in federal law from mental retardation to an intellectual disability.

2013: The Regional Centers for Workforce Transformation is established to help Direct Support Professionals in New York State enhance job performance.

2014: The ABLE Act is passed, creating a special savings tool for people with disabilities. Account holders are able to save and pay for many expenses without jeopardizing other financial benefits and programs they receive.

2014: Employment First policy for New York State is signed, aiming to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities by 5%, decrease the poverty rate of individuals with disabilities by 5%, and engage 100 businesses in adopting policies that support integrated employment of individuals with disabilities.

2015: New York City holds its first Disability Pride Parade, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

2015: New York State celebrates the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act with a celebration in West Capitol Park.

2017: CIDNY v. MTA lawsuit alleges inaccessible subway stations violate New York City's Human Rights Law.

2020: Americans with Disabilities Act 30th Anniversary – celebrations are held nationwide — many virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Advocates reflect on what's been accomplished and what's still needed.

2022: Web accessibility takes center stage - court rulings and new guidance push for greater digital accessibility — making websites, apps, and virtual spaces usable for everyone.

2022: A settlement is reached in CIDNY v. MTA, requiring half of NYC's subway stations to have alternatives to stairs by 2035 and nearly all to be wheelchair accessible by 2055.

2022: Governor Kathy Hochul establishes the Office of the Chief Disability Officer, seeking to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities and make NY the most inclusive place to live.

NYC holds its first Disability Pride Parade

ADA 30th Anniversary

Elevator Action Group Member (Photo Credit: Erik McGregor)

Governor Hochul establishes the Office of the Chief Disability Officer

Governor Kathy Hochul

Office of the Chief Disability Officer
Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Office

2023: Governor Hochul issues Executive Order 31, committing New York State to being a model employer for people with disabilities.

2024: Governor Hochul establishes the NYS Office of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing.

2024: Governor Hochul issues Executive Order 40, committing New York to becoming an Employment First state for people with disabilities.

Employment First

Celebrating the 35th Anniversary of the
NEW YORK STATE
ADA | 35
1990 | 2025
Americans with Disabilities Act

2025:

Americans with Disabilities Act Turns 35!

New York celebrates 35 years of progress and recommits to building a more accessible, inclusive, and equitable future.

Organizations involved in the movement:

Please note: This is not an exhaustive list as there have been so many self-advocates, self-advocacy groups and family advocacy groups that all deserve recognition for their role in the disability rights movement in New York State. New York celebrates these advocates on the 35th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and applauds their endless contributions to ensuring that their rights as Americans and as New Yorkers are upheld.

Disabled In Action: A not-for-profit organization that fights discrimination against people with disabilities.

Disability Rights New York: A not-for-profit organization that provides free legal and advocacy services to people wit disabilities.

Museum of the City of New York: Curates an exhibit on disability activism in NYC.

NYS Independent Living Council: Promotes independent living for people with disabilities in New York State and provides a network of community-based Centers for Independent Living

New York Association on Independent Living: Leads statewide efforts among Independent Living Center to eliminate barriers to achieving full independence for all people with disabilities.

NYC Disability Rights Archive: A project that collects and maintains documentation of the disability rights movement.

Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York: Provides free legal representation in cases of denied or terminated Social Security benefits.

New York State Division of Human Rights: Enforces the New York State Human Rights Law and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Office of the Chief Disability Officer: Works to make New York more inclusive and integrated for people with disabilities.

New York State Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Office: provides information for state agencies, local governments and organizations to better serve people of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing communities.

Council on Developmental Disabilities | Department of Civil Service | Department of Corrections and Community Supervision | Department of Health | Department of Labor | Department of Transportation | Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services | Education Department, inclusive of Adult Career & Continuing Education Services - Vocational Rehabilitation | Housing and Community Renewal | Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs | Office for People With Developmental Disabilities | Office for the Aging | Office of Addiction Services and Supports Office of Children and Family services, inclusive of the Commission for the Blind | Office of General Services | Office of Mental Health | Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance | Office of the Chief Disability Officer | Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

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