

20th Anniversary Celebration of ADA

By Ruth Jones McClendon - Guest Commentary

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Earlier this month, Americans celebrated our freedom and liberty with Fourth of July fireworks, picnics and patriotic songs.

It is a joyful time every year when we reflect upon our national history, as well as celebrate our independence and individual freedoms to direct our lives as we choose.

Some of our friends and neighbors living with disabilities work towards independence all year round. Many communities across the nation celebrated July 26 as the 20-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), an essential keystone to ensuring independence.

The ADA is instrumental in allowing individuals with disabilities to participate fully in our economy and society.

In San Antonio, the 20th anniversary celebration of the ADA will be held from 8:30 a.m.-1 p.m., Friday, at the El Mercado (Market Square) and 524 W. Commerce St.

During the event, San Antonio Independent Living Services (SAILS) will be recognizing the enactment of this important law. The stroll begins at 9 a.m., after a lively pep rally, for about a mile to 401 Villita, in LaVillita Hall.

The event also includes awards, vendors with information and resources, free lunch and free entertainment, starting at 1 p.m. Thousands of Texans with disabilities are living independently in our community.

In San Antonio, many of these individuals are assisted in their journey to independence by SAILS, which is a community-based, non-profit, non-residential service and advocacy organization.

It is operated for people with disabilities by people with disabilities.

It means having choice and control over the assistance and equipment devices needed for daily life. Independent living emphasizes:

People with disabilities should be able to live, work, shop and play where they choose within the community.

In order for people with disabilities to live in the community, instead of a hospital environment, the community has a responsibility to be accessible.

People with disabilities are not sick. A person with a disability may become ill, but disability is not always an illness.

People with disabilities should not live in a hospital environment, unless they are sick and in need of acute medical care.

People with disabilities have the same aspirations as people who do not have disabilities.

People with disabilities do not wish to be described as "very brave" when they are successful, nor do they seek pity in the manner of the "poster child" image.

People with disabilities know best what barriers exist to their independence and what they need in order to live independently.

SAILS programs are free and open to anyone with a disability. Services are tailored to the needs and desires of the individual: for more information, see www.sails.org or call 281-1878.

In addition to other programs, these four core services make the independent living movement a reality for San Antonians with disabilities:

SAILS provides training opportunities to help individuals gain skills that enable greater independence. Trainings may include functional life skills; learning to deal with insensitive and discriminatory behavior; or computer training.

SAILS can assist individuals in understanding the law and how to advocate personally for the same rights and freedoms promised to all Texans.

SAILS also maintains comprehensive information on the availability of local resources such as housing, transportation, employment opportunities and other services.

A majority of SAILS' staff and management are persons with disabilities who can provide peer counseling based on their knowledge and personal experience.

Join your fellow San Antonians at La Villita Hall on Friday for a wonderful celebration of independence!

A special word of thanks goes to Rachel McClure at the Texas Association of Centers for Independent Living.