

Disabled are losing optimism, survey shows

Almost 65% say access law isn't helping

By Jack Gillum
USA TODAY

Despite the protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was designed to make their lives easier, there is growing pessimism among the disabled, suggests a new survey by an advocacy group.

Increasing numbers don't expect their lives to improve, the survey shows, and many believe that their disability prevents them from reaching their full capacity in life.

"Imagine living your life thinking that your future will never get better," says Mary Dolan, vice president of the National Organization on Disability, the survey's sponsor.

The organization isn't pushing specific remedies but is calling for greater understanding of the difficulties faced by

people with disabilities. "We're asking for Congress, the media and policymakers to look at these numbers and take them to heart," she says. Dolan says her group aims to "identify key issues to those who can make a difference" at both federal and local levels.

About 50 million Americans live with some disability, the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2003. The new survey, by research group Harris Interactive, tallied responses from more than 2,000 telephone and online interviews. The margin of error is 3 percentage points.

Among findings:

▶ 41% of disabled respondents said they didn't expect their quality of life to improve, up from 35% in 2000.

▶ 64% said the Americans with Disabilities Act has made no difference in their lives, up from 58% in 2000.

But that could stem from ignorance of ADA legislation, says Andy Imperato, a lawyer with the American Association

Happy with life?

The Harris Interactive survey included 1,267 people with disabilities, 988 without, and showed significant differences in their views:

■ With disabilities
■ Without disabilities

How satisfied are you with life in general?

Very satisfied

34%
61%

Will your quality of life get better or worse in the next four years?

Will get better

43%
75%

By Alejandro González, USA TODAY

of People with Disabilities. Some Americans, he says, "have no clue about what the ADA is or what it's done."

Without the act, which was signed into law by the first President Bush in 1990, there would be no accessible buses, he says, or no Braille signs or required wheelchair ramps.

Sarah Burke, an office assistant at a Denver brokerage

firm, has used a wheelchair since she was 17. She says that the ADA has improved her life but that sometimes disability statutes aren't executed properly.

She recalls times when a ramp was too steep or too narrow for her chair. "I would tip over backward on a lot of them."

She believes she has been denied promotions because of her disability and says it's hard to change jobs at 56. "If I went into 5 million places and if they saw me in a wheelchair, they'd probably say 'no,'" she says.

"I don't expect any special favors. I want to be treated like everyone else."

Others say there is a need to better understand the laws in place. At 45 and blind from diabetes, Bill McMahon of Framingham, Mass., says he is frustrated when he sifts through ADA literature. Regulation booklets that are "inches thick" make it hard for people to understand the rights of the disabled.

"The majority of Americans want something as quick and easy as possible" to look at, McMahon says.

The sour numbers in the survey also are reflective of today's economics; many disabled people are living in poverty, Imperato says.

And the picture of malaise isn't limited to the disabled these days when terrorism and the Iraq war weigh on people's minds: "In general, America is less secure, less optimistic."

Jeff Rosen, policy director for the government's National Council on Disability, would like to see better coordination among federal services but points to ADA's successes since its inception 14 years ago. "We're seeing the evolution of people with disabilities. We've just started our journey."

It's a top-down approach of legislation and understanding, advocates say. "There's much work to be done," Dolan says. "On a daily basis, people with disabilities are not fulfilling their potential. That's something we take very seriously."

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