

October marks a series of important observances to raise awareness for issues that demand national attention and advocacy. We celebrate survivors and highlight the need to continue the fight against cancer by observing National Breast Cancer Awareness Month; we note the importance of raising money and providing international resources to cure AIDS during AIDS Awareness Month; and we initiate campaigns to increase sensitivity to the abuse that plagues our nation by recognizing National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

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One equally important observance is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, which provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge the contributions that millions of Americans with disabilities make to our workplaces and to reflect upon the huge, often overlooked, potential to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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Indeed, awareness has to be the first step to tearing down the barriers, both physical and social, that prevent the full participation of Americans with disabilities in our workplaces and communities. According to the National Organization on Disability there are 54 million Americans with disabilities, well over half of whom are of working age.

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Only 32 percent of those who are of working age are employed full or even part time.

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That compares to 81 percent of the rest of the population.

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This employment gap reflects a shocking inequality that simply must be addressed if disabled Americans are to share in all that our nation has to offer.

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Most disturbing is that these figures do not represent people who do not want to work, but people who are consistently denied the opportunity to contribute to our nation's prosperity.

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In America, the ability to provide for yourself and your family helps to defines one's identity and maintain one's self esteem.

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Employment impacts every aspect of a person's life: access to independent living, home ownership, health care, advanced education, socializing and economic self-sufficiency.

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Jobs are the ticket  
to inclusion and equality, freedom and  
integration.

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Ultimately, National Disability Awareness  
Month calls us to strive to make  
improvements to the employment  
opportunities for people with disabilities,  
but this  
monthly observance  
is also a time for celebration as we  
recognize and acknowledge the skills,  
vision and commitment of people working  
with disabilities - many of whom benefited  
from the Americans with Disabilities Act  
(ADA) in 1990 and subsequent progress  
in improved access to employment.

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Earlier this year, I celebrated the 17<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ADA, landmark legislation that extended civil rights to an estimated 43 million disabled Americans. As the lead sponsor of the ADA in the House of Representatives, I am proud that since 1990 we have seen signs of progress everywhere—ramps, curb cuts, Braille signs, captioned television programs, wheelchair lifts, and assistive listening devices at movie theatres, to name a few. Most importantly, the ADA has helped improve the attitudes Americans have toward people with disabilities. Winning the hearts and minds of the general public is an essential part of achieving true

progress.

Despite this important and widespread advancement, the promise of the ADA remains unfulfilled for far too many. In recent years, the Supreme Court has slowly chipped away at the broad protections of the ADA and has created a new set of barriers for Americans with disabilities. Under the cramped interpretation of the ADA by the courts, a broad range of people with physical and mental impairments have been

held not to be “disabled enough” to gain the protections of the law. This is not what Congress intended when it passed the ADA.

To address this unacceptable development, I have introduced the *Americans With Disabilities Restoration Act of 2007*. This bipartisan legislation will reinforce the letter and the spirit of the law to ensure that people who

Congress originally intended to protect from discrimination are covered under the ADA.

Furthermore, it will clarify the message of the original ADA, which is: it is unacceptable to discriminate against someone simply because they have a disability.

I remain steadfast in my commitment to enforcing the ADA and expanding opportunities wherever possible. With thousands of severely injured soldiers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, we have a

special responsibility to assure that they will receive the fair treatment they deserve as they attempt to return to work and re-integrate themselves into our communities. Our obligation to disabled veterans goes beyond expressing words of gratitude. It requires providing the resources necessary for healthy and productive lives.

Whether it's an injured Army lieutenant or a person born with cystic fibrosis, every American deserves the equality of opportunity promised in our Constitution. During this National Disability Employment Awareness

Month, we should pledge to work together to build a stronger work force that more accurately reflects America's diversity.