

**“THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: LESSONS FOR THE  
VIRTUAL WORLD”**

**Remarks By**

**William E. Kennard**

**Chairman, Federal Communications Commission**

**For**

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Thank you for that kind introduction.

Thank you, *Ability Magazine*, for sponsoring this wonderful relay.

Thank you, Mayor Riordan, for participating in today's event.

It is great to be here. I'm a homeboy – born and raised right here in Los Angeles – and I tell you, it's great to be home.

On my way to California, I was thinking about how much has changed in the past few decades. I was thinking about how this state—and all the people in this room—have changed America.

Thirty years ago a few students in Berkeley started talking about disability rights.

Some students with disabilities arrived at the campus – their campus – and realized that there was nowhere for them to live.

Students with disabilities could not live in campus housing. They could not live with their peers and be fully a part of campus life because housing was not accessible to them.

If they wanted to go to school at Berkeley, they had to live in a wing in a local hospital because there was no accessible student housing.

These students, students of my generation, had to live in a hospital because there was no housing to accommodate them.

Thank God for these students, because they had the good sense to fight this injustice.

They also had vision and a huge dose of courage.

They did what Americans have done on this continent before we were called Americans. They fought for their rights. They decided that they would not be second class students at Berkeley. And from their courage and determination, a nonviolent movement for disability rights was born – right here in California.

And they won. And after they won the right to accessible housing at Berkeley, they took their movement to the streets of San Francisco.

In the mid-1970s, when the federal government was slow to make its services accessible to people with disabilities, they joined with other activists and held a sit-in at the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare in the San Francisco federal building. The protesters stayed 28 days – the longest sit-in at a federal building in history.

They did media interviews over the phone.

And when their phone service was cut off, they used sign language to communicate with people on the ground.

This protest launched the struggle for disability rights in this country.

It sent a message to the federal government. It marked the arrival of a major movement.

And those Californians: they kept right on rolling. They rolled through that city and this state and right on through the rest of America.

And I am proud to say that some of those very same protesters are now my colleagues in government – serving in the Clinton-Gore administration.

They changed America.

They made concepts like universal design part of the American culture.

They made access to housing, and education, and transportation a reality for millions of Americans.

They took an idea—the idea of access—and made it a part of our laws, our culture, our attitudes.

They helped pass the first Rehabilitation Act in 1973.

They passed the ADA some two decades later. That was a monumental achievement for this movement. We are here tonight to celebrate this achievement – an achievement that not only opened doors for people with disabilities – it opened the minds of our people. That is what is so important about the ADA. It changed the culture.

But the battle is not over. Thanks to those courageous students at Berkeley thirty years ago, much of the physical world is accessible to people with disabilities. But what about the virtual world?

Increasingly, Americans live and work in another world. It is not a world of bricks and mortar. It's a world of billions and billions of digital bits that move at the speed of light over fiber optic networks and through the airwaves – that reside in servers and are manipulated by software.

It is an exquisitely complex world that we call the World Wide Web. And the fact is that those who have access to this world and can navigate through it with ease have a huge advantage in our society and in our economy.

More and more Americans are living in cyberspace. In fact, some people don't seem to live anywhere else. But that's another problem.

Too many Americans with disabilities are being cut off from this virtual world. Americans who need access to the technology that can bring them jobs and information and education in ways undreamed of just a few years ago. This is the real power of the New Economy. And the real challenge of the New Economy is to make sure that this wondrous technology uplifts the lives of every American – regardless of age or ability.

That is the challenge that President Clinton and Vice President Gore have embraced. Under the leadership of the President and Vice-President, the Department of Justice has more than doubled the size of its ADA enforcement program and has removed barriers to opportunity: barriers in city halls, court houses, hospitals, hotels, theaters, stores and restaurants across the country. It has worked to ensure that our nation's public transit systems are more accessible than at any other point in our history.

And making telecommunications systems accessible is the challenge that I have made our top priority at the Federal Communications Commission.

The ADA gave people with disabilities the right to navigate any street, to have access to any business. Now you have access to the store that sells these magical gadgets, from wireless phones to digital TVs. But what's the point if you can't use the products because they aren't accessible to you?

That must change. And we are changing it.

During my tenure, the FCC issued rules and policies that are every bit as fundamental – every bit as elegant in their simplicity and in their power -- as the ADA.

We said that the 54 million Americans with disabilities must have access to the telecommunications products and services that are driving this New Economy.

We said barriers will no longer be tolerated. Not in the physical world. Not in the virtual world.

