

Rehabilitation Act 50th Anniversary

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Mr./Madam President, I rise today to highlight the importance of the Rehabilitation Act, and to recognize the law's significance as we celebrate its 50th birthday today.

The Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in programs that receive Federal funding. It helped lay the foundation for the Americans with Disabilities Act, which wasn't signed into law until almost two decades later.

But aside from that, the anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act also serves as a reminder that we are where we are now because of the sheer willpower of disability activists from across the country—activists like my late friend, Judy Heumann, whom I can't help but remember today.

Even though the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law in 1973, it was not implemented until 4 years later, and that was only after hundreds of disabled activists sat in and occupied Federal buildings across the country.

At San Francisco's sit-in, which lasted for weeks, protestors like Judy refused to be moved. Authorities shut off the phone lines. They shut off the water so those protesting went thirsty. But our community stuck together and stayed strong.

I'm grateful these dedicated activists persisted despite difficult obstacles, and their persistence and determination should inspire our country to push further towards achieving the ultimate goal of full accessibility and inclusion.

People with disabilities continue to face discrimination every day. From lack of access to healthcare to disparately low employment rates; from inaccessible websites and official documents to suffering the indignity of having airlines destroy wheelchairs and assistive equipment on flights, our Nation must push past complacency and work to ensure the letter and spirit of the Rehabilitation Act and Americans with Disabilities Act are applied to all aspects of life in the 21st century.

Our community is already more than 61 million strong—a number that will continue to grow in the years ahead. Because the truth is that every American is just one day away from becoming disabled, and everyone should hope to live long enough that they eventually gain some sort of disability. Our Nation's laws and policies should reflect that.

That's one reason why I'm proud that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services acted on my request that Medicare finally cover seat elevation systems in power wheelchairs.

It's why I'm proud that the Government Accountability Office agreed to study health disparities experienced by people with disabilities.

And it's why I'll keep working with the disability community to honor and carry on the work of Judy and all the advocates, activists and allies who helped get us to this point.

So here's to 50 years of the Rehabilitation Act, and to everything we do in the next 50!