

July 21, 2005

A PIONEER PRESS PUBLICATION

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PIONEER PRESS

Thursday, July 21, 2005

NEWS

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1990 Disabilities Act nudges change

By **LYNNE STIEFEL**
STAFF WRITER

Fifteen years after a federal law was enacted to guarantee disabled Americans access to jobs, transportation and public facilities, opinion is mixed about its success.

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"There have been a lot of successes since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, but certainly not to the degree that I believe former President Bush wanted and certainly not to the degree the disabled wanted," summed up Vickie Wilson, executive director of the Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities in Illinois.

Since the law was signed in July, 1990, a myriad of changes in public accommodations have benefited not only the disabled, but also everyone, noted Peter Berg, a technical assistance coordinator with the Great Lakes Disability and Business of Illinois at Chicago.

"Curb cuts and ramps were seen as accessible for wheelchairs, but it's made a huge difference for strollers, bikers, skate boarders and (delivery services) and wasn't commonplace prior to the ADA," Berg said. "Automatic doors aren't re-

quired under the ADA, but many shopping malls have gone to the automatic doors. Probably the No. 1 users of the automatic doors are families and children, not necessarily the disabled."

All 12 lines in the Metra rail system are fully accessible, as are 131 of its stations. Another 31 stations meet some, but not yet all, ADA requirements. Rail cars that accommodate people with disabilities are marked with an "access" symbol.

Wheelchair lifts have made all of the CTA's 150 bus routes accessible to customers with disabilities.

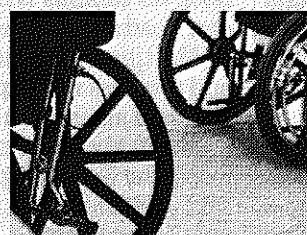
Since the ADA was passed, more movie theaters provide listening devices for the blind and captioning systems for the deaf, and, though not an ADA requirement, more programs on television have captions available.

Progress slow

Although those with disabilities have an easier time getting around, progress has been slow for them when it comes to finding jobs.

A 2004 survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability, and the Harris Poll — their fifth since 1986 — found only 35 percent of people with disabilities reported being employed full-time or part-time, compared to 78 percent of those who do not have disabilities.

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What the Act says

The Americans with Disabilities Act makes it a violation of federal law to discriminate against people with disabilities. It protects more than 43 million people in the United States who have physical, visual, hearing or cognitive impairments.

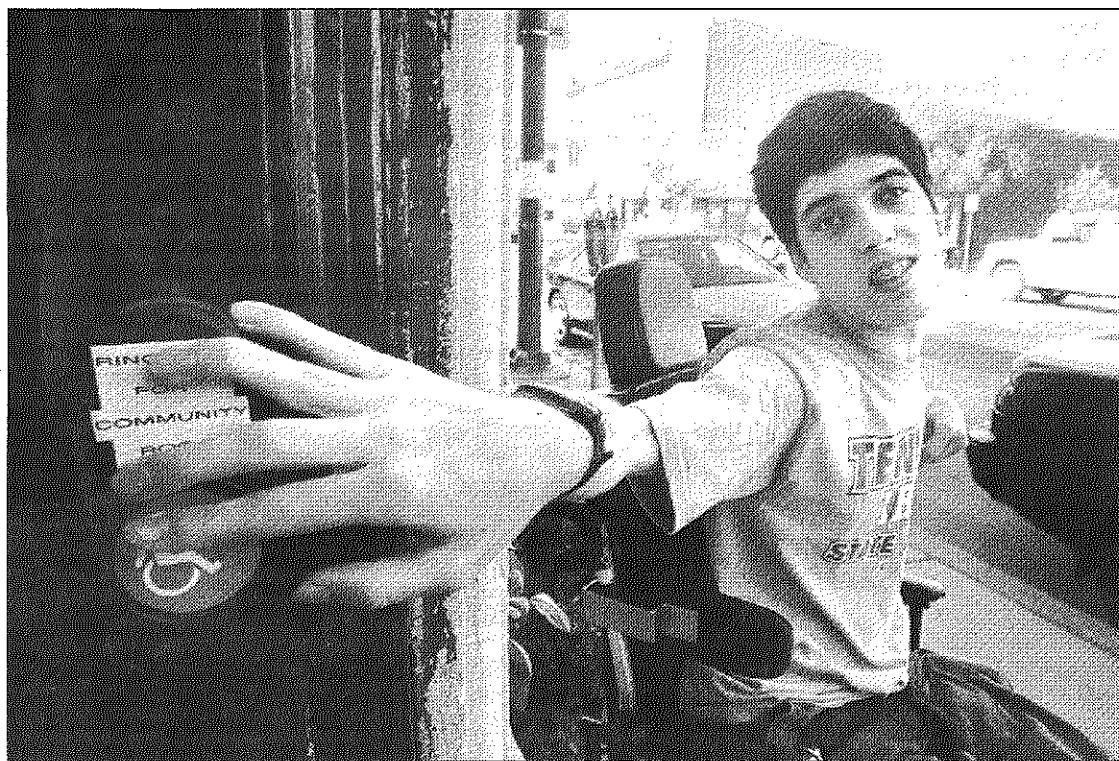
The Act's four sections state, in summary:

