

Local advocates celebrate ADA 20th anniversary

Americans with Disabilities Act changed community

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The Holland Sentinel

Posted Jul 26, 2010 @ 05:30 AM

Holland, MI — Entrances to most new public buildings are ground level today and — excepting a few small churches — most older buildings have ramps built up past the stairs.

In two decades, architecture has morphed and culture has shifted to make way for a minority group not described by its race, sexual preference or political affiliation.

It's a milestone that local advocates celebrating today — the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act by President George H.W. Bush.

"I think the most significant move that has come from the Americans with Disabilities Act is the idea of accessibility," said Disability Network Lakeshore Executive Director Ruth Stegeman. "If you look at historic architecture, they all have steps." Cities across America also have cut corners off of their curbs so that those who use wheelchairs can roll onto the sidewalk from the crosswalk, Stegeman said.

The employment situation also has improved, said Rick Diamond, director of employment services in Holland.

The situation is complex — only about 35 percent of Americans with disabilities are employed, nearly what it was in 1990, and Diamond said he's heard a few stories to suggest that the declining economy is hurting people with disabilities more than others.

But on the other hand, he's seen that local employers place a value on diversity, and will go even beyond the act's requirement that they provide reasonable accommodation for qualified applicants with disabilities.

And if no one's job is safe, given today's economy, neither should the jobs of the disabled be, he said.

"That it hasn't changed dramatically is telling me that it's not an employer thing," Diamond said. "It's just that Americans with disabilities have the privilege of being laid off and let go and downsized just like Americans without disabilities."

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