

**From:** Administration for Community Living <acl@public.govdelivery.com>  
**To:** Kester, Tonykester@aging.sc.gov  
**Date:** 9/26/2016 12:11:06 PM  
**Subject:** The Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Independence Bound

---

**September 26, 2016**

## **The Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Independence Bound**

By: Bob Williams, Deputy Commissioner, Administration on Disabilities  
Director, Independent Living Administration

The original Rehabilitation Act became law just before the First World War and little change was made to it over the next five decades. In contrast, the landmark legislation that passed in 1973 altered the course of history in fundamental ways.

When the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 became law, I was just starting my freshman year in high school. My parents and I worked hard for years to win the right, or at least the chance, for me to attend the same school and classes as every other kid in my town. This chance, coupled with the passage of the '73 Act, opened up doors of opportunities for hundreds of thousands baby boomers with significant disabilities like me and successive generations in ways that seemed like the stuff of fiction 40 years ago.

The Act itself was the subject of intense debate and compromise on the part of Congress and the President. Earlier versions of the bill were vetoed by President Nixon in October 1972 and again in March 1973 because he believed the legislation, though well intended, would lead to [unintended consequences](#) both for government and people with disabilities it was intended to assist. This sparked protests led by [young disability activists](#) like Judy Heumann and others who took to Madison Avenue in New York City to demand legislation be passed. Months later, when he signed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 into law, the President [hailed it](#) as creating "expanded job opportunities and further(ing) steps toward independence" as well as demonstrating the good that can come from "executive-legislative cooperation."

For those of us who came of age around this time, its effects expanded and emboldened what we perceived to be the possibilities of our lives. For the first time, the new law required that state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies provide services to individuals with significant disabilities. Soon I saw friends just like me begin to attend college, learn to drive and start their careers with assistance from VR, and I knew I could do the same.

The Act also contained a provision that then US Senator [Hubert Humphrey](#) first tried to attach to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That provision, Section 504 bans discrimination on the basis of disability in all federally funded programs and activities. While its potential effects were initially overlooked, disability civil rights recognized its promise and importance. In the spring of 1977, just as I was about to graduate from high school, people with disabilities and their allies took over Health,

Education and Welfare offices in San Francisco, Washington, DC and other cities to make the Carter Administration to issue rules to fully implement and enforce the vital civil rights Section 504 protects.

I will never forget catching glimpses of [the 504 sit-ins](#) on TV nightly news – tears streaming down, feeling whole at last. Over the years and decades that followed, all that the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 made possible changed millions of our lives and laid a strong foundation for the disability civil rights movement, the passage of [the Americans with Disabilities Act](#) and many other gains. The legacy of the Rehabilitation Act is one we can be proud of and constantly build on. Let's get to it.

*The Rehabilitation Act also established what would become the [National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research \(NIDILRR\)](#), which is now part of ACL. The National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC) helps ensure that the research funded by NIDILRR reaches organizations that put it into practice. [Click here](#) to read a blog from NARIC staff who live with disabilities and share how the Act and the work of the NIDILRR community have impacted them personally and professionally.*

Please do not respond to this e-mail. [Contact Administration for Community Living](#)

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

[Manage Preferences](#) | [Unsubscribe](#) | [Help](#)

---

This email was sent to kester@aging.sc.gov using GovDelivery, on behalf of: Administration for Community Living · One Massachusetts Avenue · Washington, D.C. 20001