- Employers with 15 or more employees cannot discriminate against qualified job applicants and employees on the basis of their disability.
- State and local governments, including transit services, must be accessible, and no one can be prevented from using a program, service or activity because of a disability.
- Public places, such as restaurants, hotels, schools, doctors' offices and recreational facilities, may not discriminate on the basis of disability and must be made accessible.
- Telephone companies must provide services for people who use telecommunication devices for the deaf or similar devices. At a minimum, closed captioning of federally funded public service announcements is required on television.

For information on the ADA, contact:

- U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, at (202) 514-0301;
- Great Lakes Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center, University of Illinois at Chicago, at (800) 949-4232;
- Illinois Department of Human Rights, at (312) 814-6200; or
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Chicago, at (312) 353-2713.

Pioneer Press/LPK



Jason Han/Staff Photographer

Ted Gram-Boarini shows off the "Big Bell" item that he sells to churches, businesses, doctor's offices and other places to accommodate people with disabilities. The device is set much lower than traditional bells so that people in wheelchairs may reach them easily.

Law helps open doors, but much remains undone

By **BOB SEIDENBERG**
CITY EDITOR

You might say the Americans with Disabilities Act is opening doors for Evanston resident Ted Gram-Boarini.

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Gram-Boarini, 21, of 1126 South Blvd., is a student at Oakton Community College. On the side, he's a salesman for Inclusions Solutions, a Chicago-based company run by Patrick Hughes Jr., also an Evanston resident, which offers low-cost solutions for accessibility issues.

Gram-Boarini has cerebral palsy, a condition that weakens the limbs and can make opening a door difficult, if not impossible. So he experiences more than your average salesman's high when he sells one of his products, a wireless bell system or portable ramp that makes it easier for people with disabilities to enter a business.

"It's very thrilling when I sell one, it's really a thrill," he said, "because I get a big kick out of when a business becomes more accessible or says, 'Yes, I'd really like to be more of a help to people with disabili-

ties.'"

Fifteen years after the Americans with Disabilities Act was made law, people in the disabilities community say they are making progress, but more work needs to be done toward ensuring greater access.

Law helpful

On one hand, "the impact, I think, has been phenomenal," said Mary Friedl, 56, a member of the city's Commission of Aging and a leading advocate for disabled rights locally.

"I know for myself at the very beginning of ADA I was not nearly as disabled as I am now," said Friedl, who has multiple sclerosis, "and yet my travel was probably more limited because there was no place to go to the bathroom."

Friedl recalled she would sometimes have to drive around hours on trips.

"About the only place I could stop was McDonald's. They were the first ones to set up their bathrooms," she said.

At restaurants these days, she can ask for a table for herself whereas in pre-ADA days, it was like, "What are you, crazy, lady?"

"There's an awareness that (Continued on page 12)

What you need to know about ADA

■ Evanston residents with disabilities say they've seen progress since the American Disabilities Act was enacted into law 15 years ago, but they say there's also still much to do.

■ City officials have upgraded facilities at many public buildings, bringing them into compliance. Evanston fire stations and police headquarters are ADA compliant, say officials, except for Station 5, at 3005 Central St., which is to be rebuilt.

■ Many city parks and recreation facilities have received upgrades, with elevators added at a number of key buildings, allowing people with disabilities to reach upper floors.

