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Accommodations' for the disabled should become norms | Commentary

By SARAH GOLDMAN

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Sarah Goldman, a guest columnist with cerebral palsy, reflects that some of the steps put in place during the coronavirus epidemic -- such as remote work, remote school and telehealth -- should remain for the benefit of those with disabilities. (Courtesy photo)

I was born into “generation ADA,” which is anyone born around or after the time the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990. I am fortunate to benefit from having curb cuts for my wheelchair, have the ability to ride almost any form of public transportation with few barriers, and attended and graduated from a public university having been 100% accommodated on campus both within and outside the classroom. I certainly don’t take any of that for granted.

On July 26, the ADA turned 30 years old, but is it showing its age? Why do I still have to call nail or hair salons to find out if they are wheelchair accessible because they still have steps to enter in? Why doesn’t every building provide equal access such as an automatic door opener so that those with disabilities don’t have to yank heavy doors open while navigating their wheelchair? Why is it difficult for individuals with disabilities to often get hired when the ADA protects against disability discrimination from employment?

Perhaps it is because we may need minimal accommodations to be successful. Perhaps employers are fearful of hiring individuals with disabilities because of preconceived stereotypes.

Perhaps it is because individuals with disabilities are not incentivized to work by our own government. For example, if we earn above an income limit of about \$30,000 (in Florida) or have more than \$2,000 in our bank account at any given time, we will lose our personal care attendants that are only funded through Medicaid. Work full time or have someone shower and dress you? Your choice. Today, it is almost impossible to do both.

Not long ago, I was at a doctor’s office and the doctor looked at me sitting in my wheelchair and then looked at my caregiver and said, “What’s wrong with her?” Boldly, speaking for myself, I said “I have cerebral palsy.”

“*What’s wrong with her?*” is the lens through which society has been viewing individuals with disabilities for the past 30 years. This model views

disabled people as a societal burden that suck up government resources. It often claims disabled people and their need for their mobility aids as the problem.

What if we flipped the view where the issue is not the person with the disability, but with society? What if we had a model that viewed disability not as an individual problem but as a social problem caused by outdated or nonexistent policies, practices, and attitudes?

As we navigate COVID-19, the United States is practicing this type of model. Individuals are working from home, attending school online, and have telehealth doctor's visits. These are reasonable accommodations individuals with disabilities have been requesting for years. It took a pandemic affecting *everyone* to make these accommodations the "new normal." And what will happen post-COVID? Will we return to pre-COVID norms or will we extend these "new normal" accommodations to benefit both individuals with disabilities, as well as society?

What if we had a model that focused on inclusion for everyone; one that had universal design of buildings or accessible automatic transportation so that *everyone* could navigate equally and successfully?

My life, and the lives of others who are disabled, depend on these advances. I am tired of being seen as a problem. Tired of having to plead for accommodations. Tired of fighting bureaucratic red tape so that I can work full time and continue to live independently. I want to be able to go out with my friends without calling ahead to confirm accessibility.

It is society that needs to accept and accommodate us. Construct buildings that meet standards with universal design features. Include technology as a standard part of designs; use smartphone technology when installing or replacing light switches, thermostats, door locks and more. What may be an accommodation for people with disabilities may also provide benefits to others. It is an equal playing field for us all.

We need society to step up. Are you going to choose to blame the individual for needing access or are you going to help advocate for the societal benefits of universal accessibility, inclusion and equality? Over the next 30 years, I hope society chooses the latter.

Sarah Goldman has used her education and personal challenges living with cerebral palsy to advocate for others with disabilities by contributing to policy initiatives within the Florida Legislature.

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