



## **Commentary: ADA isn't just the right thing to do — it's good for business**

**By Bruce Freeman**

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I am a successful entrepreneur, a teacher, a father, husband, and active community member. I purchase goods and services like everyone else. While I do not let multiple sclerosis define me, I do need a wheelchair and conversion van to get around.

A couple of weeks ago our House of Representatives passed HR 620, the ADA Education and Reform Act of 2017. It sounds good: Educate people about the ADA and reform legislation that is more than 25 years old. But this bill significantly weakens the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and is a setback for civil rights.

There's not much education in this bill to speak of and it would make it much more difficult for people like me to challenge an inaccessible business. If this passes into law, business owners would no longer need to strive to make their premises accessible. They could just strive for "substantial progress." A grocery store, restaurant, garage or any place of business could "strive" for decades and still be unavailable to someone with limited mobility or who is in a wheelchair.

Hundreds of groups representing people with disabilities are fighting this change and I support them. Some lawyers aren't happy, some owners of inaccessible businesses are breathing a sigh of relief, and much of the general public may not care one way or the other.

All of this got me thinking.

First I have to say that my own experiences with local businesses and places where I work have been, by and large, really positive. Business owners I frequent and places I work see me, Bruce, not the guy in the wheelchair. They want me to be able to get into work without a hassle and want me to keep shopping and eating in their establishments.

As a business professor, business owner, baby boomer, friend and parent, I understand that this is good business, too. According to a census report, there are 56.7 million people with disabilities in this country, representing 19 percent of the U.S. population. We shop, eat out and use services the same as everyone else. With ramps, wider doors and wheelchair-accessible

bathrooms, we are able to shop and eat locally. This point is often made by individuals and groups who advocate for people with disabilities.

But I want to make the point that accessibility is good for business in a much broader sense. People with disabilities have friends and families who choose businesses based on their accessibility. Last year a friend had a party with about 40 people invited, and his wife spent hours on the phone finding a venue that I could get into and that had a wheelchair accessible bathroom. So, in the end, an accessible restaurant got a big party and lots of follow-on business. This happens every day on a smaller scale as people with disabilities shop or eat out with our families and our lunch groups, and work with business associates.

New parents also learn something about business accessibility. The first time they see a flight of stairs they can't pull the carriage up or the store with a bathroom or aisles with no room for a stroller, they start thinking about alternative shops and restaurants.

And, although we have recently been nudged out by millennials, the baby boom generation still is a force with which to be reckoned. Let's face it, all 49 million of us are getting older and are in varying stages of great health and mobility. We want to be active and we have money to spend. Many of us and our friends look for restaurants, stores and services that comfortably accommodate our mobility issues, knee operations, arthritis, fear of falling and need for "comfort" height toilets. This is a phenomenon and business necessity that will increase exponentially as we age.

And as a final thought, I want to say thank you to the business owners and employers who have made it easy for me, my family and friends to patronize your stores, restaurants and services. I also want to ask your readers to look around the next time you access a local business or service. If it is a place that people with limited mobility can access and where they can be comfortable, thank the owner and recommend it to your friends. If not, ask the owner to consider making changes. Tell him or her those changes will be good for business.

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#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Bruce Freeman is entrepreneur, author and college professor. He is public affairs coordinator for Livingston Advisory Committee for Disabilities (LACD) in Livingston, N.J. [BruceFreemanspeaks.com](http://BruceFreemanspeaks.com)