The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990. This year marks the 25th anniversary of this landmark act.

The ADA protects the civil rights of more than 50 million Americans with disabilities. Its purpose is to make sure they have the same opportunities as everyone else to fully participate in public life.

Under the ADA, a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits 1 or more major life activities. Major life activities include things like speaking, walking, caring for oneself, and performing manual tasks. The law also protects people with a history of such an impairment and those who are regarded as having such an impairment.

The ADA prohibits discrimination in all areas of public life, including:
- Employment
  - An employer cannot discriminate against a qualified person with a disability with regard to practices like hiring, firing, advancement, and training.
  - Employers must also make reasonable accommodations for an employee’s disability as long as the accommodations are not too difficult or expensive. An accommodation might be a modified work schedule or a special piece of equipment.
- State and local governments: All public entity (state and local government) services, programs, and activities must be accessible to people with disabilities. This includes public transportation services like bus and rail systems.
- Public accommodations: Public accommodations are places that are privately owned but open to the public. Examples are doctors’ offices, pharmacies, museums, restaurants, day care centers, educational institutions, hotels, libraries, and stores. They must be accessible to people with disabilities and they cannot discriminate based on disability.
- Telecommunications: Emergency telephone services, such as 911, are now directly accessible by people with speech, hearing, and other disabilities. In addition, telephone and Internet companies must provide relay services so that people with disabilities can communicate by phone.

Some Examples of Changes Under the ADA
- Service animals are allowed in most areas of public facilities and private businesses, with some exceptions for safety.
- When necessary, public entities and private businesses must provide communication aids or services to people with speech, hearing, or vision disabilities. For example, a doctor’s office may need to provide a sign language interpreter for a patient who is deaf and needs to discuss a complex medical issue.
- Many new construction projects must meet accessibility standards. These design standards might include, for example, van-accessible parking spaces or doors that can safely and easily be operated by people using wheelchairs or other mobility aids.
- Public and private hospitals, health care clinics, and doctor’s offices must be accessible so that all patients can receive equal medical care. Examination rooms and medical equipment should not pose barriers to care.

For more information
- ADA National Network odata.org
- US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division www.ada.gov

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA’s website at jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish.