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Let Every Voice Be Heard...Communicating with a Legislator

People with disabilities do not have equal access to opportunities in employment, education, housing, travel, social life or health protection. The government which is set up to protect and serve rights, often ends up being the overseer of institutionalized discrimination. As a social and political class, people with disabilities are particularly underprivileged and disadvantaged.

People with disabilities can begin to claim their American birthright by using the system that currently discriminates against them. By shining a light on the unfair treatment and unequal access to this country's political and economic harvest, you will begin to change the system for all people with disabilities.

Lawmakers must begin to understand that becoming a "prisoner of benevolence" is not a substitute for access or opportunity. We must teach them that people with disabilities face far more incapacitation from societal and institutional barriers than actual personal disability.

Once people with disabilities begin an honest dialogue with lawmakers about the condition of their lives lawmakers will begin to understand how the decisions they make affect people with disabilities.

Like it or not, the dialogue about government's role in this country is different from it was a decade ago. Strategies that brought favorable attention then, many now believe are ineffective.

Like any good strategist, advocates for people with disabilities must change the type of offense they use when the battle field or opponent changes. The middle part of this century saw many changes we take for granted today. People "in the trenches" rallied troops to march and protest.

While marches and protest still attract attention today, those strategies may not be the most effective means of reforming the current system. Today's political and economic climates require

advocates to shift from arguments of a high moral ground of civil rights to cost effectiveness and fiscal responsibility.

We are in luck though. Lucky because granting people with disabilities equal access and civil rights are both cost effective and fiscally responsible. For example, disability advocates talk about the need for fair housing. We say that people with disabilities need to get out of institutions and into independent living situations. It is a statistical fact that housing people in community-based settings costs much less than housing them inside an institution.

Forty-nine million Americans with disabilities want what all Americans want . . . the touchstone of American identity . . . independence. That is no small number. If we all work together, with one voice, lawmakers can and will respond.

Conclusion

Some advocates for people with disabilities work well outside the system, pressuring and pushing the envelope. These advocates want to revolutionize the system . . . to tear it down and begin again. Others work well within, massaging legislation, reforming and sometimes even creating new and better laws. These advocates want to build on the current strengths and make the system better.

Neither position is wrong. Both positions come from positions of logic and strength. Together, advocates with differing views will move our civil rights struggle farther down the road to equal access.