Diversity Notes

JOHN M. ROBINSON
OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS

Celebrating Two Key Anniversaries

This year marks the 70th anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), which we celebrate each October to raise awareness about various disability employment issues and honor the many contributions of Americans with disabilities. As we commemorate NDEAM this year, we also celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), landmark legislation enacted to prohibit discrimination based on disability.

The ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public services and communications. It was signed into law with the purpose of dismantling barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities. Throughout the past 25 years, many discriminatory policies, practices and barriers have been removed for people with disabilities as a result of requirements mandated by the ADA and other related laws, such as the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which covers federal employees and applicants with disabilities.

Today, thanks to many of these laws, building entrances are more accessible than they once were. We have also seen many changes in our daily lives such as sidewalk curb cuts and the development of text messaging, which was originally created as an accommodation for people with disabilities. Conveniences that we all take for granted began out of necessity to help people with disabilities to live fully integrated and productive lives. The Department has also taken a number of steps to provide equal access to employees with disabilities, such as the launch of a video-captioning unit to ensure that all official multimedia for internal and external clients are accessible to people with disabilities.

Thanks to increased awareness raised by NDEAM and protections afforded by the ADA, our nation has made a great deal of progress in ensuring equal opportunities and access for people with disabilities in all aspects of life, including employment. We are increasingly committed to appreciating our differences and resistant to all forms of discrimination. Yet, our work still isn't quite done.

To build upon achievements of the ADA and other civil rights laws that have changed our nation, we must go one step further and remove attitudinal barriers toward people with disabilities, in and out of the workplace. Attitudinal barriers often abound in unconscious contexts and thus aren't as easily identifiable as physical barriers. However, they still have a real and detrimental impact upon those subject to them.

Attitudinal barriers include assumptions and fears that impede meaningful communication between people with and without disabilities. Stigmas and stereotypes attached to disabilities or assumptions about what one can and cannot do because of a disability erode morale and negatively affect the workplace. While attitudinal barriers are arguably the most difficult to overcome, we must make a concerted effort to do so because they undermine the principles of equal opportunity and have the potential to obstruct the progress we've made.

As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of NDEAM and the 25th anniversary of the ADA, let's continue to work together to build upon the progress we've made. I encourage you to look around and reexamine your surroundings and beliefs, ask questions and consider how accessible your office and its resources are to others. Are you helping to create an environment where each and every individual feels comfortable bringing his or her whole self to work each day? Without regular self-analysis at every level, we risk unconsciously contradicting our principles by limiting access and opportunity. As we remove various barriers to equal opportunity for people with disabilities, we ultimately strengthen our efforts toward a diverse and inclusive government, nation and world.