

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on the Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act
October 2, 2023

The President. My name is Joe Biden. I'm Jill Biden's husband. *[Laughter]*

And what I told this beautiful lady when we met inside: She's doing so much to change people's lives. All of you are.

I look out there and I see one of the guys that got it started: Tom Harkin. Tom, stand up. Stand—stand up for people to see you. Good to see you, Tom.

And, Elizabeth Dole, Bob Dole was a major, major player in all of this. He really was.

I remember getting in trouble because someone was criticizing Bob Dole on the floor for—why do we need curb cuts, why do we need all those kinds of things? *[Laughter]* And I got myself in trouble. Anyway—*[laughter]*—but he's a great—and there's so, so, so many really important people here that made all this possible.

Tammy Duckworth, who is—she's too young. Steny Hoyer—Steny. Madeleine Dean and Jared Huffman—I think they were supposed to be here. Mark Pocan—and, Mark, you're here? Well, I guess what.

Mary Gay Scanlon—Scanlon. I keep telling her: I think we're related. I found out—when I went to Ireland, they did my genealogy, and they said I've got a "Scanlon" in the background. So you may be my—I may be your 19th cousin. *[Laughter]* Jan Schakowsky. Jan, good to see you. And Dina Titus.

Look—and by the way, is Tim Shriver here? Tim, thank you, pal. You've been there the whole time with the Special Olympics. You've changed it. You really—it's incredible what you've done.

And I'm not going to read all the organizations, because we'd get sunstroke by the time I get finished doing that. *[Laughter]* But look, I want to welcome you all of the White House.

And, Selma, thank you for the introduction. But more importantly, thank you for your advocacy. Your advocacy has given people hope. You've changed people's lives, along with the rest of you who are here.

You know, Kamala and Doug are here. I want to thank them for being here. They're strong, strong, strong supporters as well. And I want to thank you, Kamala, for your leadership.

We're joined by many Members of Congress, as I said, and—including some of the biggest champions of this disability rights community, and I think I've gone through most of the names already.

But here's the deal: You know, the—a big thanks to the courageous activists here who work so hard to make the country more accessible and more just.

You know, one of my first acts as a United States Senator—I know I don't look old enough to do it—*[laughter]*—but one of my first acts was I voted—I was a cosponsor of the Rehabilitation Act, which was the first time in our Nation's history we declared in law what we knew to be true: that Americans with disabilities deserve dignity, respect, and an equal chance at the American Dream.

The Rehabilitation Act is one of the most consequential civil rights laws in our Nation's history, banning discrimination on the basis of disability by any entity funded by the Federal Government.

You know, it promoted equal access to—for communities—access to our communities—authorized independent living services and research that supports disabled people in living the lives that they want to lead.

Folks, but after the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law, its implementation was delayed. In response, disability advocates staged sit-ins named for the section of the law that the Government had failed to implement.

One of those was—as you've already mentioned—Judy Heumann, who we lost earlier this year. And we're joined today by so many of Judy's family and friends. Would her family stand up, any of Judy's family. [*Applause*] Thank you, thank you, thank you.

As an infant—and you all know—Judy contracted polio and lost the ability to walk. At the age of 5, she was prohibited from entering kindergarten because her principal deemed her wheelchair a "fire hazard." A fire hazard.

Judy turned that pain of this rejection and the many more that followed into purpose. After the Rehabilitation Act passed, she led demonstrations in San Francisco, testified in congressional hearings, demanding—demanding—that the people in power actually implement the law that was passed.

And, after 4 years of protests, Judy and disabled activists all over the country were successful. History shows it's often not the people in power, but the power of the people that moves a nation forward. And all of you did.

The Rehabilitation Act laid the groundwork for another landmark law celebrated today: the Americans with Disabilities Act. Steny Hoyer led the charge in the House along with Major Robert—excuse me, Major Robert Owens and Tony Coelho—I don't know, as well as Tom Harkin and Bob Dole. They led the fight in the Senate. You know, I was enormously proud to be a Senator—a Senate cosponsor.

Today, three decades after its passage, many of us can still recall the America where a person with disability could be denied service in a restaurant or a grocery store, where an employer could refuse to hire because of the disability. And when we passed this law, we made a commitment to build an America for all Americans—for all Americans.

Perhaps most importantly, we did it together. This was a bipartisan bill, signed into law by a Republican President, George H.W. Bush, 33 years ago on this spot on the South Lawn of the White House.

It marked progress that wasn't political, but personal for millions of disabled American veterans and families. Folks, for more than 61 million Americans living with disability, these laws are a source of opportunity, meaningful inclusion, participation, respect, and, as my dad would say, the most important of all, dignity. Being treated with dignity.

Ensuring the American Dream is for all of us, not just some of us. A bulwark against discrimination and a path to personal independence. And for our Nation, these laws are a testament to our character as a people, a triumph of values over selfishness.

But of course, these laws didn't bring an end to the work we need to do. Disabled Americans are still three times less likely to have a job, and they're—often earn less for exact work someone else is doing who is not disabled.

Too often, disabled Americans are unable to vote, to get to and from work and school, to enjoy public spaces. But, thanks to all of you, we're making—continue to make progress.

In my first few months in office, I was around to sign an Executive order—proud to do it—establishing a Government-wide commitment to advancing equality and equity in Federal employment, including for people with disabilities.

