

Bob Dole



NEWS

U.S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS

FROM:

SENATE REPUBLICAN LEADER

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DISABILITY POLICY

**ON 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF FIRST MAJOR SENATE SPEECH, DOLE
CALLS FOR NATIONAL COMMISSION TO FIX NATION'S DISABILITY PROGRAMS;
CITES PROGRESS, PROBLEMS IN SOCIAL SECURITY,
HEALTH CARE, EMPLOYMENT, WELFARE**

WASHINGTON -- Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole, a longtime advocate for people with disabilities, today made the following speech on the 25th anniversary of his first speech before the Senate.

Twenty-five years ago today I rose in the Senate to give my first speech as the newly elected Junior Senator from Kansas. It concerned a minority group whose existence affects every person in our society and the very fiber of our nation.

It is an exceptional group which I joined another April 14th, during World War II. As I said then, it is a group no one joins by personal choice, and neither respects nor discriminates by age, sex, wealth, education, skin color, religious beliefs, political party, power, or prestige.

It is a group that for too long had known exclusion -- 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.

Progress in 25 Years

I was speaking then about Americans with disabilities -- today 49 million persons, 24 million of whom are severely disabled. As I said in 1969, and which is still true today, the challenge to our nation is to help foster their independence, dignity, and security.

We have worked hard over the years to meet these goals. In fact, they are the foundation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a sweeping law to promote equal opportunity and full participation.

Today I will speak of the progress we have made in the past 25 years, and what remains to be done.

Architectural Barriers

In 1969, I called for greater removal of architectural barriers. At that time, there was only a single Federal law requiring accessibility, and it applied only to new or newly renovated Federal buildings.

In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act expanded this mandate to all Federally funded programs, including state and local governments. People with disabilities are citizens and taxpayers, and it was unconscionable that they were denied the benefits of publicly supported services.

Since then, we have learned that providing accessibility is often not difficult -- where there is the will. Thus, in 1990, with ADA, we required reasonable accommodations by businesses and other private entities.

Perhaps in no other area have we had such visible success. Last May, even before the effective dates of ADA, GAO reported that accessibility is generally good. ADA should eliminate many of the remaining barriers. I have been deeply impressed, in my home state of Kansas and elsewhere, that despite the real costs and some uncertainties about what ADA requires, people recognize how important accessibility is and are willing to do their part.

Education of Children with Disabilities

I also spoke about the need to improve education for children with disabilities. Back then, the Council for Exceptional Children estimated that less than one-third of children needing special ed

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often considered inevitable, today independent living is an important goal. The Federal government backs this view with dollars. In August, I cut the ribbon at a brand new independent living center in Dodge City, in the western, most rural part of my state. Kansas now has 12 independent living centers, bringing their services within reach of most citizens.

Indeed, fifty years ago, we had a President, Franklin Roosevelt, who could not walk and believed it necessary to disguise that fact from the American people. Today I trust that Americans would have no problem in electing as President a man or woman with a disability.

But this is not something Congress can take credit for. It is something people with disabilities have done for themselves.

In 1970, I spoke on the Senate floor about a young woman, Judy Heumann, who I read about in the New York Times. Ms. Heumann filed a lawsuit because the New York City School Board had refused her a teaching job simply because she was unable to walk and used a wheelchair.

Well, she won that lawsuit and today is the Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitation Services in the U.S. Department of Education.

And I congratulate the advocacy community. When I arrived in the Senate, there were few organizations representing the interests of people with disabilities in Washington. In the early 1970s, the forerunner of today's Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities was formed. Now CCD is a vigorous association of over 130 member agencies, representing millions of Americans with disabilities and their families.

Persistent Joblessness and Poverty

The news is not all good, however. The poet Archibald MacLeish once wrote, "America was always promises." But America's biggest promise -- a job -- is too often an empty promise to the disabled. According to a Census Bureau report released several weeks ago, only 52% of people with disabilities are working, and only 23% of those with a severe disability.

Even more disturbing, other surveys have shown that over the past 15 years, the percentage of people with disabilities not working has remained constant, or even increased.

I would not be concerned if people were well off. But they are not. According to a 1992 GAO study, 45% of families headed by a person with a disability, and 65% of single parents or single persons with a disability, live in poverty. These numbers are startling, and I bet unknown to most people.

The Federal government certainly has tried to help. Between just two programs, Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income, it spent \$54 billion last year for cash incomes to people with disabilities.

There is no career ladder for Social Security recipients. The lesson here is simple: for people with disabilities, as for most Americans, working is essential to a decent income. We need to help people get off the disability check and onto a paycheck.

Disability Future: Addressing the Problems

What's wrong, and what's the remedy? In my view, there are two big problems. First, as I said back in September, our vocational rehabilitation program is outdated. Our Social Security disability programs still discourage people from going to work. True, we have created work incentives, but few use them.

Second, our expectations for people with disabilities have changed. What was once acceptable is not any longer. Indeed, many Federal disability programs are in trouble. We can have little confidence that our priorities are right or that our money is well spent.

There are also other non-disability programs that serve large numbers of people with disabilities that need attention. For example, 27% of welfare mothers are either disabled or have a child with a disability. Both Republican and Democratic welfare proposals generally exempt such individuals from reforms. We mean well, I know, but I fear we are doing these individuals no favor.

If we are in trouble today, consider the future. Little attention is paid to the rapidly growing number of people with disabilities. In my view, disability will soon become the nation's number one health care and social welfare issue.

Unfortunately, good ideas for change are in short supply, especially compared to many other areas of policymaking -- such as defense and national security, telecommunications, education, and employment. The Federal government itself funds little disability policy research. Worse, as one disability expert has stated bluntly,

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"We in disability services continue to plan for yesterday ... to overcome the problems of a decade ago."

Our Federal agencies haven't been much help, either. As Senator Moynihan has said at least twice in the past six months, the Social Security Administration "has been brain dead in a policy sense for 15 years."

A National Commission on the Future of Disability

For these reasons I introduce today a bill to establish a National Commission on the Future of Disability. Its purpose is to examine all the nation's disability programs; evaluate them according to the goals of ADA -- equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency; recommend priorities; and prepare us for the 21st century. It must interpret this charge very broadly. And it must look to the unfulfilled opportunities of rehabilitation science.

This Commission is also charged with actually writing bill text. Good ideas are fine, but we need something to work with.

This, then, is the sum and substance of my 25th anniversary speech in the Senate. I know of no more important subject matter, not solely because of my personal interest, but because in our great country, to quote the president, "We have not a single person to waste." I think this is something we can all agree on, Republican or Democrat.

No doubt about it, much work remains. But I know we are ready and willing.

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Remarks delivered on the Senate floor, approximately 9:35 AM ET.