■ More parking spaces have been created for drivers with disabilities. The city routinely makes curb cuts at corners in work on streets.

■ Still undone, many small businesses, including restaurants, where compliance is voluntary, have not added accessibility features, and are inaccessible to people in wheelchairs.

■ Officials estimate that the Evanston Civic Center, 2100 Ridge Ave., where most municipal meetings are held, is about 40 percent accessible. Some bathrooms aren't done, and the elevators on the first floor open and close too quickly for people in wheelchairs to enter them in time.

■ Law *Continued from page 9*

people who are disabled are part of the community and need to be included," she said.

She cited improvements made at public buildings, and in travel along streets.

At one time, the only "handicapped" accessible spaces were located behind the main public library building, a total of three, she recalled.

"I can't tell you how many times I drove downtown and had to go home because I couldn't find a space," she said.

She said when she complained to one city official, he

remarked, 'But I don't see any disabled people downtown.' I said, 'That's no joke because we're always looking for parking spaces,'" Friedl said.

At the Evanston Civic Center, 2100 Ridge Ave., where most city meetings are held, a whole row of handicap parking spaces is marked off so people with disabilities can park close to the building. The center's front stairs are another matter, however.

Any time a street resurfacing project is undertaken, the city uses the opportunity to drop

the curb down to street level at the corners by adding ramps, said David Jennings, city director of Public Works.

Moreover, Jennings said the city also has used federal Community Development Block Grant funds to install ramps at many corners, "even when we aren't doing the street."

Max Rubin, the city's facilities coordinator, said access improvements are built into the city's capital improvements plan. He estimates the city has spent \$2.7 million on access improvements since the ADA was

made law. He said the city was making improvements before that.

"In general, if we are spending money on a building, we make sure that every area we touch is made as accessible as possible," he said.

All city recreation facilities are accessible, said Douglas J. Gaynor, city superintendent of Parks, Forestry and Recreation.

He said a significant amount of money is spent annually ensuring that indoor facilities are accessible, and that all redeveloped parks are also made accessible, complying with ADA requirements.

The city added elevators to the Chandler-Newberger and Fleetwood-Jourdain community centers, and at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., in recent years to make them accessible.

The city is working at the Clark Street beach, adding a hard surface that will be placed in the sand, allowing people with walkers and wheelchairs to get out to the water's edge, Gaynor said.

He said work had been done previously at the Lee Street beach.

Barnes, 22, sits in regularly at the city site plan development committee, where developers present initial designs for projects to staff, inviting feedback.

"I try to encourage developers; if they can put a wider doorway into buildings, they (should) do that," Barnes said. "If a high-rise or townhouse is going up, I might say to them, if you have a 44-unit townhouse or development, maybe you can think about one or two units set aside" as accessible units.

Even 15 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act went into effect, it can take a hard sell to convince business owners, particularly small-business owners, that it is in their interest to add accessibility features, said Hughes, the Evanston resident whose Rogers Park business, Inclusions Solutions, is in that line of work.

One restaurant he stops by regularly consistently says no. About the setup, "you would get stuck in the middle of the entranceway — if you could get up the 5-inch step," he said.

On the other hand, other local businesses have added accessibility features, including First Bank & Trust of Evanston, Saville Flowers, the Lucky Platter and Hecky's. Beth Emet the Free Synagogue, 1224 Dempster St., also has added accessibility features.

The Evanston Chamber of Commerce has been supportive, holding seminars from time to time, "to try to inspire more local businesses to become aware of the needs of those who are disabled," said Jonathan Perman, the chamber's executive director, "and to show them what low-cost solutions are available."

For Ted Gram-Boarini and others, automatic door bells and ramps can make a major difference.

People with disabilities can arrive at a business and, facing a stairway or unattended door, have to wait, said Rocky Kunz, Ted's mother.

"It's very demeaning," she said. "You have to wait until some 'able-bodied person,' quote unquote, comes up to help you. Some people don't offer because they don't know whether you are coming or going."

With a special doorbell system, the person at the business comes to the door — a wholly different mode, she said, where Ted and others "are engaging with the store staff themselves," much as anyone else does, she said.

Bob Seidenberg can be reached at bseidenberg@pioneerlocal.com.



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