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UW System recognizes 30th anniversary of Americans with Disabilities Act

The University of Wisconsin System, with our 13 universities across 26 campuses, strives to provide access and opportunity, creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning communities that advance education, research, development, engagement, and prosperity for all.

This year, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of landmark federal civil rights legislation, mandating that access and opportunity include people with disabilities.

July 26 marked 30 years since President George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law, bringing the promise of inclusion and full participation in dimensions of citizenship for people with disabilities. Prior to the ADA, people with disabilities had limited legal protections to guarantee privileges and benefits in employment, transportation, telecommunications, and digital and functional environments. Supported by disability rights groups and individuals with disabilities, who had experienced generations of systemic exclusion and discrimination, the bipartisan legislation established the ADA, and disability rights were finally identified as fundamental civil rights. We honor this historic event annually in October with Disability Employment Awareness Month.

It is critical that we both celebrate past accomplishments as well as embrace future challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of ADA accommodations, especially because all disabilities are not obvious or visible. The spirit and intent of the ADA has been to meet every individual where they are and to remove barriers to their full and holistic participation in society. Many people who have never previously self-identified as having a disability are now realizing how the ADA applies to their situations and how it can offer them access to accommodation and protection for equity and inclusion.

Since 1990, all UW System campuses have designated [ADA coordinators](#) to ensure equity, inclusion, and compliance for students, employees, and visitors with disabilities who participate in their programs. Each campus also has a [disability resource center](#) to support student access, accommodations, and success.

Not only has the UW System implemented policies and practices to create inclusion and equity for students and employees on campus, but our universities have also actively sought out opportunities to support and improve the quality of life for our broader communities within the state of Wisconsin and beyond. UW System institutions demonstrate a commitment to serving individuals with disabilities across the lifespan through degree programs, research programs, and outreach programs. Embracing

the Wisconsin Idea, the following centers are among those that support research and services for individuals with disabilities:

- UW-Madison's [Waisman Center](#) has the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and the Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities Research Center (IDDRC);
- UW-Stout has the [Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute](#) (SVRI);
- UW-Milwaukee has the [Rehabilitation Research Design & Disability Center](#) (R₂D₂); and
- UW-Whitewater has the [Center for Inclusive Transition Education & Employment](#) (CITEE).

While we celebrate progress made in the past 30 years, we cannot—and must not—rest on past accomplishments. Visible and invisible barriers still exist for many individuals, including physical, digital, ecological, and policy impediments that block the way to participating fully in society. We must resolutely turn to the future and sustain the important work of the ADA and its sister legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), for implementation and accountability.

As we conclude this year of celebration, we must remember that the full promise of the ADA will only be reached through our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to persons with disabilities. The UW System is committed to moving onward and forward – from access to universal design, the concept of designing buildings, products, and environments to make them accessible to all people, regardless of age, disability, or other factors.

— Tommy G. Thompson
President
University of Wisconsin System