

Final Push for the ADA Took Time, Political Process

by [Access Press Staff](#) // June 10th, 2015

At the beginning of the George H. W. Bush presidential administration, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became the charge of disability lobbyists, including Patrisha Wright of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, and Democratic lawmakers. Democratic Senators Tom Harkin of Iowa and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, working with Wright, rewrote a more conservative version of the ADA of 1988 than the version written by conservative Republicans on the National Council on the Handicapped. They narrowed the scope of the accommodations to be made so that the bill was more palatable to business and therefore more likely to become law. On May 9, 1989, the ADA was introduced in the Senate by Senators Harkin, Kennedy and Minnesota's David Durenberger. Former Sen. Lowell P. Weicker provided testimony as a parent of a child with a disability. It was introduced in the House the same day.

On June 21, 1989, then-Attorney General Dick Thornburgh, the parent of a son with developmental disabilities, outlined the Bush administration's position on the ADA. Bush as vice president had endorsed the original version of the ADA and expressed support for the rights of people with disabilities throughout his presidential campaign. However, it wasn't until that time that his administration showed support for the ADA. Thornburgh articulated the administration's commitment to sign the bill into law, but also outlined concerns that the administration had. These concerns included the scope of the remedies allowed, the reach of the public accommodations provision and the potential financial impact on small businesses.

During the summer, Senate leadership and bill sponsors reached an agreement with Bush administration officials on major provisions. The president supported the legislation only after sponsors agreed to limit remedies for findings of discrimination largely to those available under the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The ADA continued the long process of hearings through Congressional committees. On September 7, 1989, the Senate voted overwhelmingly (76-8) in favor of the ADA. The vote took place after lengthy Senate floor debate that lasted late into the night with more than a dozen amendments added to the bill and several adopted before the Senate took floor action.

On May 17, 1990, the House began consideration of the ADA. It won approval five days later. A number of amendments to weaken various provisions of the bill were introduced during floor debate and defeated by wide margins. The vote on final passage of the bill was 403-20. The bill then went to conference committees and then back to both bodies for passage again.

Upon passage of the ADA in the Senate on July 13, 1990, Harkin delivered a speech on the Senate floor in ASL. His speech is the first in ASL to be delivered from the Senate floor and can be viewed [here](#).

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.