It brought together—[*applause*]. It brought together the Department of Labor and the Office of Personnel Management to ensure that we're making Federal workplace—the Federal workplaces all over fully accessible to people with disabilities so that dignity and rights of disabled Americans are lifted in every policy we pursue.

The whole purpose of engaging my Labor Department is to help protect workers with disabilities and fight to end the unjust employment practices. You know, we're also helping State and local governments, businesses, and nonprofits access Federal funds to hire more disabled Americans.

And we continue—we continue—to make sure this administration looks like America, appointing people with disabilities to positions all across our Government. And, over my first 2 years, my administration—we've seen a 22-percent increase in people with disabilities employed by the Federal Government, and we're going to continue to grow it.

We're making the Federal Government a model employer when it comes to wages, accommodations, and opportunities to advance for people with disabilities.

We're also taking action to improve access to health care for disabled Americans. Today, as many of you unfortunately know, some doctors and hospitals are denying medical treatments related to organ donations or lifesaving care for disabled Americans based on their disability alone. That's why the Department of Health and Human Services just proposed a rule barring—barring these kinds of denials for medical treatment, because no American—no American—should be deprived of health care they need. Period. It's simple. [*Applause*] No American.

And the Department of Health and Human Services also launched the long COVID clinical trials and created the Office of Long COVID Research and Practice with a first-of-its-kind initiative in our history.

And because of your advocacy, the National Institutes of Health just designed—just designated people with disabilities a health disparity population. And you all know what that means, but I'm going to try to briefly explain that to people listening—which opens up new funding for research into unmet health needs specific to disabled Americans.

We launched ARPA-H to drive breakthroughs in biomedicine to prevent, detect, and treat diseases, including cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and other neurological diseases, like MS.

The American Rescue Plan provided billions of dollars to all 50 States—all 50 States—to expand home- and community-based services under Medicaid so—again, in my experience—with friends who are disabled, my experience is, it also just continues to provide the dignity they're looking for—just dignity—more people with disabilities, including intellectual and developmental disabilities, can live independently at home.

The Inflation Reduction Act capped the cost of insulin at \$35 a month. And out-of-pocket prescription drug costs are going to be limited to \$2,000 a year for older Americans, no matter what the disability, no matter how expensive, no matter what drugs they use. Even if you're using cancer drugs that are \$10-, \$12-, \$14,000—no more than \$2,000 a year.

Our bipartisan infrastructure law makes the biggest investment ever—\$1.75 billion—to make transit and rail stations more accessible. We're mobile—we're modernizing airports by

adding wheelchair ramps, accessible restrooms, and so much more. And the Department of Transportation issued a rule that now requires all new single-aisle aircraft over a certain size to have wheelchair-accessible restrooms.

The Department of Justice proposed standards for State and local governments to make their internet content and mobile apps more accessible to disabled Americans so they can easily do things like travel to and from work and school, care for their selves and their loved ones, and vote.

And look, accessibility is a cornerstone of ensuring Government works for everybody—accessibility.

So let me close with this. Judy Heumann, in reflecting on her life, wrote, and I quote: "Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happens over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can."

Well, that's the story we celebrated here today: progress, hard fought and won, making real our Nation's founding promise that every American—every American—has a right to be recognized and respected for who they are.

And millions of Americans with disability, it's a source of identity and power. This is the essence of disability pride. Look, folks, it's the essence of what Judy and so many of you here today have fought so hard for and the progress we'll continue to make together.

Folks, as I look out on all of you, I can honestly say I've never been more optimistic about America's future. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. Never. We just have to remember who in the hell we are. We are the United States of America. There is nothing—nothing beyond our capacity if we set our mind to do it and we work together.

And, folks, there is so much more. I don't—I—because it's so hot out here, I don't want to keep you, but—[*laughter*]. Folks, the fundamental research going on for all the various disabilities is staggering. It's staggering. And, for example, whether it's ARPA, we're spending billions of dollars on research and development for health disparities, everything from—anyway, I won't—[*laughter*].

But it's because of you all. You all not only had the physical courage to deal with whatever your disability is—those of you who are in this community—but you stood up. You spoke for everybody else. You spoke not just for yourself, but for everybody. You've changed people's lives for the better. You've given people hope. And you've allowed them—allowed them—to regain their pride, their dignity, and be able to do what they want to do as best they can.

So I just—I think this is just the beginning. I think someone is going to be standing here 20 years from now talking about how fundamentally it's changed across the board—across the board. We can never stop.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you.

Audience member. Hear, hear!

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to actor and disability rights advocate Selma Blair; former Sens. Thomas R. Harkin and Elizabeth A. Dole; Sen. L. Tammy Duckworth; Reps. Steny H. Hoyer, Madeleine C. Dean, Jared W. Huffman, Mark W. Pocan, Mary Gay Scanlon, Janice D. Schakowsky, and Constadina A. Titus; Timothy P. Shriver, chairman of the international board of directors, Special Olympics;

Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff; and former Rep. Anthony L. Coelho.

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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Blair, Selma; Coelho, Anthony L.; Dean, Madeleine C.; Dole, Elizabeth A.; Duckworth, L. Tammy; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harkin, Thomas R.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hoyer, Steny H.; Huffman, Jared W.; Pocan, Mark W.; Scanlon, Mary Gay; Schakowsky, Janice D.; Shriver, Timothy P.; Titus, A. Constadina.

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