

Commentary: An attack on the disabled

By Bruce Freeman
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A few months ago, the House of Representatives passed HR 620, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Education and Reform Act. It is a shocking attack on people with disabilities. It also is shocking attack on civil rights law itself.

The Americans with Disabilities Act is one of the most practical, visible, and popular pieces of legislation in our history. It was passed by Congress in 1990 with 93 percent of House members voting "yea" and passing the Senate 76-8. When you see a co-worker in a wheelchair roll into work on a ramp, an elderly relative use a restaurant's bathroom easily because there are grab bars, or use a "kneeling" bus with seats reserved or movable for people with disabilities, thank the ADA.

HR 620, which passed the House in February, is an effort to weaken the ADA. It is designed to limit the access of people with disabilities to the courts when business owners maintain premises that do not meet the needs of customers or clients with disabilities. If a companion bill is raised, passes the Senate, and is signed by the president, businesses 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.

HR 620 quietly made its way through the House. After its passage, Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and a number of Senate colleagues released a strong critical statement noting that "advocates had worked tirelessly to oppose the Bill and protect the rights of people with disabilities" but still, it seems to have sneaked through without major public discussion. And this a problem".

Do you know anyone talking about HR 620? I don't.

Do you know whether anyone's talking about turning this idea into a rider to be placed on a popular piece of legislation? I don't.

And the uncertainty and fear that this legislation might ultimately pass and be signed by the president is a stress on the disabled community, their caregivers and loved ones. The fact that popular and practical Civil Rights legislation like the ADA of 1990 can be targeted and weakened under the guise of "reform" leaves the disabled community, their family and friends wondering what might be the next protection or right under the ADA to disappear.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Bruce Freeman is a motivational speaker, co-author of "Birthing the Elephant" and an adjunct professor of business at Seton Hall University. www.brucefreemanspeaks.com

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