

Email Interview with Lex Frieden
April 1, 2015

Mila: What effects has the Americans with Disabilities Act had on your own life?

Professor Frieden: ADA has had a profound impact on my life. I am now able to go shopping, restaurants, to the theater, to movies, and to businesses without having to call ahead to find out whether or not they were accessible, and if so how. If I apply for a new job, I don't have to be concerned that the prospective employer will disregard me strictly because I'm in a wheelchair. Now, I can use the bathroom on the floor of the building where my office is, rather than going to the adjacent building where there was an accessible bathroom. I can use public transportation to get to and from meetings whenever I need to, without making appointments days ahead of time. Frankly, there have been so many improvements in the social and physical environments that I cannot even remember all the challenges I used to face daily.

Mila: What are some of the most significant issues for people with disabilities that you worked on while Chairperson of the National Council on Disability?

Professor Frieden: When I was executive director of the National Council on Disability in the mid-1980s, the main issues we addressed related to discrimination on the basis of disability. In addition to the ADA, my colleagues and I worked on amendments to the fair housing act, developed and proposed the air carriers access act, and put forward legislation to make national parks accessible.

As chair of the National Council on Disability from 2002 to 2006, I lead the Council in proposing the ADA Amendments Act (at first we called it the ADA Restoration Act) and I proposed that the United Nations promulgate a Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. I also served on the UN panel that drafted the original convention proposal.

Other issues I worked on as chairperson of NCD included livable communities, adaptive technology and community-based services and supports for long-term care. Under my leadership, the Council also proposed legislation to improve emergency preparedness and response for people with disabilities in disasters. The legislation ultimately passed.

Mila: The theme for this year's competition is "Leadership and Legacy." What do you believe these two concepts mean in terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the disability rights movement itself?

Professor Frieden: Constructive social action and improvements in social policy and practice require leadership. Good leaders must be intimately familiar with the subject matter of their concern, and they must understand the implications of every move they make. They must also be passionate about their objectives and focused on the end goal of making life better for everyone. Legacy is a byproduct of effective leadership.