We said this must be part of our national policy.

We said that no one should be denied access to our telecommunications networks, anytime, anywhere, or anyhow. And that we must give each American the tools to communicate with every other American.

Now, the FCC does not have authority over the content, data, and services that constitute the Internet, but we do regulate the cables, wires, and fiber-optic lines that connect Americans to the Internet. And we have worked hard to make interactive menus on the Internet accessible to people with disabilities. We are also working with the IP telephony community to ensure that all Americans can use that new telecommunications service.

It is inconceivable that this society would tolerate an Internet that is not accessible to 54 million Americans with disabilities. No one wants to regulate the Internet. But with freedom comes responsibility. So industry must meet its responsibility in the digital age; it must make sure that accessibility is built in at the design and manufacturing stages and it must ensure that no American gets left behind.

And at the FCC, we have made sure that Americans have closed captioning on every television, hearing aid compatible phones, wireless phones that work with TTYs, video description, better telecommunications relay services.

Friends, we are building the first curb-cuts on the Information Superhighway.

And none of it—none of it—would have been possible without you.

You are the ones who make our work possible.

So I came here to thank all of you. You are the heroes here. You and people throughout the disability community who led the way.

Franklin Roosevelt, the first President to use a wheelchair, liked to quote from the Bible in his speeches. He liked to quote the line:

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Like all of the great reformers of American history, you have vision. You envision an America that lives up to its promise of equal opportunity for all.

And your vision—your vision of access—is one of the most dynamic, compelling visions of our time.

And at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, your leadership will show us the way to make this New Economy an economy that works for everyone.

Here in California, the California Deaf and Disabled Telecommunications Program Advisory Committee is a model for the nation.

That committee, like the ADA, is ten years old.

It is a committee of consumers with disabilities that advises state regulators here on policies dealing with accessibility.

Because of this committee, because of the hard work and vision of activists in this state, California has the nation's most progressive equipment distribution program.

You keep the state government up to speed about the issues that confront people with disabilities. You blaze trails and let me tell you, people around the country, including at the FCC, are following in your footsteps. Your rallying cry, "Nothing about us without us," has become my rallying cry.

So I am proud to announce today that the FCC will create a Consumer Advisory Committee to open wider doors to the disability community, just as you have done here in California.

We need this committee. Because during my tenure, the FCC has looked at every single rule and policy to make the virtual world accessible.

We established for the first time in history a Disability Rights Office to institutionalize our new relationship with the disability community – to provide information to the community and, most important, to advocate their interests within the bureaucracy.

We wrote the rules to ensure access to the virtual world and then created an Enforcement Bureau to make enforcement of those rules a priority.

A few months ago, we built on the pioneering work by Bob Segalman here in California by adopting rules on speech-to-speech relay. Thanks to Bob's pioneering work, all Americans will have nationwide speech-to-speech relay within a year.

But we didn't stop there.

In February, we adopted rules that require Spanish-to-Spanish relay services, and that, as you know, is especially relevant in this state.

We said that telecommunications relay services should not be limited to simply one kind of service. We expanded our definition of TRS to include video relay services (VRS) and speech-to-speech services (STS), and we recognized that new services like Spanish-to-Spanish can open the network to millions of Spanish-speaking Americans, many here in California.

We also made sure that Americans have access to emergency information. We said that if you are deaf or hard of hearing, you will have access to the life-saving information that every other American takes for granted. You will know what to do in the event of an earthquake, flood or fire.

We have also taken the first steps on video description for blind Americans. Our goal is to do for video description what we have done for closed captioning: make it second nature. Make it an accepted part of the way people use television.

So I thank the disability movement of this state. I thank you for your drive, for your vision, for your leadership. Thank you for starting a movement that I have had the privilege of building on as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Thank you for leading the struggle for access, and building a foundation for our work at the FCC.

And I say to you this evening, keep on fighting.

Keep on leading.

Keep on inspiring.

And remember that the importance of this movement is not only about writing laws or rules or policies. It's about changing the culture. Changing attitudes. Breaking down barriers in our minds.

Just as you have worked to break down barriers in the physical world, work with me to break down barriers in the virtual world – in cyberspace.

Work with me to ensure that no part of the virtual world is off limits to any American. So that all Americans can reach into this wondrous virtual world and connect with the mind, the talent, the heart of every other American.

That is our challenge.

I believe it is the most important challenge of the New Economy – to make sure that everyone can be a part of it.

Thank you.