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Celebrating 53 Years of the Developmental Disabilities Act

By Jennifer G. Johnson, Ed.D., Deputy Director, Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Fifty three years ago today, President John F. Kennedy signed a historic piece of legislation that we now know as the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act).

At the time, people with developmental disabilities (DD) faced exclusion from many spheres of public and private life, including most schools and community spaces. Many spent nearly their entire lives in large, state-run institutions that were often grossly underfunded and where reports of systemic abuse and neglect were common.

Speaking in Montgomery, Ala. this summer, Administration on Disabilities Commissioner Aaron Bishop explained how he came to see the parallels between the segregation and discrimination faced by people with DD and his family's experiences of racial segregation and discrimination.

Bishop also describes the evolution of DD Act programs and their impact in Alabama and across the country over the last 53 years.

In that time, as the DD Act has grown to provide a broader range of programs that aim to improve integration and inclusion of people with DD, so too have the opportunities for people with DD to live and thrive in the community.

Today, DD Act programs, funded by ACL, in every state and territory empower individuals with DD and their families to help shape the policies that impact them. DD Act programs conduct important research and test innovative new service

delivery models. They work to break down barriers and bring the latest knowledge and resources to those who can put it to the best use—including self-advocates families, service providers, and policymakers. And DD Act programs investigate cases of alleged abuse and serve as advocates for individuals with DD and their families.

[Watch Commissioner Bishop's full remarks on civil rights, the history of the DD Act, and the work that lies ahead.](#) He spoke at the Alabama State Capitol during an event hosted by the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program (ADAP).

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