

The Impact of the ADA Then and Now

*A 30+ years perspective through the eyes of TRI's Program Director Patrick Muller on the ADA and our **Architectural Barriers Consultation (ABC)** Program.*

I joined the Independent Living Services team at TRI on May 9, 1990 just 4 years after TRI had opened and just before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 1990. Initially hired as an Independent Living Specialist, my first assignment was to learn all about the ADA. We were all excited about what changes this historical landmark legislation would bring. Finally, there would be federal legislation protecting people with disabilities from discrimination in four major areas: Employment, State and Local government services, Places of Public Accommodation, and Telecommunications. For a short summary of the 4 Titles and what this legislation covered see the section below, **“Did you Know.”**

People with disabilities would call the office to complain about the lack of access in many areas in Dutchess County and shopping malls were the most problematic. We heard numerous complaints about the lack of elevators, inaccessible entrance doors, busses without wheelchair lifts, and the overall lack of awareness regarding accommodations for persons with disabilities, such as a providing an ASL interpreter for our Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.

Over the years, we began arming consumers with disabilities with the knowledge of the law and how to go about requesting changes needed for access: what to document, whom to call, what to do to file a complaint., etc. At times, we would get involved and develop relationships with key personnel/managers in the commercial district and supervisors/commissioners in governmental offices, to educate them and work with them to provide solutions. At the Poughkeepsie Galleria, after many conversations, letters and meetings from us, they installed an elevator and added automatic doors. TRI staff served as advisors to the Dutchess County Transportation Committee and, as a result of our advocacy , the County began the process of purchasing fully accessible buses. We discussed providing accessible bus shelters and simple, color coded bus schedules for anyone to follow. I attended the Dutchess County

Code Officials Council meeting to constantly raise the issue of adherence to accessibility guidelines. Our own office expanded its one-person interpreter service to a fee for service program now called Mid-Hudson Interpreter Services with over 50 sign language interpreters available to agencies in the Hudson Valley area. Most government offices now do provide an ASL interpreter when needed. Accessible parking spaces built to code are now prevalent throughout the County.

As a result of having to become so well versed in accessibility guidelines, I also became certified as a building code inspector and began offering Architectural Barrier Consultations (ABC) for a fee. After conducting an ABC evaluation for Dutchess Community College (DCC), they ensured all significant signage was placed at the right location, height, and in braille throughout the college campus. We obtained a contract with Dutchess County Department of Community and Family Services to do ABC for their clients in the Medicaid Waiver programs. Through this program Medicaid then pays for renovations to provide access in the home.

I believe one of the strongest outcomes of the ADA is that Title I (Employment) and Title II (Government Services) became part of NYS Human Rights law. Since there are no “ADA police,” when we are unable to help consumers with their access complaints, we can urge them to file complaints not just under federal law, but also through the NYS Division of Human Rights.

No law can change how people think. If you think I am “stupid” when you meet me (my speech and gait are affected by my cerebral palsy), you are still going to think that, no matter what law exists. The law cannot change people’s thoughts. Attitudinal barriers have not changed. On average once a year as I walk over to my car in a parking lot, I still get stopped and questioned to see if I am drunk.

I also don’t see a lot of representation of people with disabilities in government. When I went to college the disability coordinators had disabilities themselves and that inspired me. It is vital to have leaders in high positions in our community that have a visible and significant disability.

Although we experienced some success, a lot of changes are still needed. The mindset of providers is often that if the person doesn’t ask, they won’t bring it up/offer it (accommodations). Consumers can still call us for

assistance in requesting access to services. If you feel like you are being discriminated, just speak up, give us a call. If you are a business or agency, let us help you become more accessible.