

OPINION



Your Turn
Paul Aronsohn
Guest columnist

Candidates, make disability rights a priority

Dear presidential candidates,

This year's election is happening against the backdrop of a barely noticed, albeit very important milestone — the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) — and I am writing to urge you to seize this opportunity.

There are an estimated 85 million Americans with disabilities. Some are children. Some are adults. They live in every community and in practically every family. Yet, despite the very real progress made over the past 30 years, many of them are treated like second-class citizens — getting an inadequate education, residing in substandard housing and living life without the opportunities and joys the rest of us take for granted.

As the next president, one of you will be in a unique position to do what few national leaders have done before: Make disability rights a priority of your administration — a priority that expresses itself in your appointments, your policies and your communications.

• **Appointments:** You should demonstrate your commitment to a truly diverse Cabinet and White House staff by placing people with disabilities and their family members in key posts. Just as elected officials do with respect to other groups — gender, racial, cultural, etc. — you should seek to balance your administration with folks from the disability community, individuals as well as family members. This would not only send a powerful and important symbolic message to our community; it would also ensure our perspective had a meaningful seat at the policy-making table.

• **Policies:** With the right people in place, you should not only put forward policies to enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities; you should also insist that all of your major policy proposals — regardless of subject matter — are viewed through the prism of disability. Transportation. Housing. Employment. Public safety. Whatever the topic, you should explore the possibility of requiring your team to produce a “disability impact statement” to determine how your policies affect the lives of people with disabilities.

• **Communications:** You should make it a point to talk about disability, often. Don't be shy. Don't be reticent. Just as Presidents frequently make reference to other groups — gender, racial, cultural, etc. — in their communications, you should make it a point to talk about people with disabilities and their families. We need you to acknowledge us. We need you to set the tone.

Disability rights is not a partisan issue, and frankly, on a national level, neither party has an exceptional record on the issue.

Some of us were excited by Gov. Sarah Palin's vice presidential candidacy, because she is a mother of a child with Down syndrome. Some of us were excited by the possibility of Sen. Tammy Duckworth's vice presidential candidacy, because she is a veteran, who lost both of her legs serving our country. Like others, we want people in high political office who look like us, who think like us and who will consistently advocate for us. We want government officials who have not only walked the walk, but who — going forward — will also walk the talk. Disability rights is not a partisan issue, and frankly, on a national level, neither party has an exceptional record on the issue. That might explain why the United States is one of the few countries in the world that has not yet ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Here in New Jersey, we have made great strides in recent years, thanks — in large part — to bipartisan leadership and bipartisan support. And while we have a long way to go to meet the needs of all individuals with disabilities and their families, we have worked across the aisle and across the state to make New Jersey a more inclusive, more accessible place to live, learn, work and raise a family.

Most recently, when Gov. Phil Murphy ran for office in 2017, he explained in clear and in no uncertain terms that “improving the lives of people with disabilities is a top priority.” And from the very start of his Administration, we have been working — with our colleagues across both parties and across all levels of government — to fulfill that promise. My request — on behalf of the millions of Americans with disabilities and their families — is that you, as president, do the same. Thank you.

Paul Aronsohn, who comes from a family with disability, is New Jersey's Ombudsman for Individual with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families.

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