

Americans with Disabilities Act turns 25

Tom Quinn

Local officials work hard to make sure the city is accessible to any resident, regardless of ability. Not too long ago, however, there were no legal requirements for the government to accommodate people with disabilities – a point sure to be brought home by the 25th anniversary celebration of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 25 at Worcester's Union Station.

Jayna Turcek, the city's director of the Office of Human Rights, said she is proud of the work Worcester has done to ensure compliance with the ADA, although work still remains.

"When you look at where other cities of our size are, and the progress we've made, we know we've been doing a lot of amazing work," Turcek said. "I think we're doing a great job based on what our consultants have told us. I don't think the ADA has been fully implemented in any city or town, but to know we are fully committed to making sure, we're making adjustments."

The ADA, at its most basic level, prohibits discrimination based on a person's disability. It is the law that requires governments to make public buildings and buses wheelchair accessible, employers to make reasonable accommodations for current or potential employees with disabilities, and telecommunication companies to provide services for people with hearing or speech impediments, along with a host of wide-ranging changes and mandates.

Kirk Joslin, CEO of the disabilities advocacy organization Massachusetts Easter Seals, has been working in the disabilities field for 40 years, and remembers a time when people with disabilities were treated as second-class citizens.

"There were no guarantees people in wheelchairs could get access to restaurants, buildings, or even get off the sidewalk," Joslin said.

Turcek said in addition to more visible accommodations, such as wheelchair ramps and sign language interpreters, letting every child attend the same school rather than separate children with disabilities into separate institutions was a boon for educational parity.

"Having the ability to have all kids, all abilities, attend the same school, is a huge impact of the ADA," Turcek said.

The city's anniversary event, which runs from noon to 4 p.m. on Saturday, will be part educational and part celebration. Speeches by politicians will be broken up by music,

dancing and a magician, while different vendors will line the floor.

Of course, a celebration of the ADA that is not completely accessible to all people would be an ironic failure the city might not live down. Turcek and an "accommodations committee" have that covered, though, and the event could turn out to be a model of how to make an event friendly to people with disabilities. The Union Station parking garage will have additional temporary handicapped parking spaces, and special attention will be paid to the drop-off circle adjacent the Washington Square rotary. There will be two welcome stations, at least 40 volunteers, available wheelchairs, Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services for deaf attendees, audio descriptors for blind attendees and abundant signage. In addition, vendors are being asked to have Braille and large font materials available, and to leave the strong perfume at home for the benefit of people with heightened chemical sensitivity. Even things such as the floor plan and seating area had to be carefully planned out to allow enough room for attendees to maneuver.

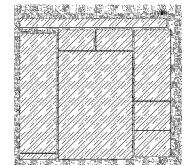
The Easter Seals are planning on bringing paper chains to the event, with notes explaining what the ADA means to individual people. The chains are in memory of those many people with disabilities used before the ADA was passed in 1990 to attach themselves to public buildings or buses in protest of a lack of legally mandated accommodations. The protests culminated in the "Capitol Crawl," in which a number of activists with disabilities crawled up the steps of Congress' headquarters in Washington, D.C. to illustrate the need for the ADA legislation.

"People with disabilities fought for many years to get equal rights and access to schools, businesses and other places," Joslin said. "It's important to celebrate the successes but also look at the work we have to do."

Some of the work to be done includes getting the private sector on board with accommodations.

"The most vital unfulfilled promise of the ADA is access to employment," Joslin said, citing higher unemployment numbers for people with disabilities. "It's a big gap between people with disabilities and people without."

Stephen Stolberg, chairperson of the city's Commission on Disability, said the ADA created a more welcoming environment for job-seekers who may need employers to meet them in the middle.



“The fact that accommodations are easier to get, it makes more people with disabilities want to work,” Stolberg said.

People attending a recent Commission on Disability’s meeting said amenities such as curb cuts, bus lifts and wider doorways may not seem like huge improvements to the average Worcesterite, but they make a big difference to people who use wheelchairs or other devices to get around.

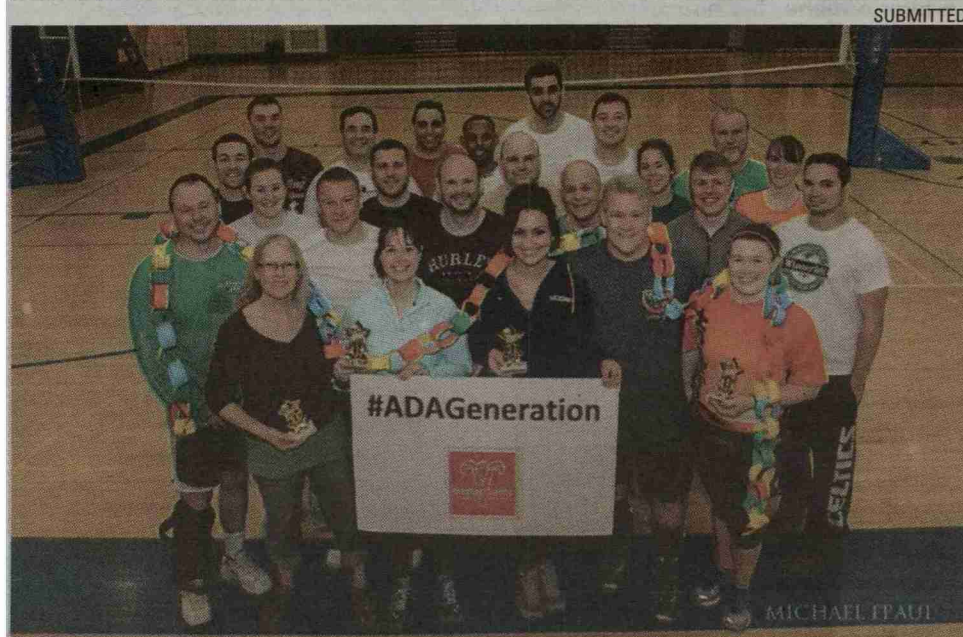
“We know Worcester doesn’t have all the money in the world, but if they can put it on a list to be fixed later, that’s all we ask,” said Stolberg, who spoke highly of current City

Manager Ed Augustus Jr.

Education for private business owners, and the public in general, is one thing the city hopes to achieve during a night of fun for all.

“Folks have a right to come forward to the city and make sure their needs are met by the city, but those obligations by private companies – they also need a little bit of education, and to be informed of what the needs are in the community,” Turchek said.

Parking in the Union Station garage on Franklin Street is free for the event, as is admission.



Top, Commission on Disability Chair Stephen Stolberg and member Nancy Colzi at a recent meeting. Bottom, A group holds up paper chains symbolizing the fight to enact the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).