

“Nothing About Us Without Us”

This phrase was popularized by James Charlton during the 1990s disability rights movement. He mentioned first hearing this phrase from South African disability activists. This phrase is now commonly associated with the disability rights movement with the idea being that people with disabilities should be involved in decisions that impact their lives.¹



Change Through Activism

How social activism created a legal framework for equal rights and opportunities for individuals with disabilities with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.

Change Through Legislation

Following the momentum of the 1960s-1980s civil rights movement, social activism continued to pave the way for more change entering the 1990s and new millennium. One specific example of how social activism was a primary driver for change, and subsequently executed through a means of legal change, was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. This act, which was modeled similarly after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was signed into law on July 26th, 1990, by President George Bush. Its policy was a culmination of advocacy efforts at the time and covered items like employment, transportation, public accommodation, and government services as it related to disabled individuals. This law marked an impactful change because it was said to have offered more comprehensive protections than previous laws concerning the same issues, however many still see challenges related to enforcement and full inclusion.

Reasons for Activism	Means of Activism	Was Change Successful
- Momentum: lessons and enthusiasm from previous movements (women’s rights, African American rights, LGBTQ+ activism) provided a road map for organized advocacy and legislative pressure - Veterans: upon return from various wars and conflicts, disabled veterans required greater access to benefits, rights, and disability protections² - Inaccessibility: public spaces, transportation, and commercial buildings lacked elements such as ramps, elevators, and technologies that allowed everyday people equal access to spaces in the built environment³ - Systemic Issues: people with disabilities faced widespread barriers not comprehensively protected by previous laws^{4,5} - Perspective Shift: the Independent Living Movement worked to reframe disability into a civil rights issue⁶	- Direct protests: sit-ins at federal buildings and state capitols (“Capitol Crawl”)⁷ - Lobbying: activists built relationships with sympathetic lawmakers, drafted bills, and advocated for strong legal language⁸ - Legal challenges: court cases highlighted systemic discrimination, such as educational and employment denials or inaccessible facilities creating legal precedents that strengthened advocacy⁹ - Coalitions: alliances with civil rights organizations, labor unions, and advocacy groups amplified public support¹⁰ - Public awareness: media stories and coverage humanized the struggle, swaying public opinion in favor of reform - Evidence-based arguments: activists used statistics on unemployment, inaccessibility, and discrimination to demonstrate the scope of the problem and justify legislative action	It was successful in terms of change:¹¹ - Immediate changes: I. Equal Employment Opportunity II. State and Local Government Services III. Public Accommodations and Commercial Facilities IV. Telecommunications V. Miscellaneous Provisions: clarifies relation to other laws - Challenges: continued discrimination related to uneven enforcement or implementation of accessibility standards. Expense of updating uncompliant and past systems.¹² - Long-term: shift toward inclusion that paved the way for other crucial legislative amendments, changes, and attention¹³

Shape of Change



A Few Key Voices¹⁴



Justin Dart Jr.

- often called the “Godfather of the ADA”
- co-founded the American Association of People with Disabilities
- lobbied congress to pass ADA



Judith Heumann

- known for the lawsuit against the Board of Education case
- a founding member of the Independent Living Movement
- leader in the World Institute on Disability



Ed Roberts

- father of the Independent Living Movement
- fought for admission into UC, Berkeley
- advocacy led to the creation of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living

A Very Brief Timeline¹⁵

