

A Message From Chairman Tony Coelho

"Ability for Hire": The theme we have selected for this year's awareness and educational program is more than a mere slogan; it is a statement of fact, an assertion of pride, and an advertisement to industry. It is a bold announcement that America's 49 million people with disabilities have boundless talents to contribute to our economy, vastly diversified skills to be utilized, and abundant energy for whatever work needs to be done.

We need to communicate to corporate executives, business leaders, entrepreneurs, government officials, and others with hiring authority something we all know to be true: The major challenges to productive employment of qualified people with disabilities are attitudinal barriers and narrow-minded assumptions about what people can and can not do.

What people with disabilities can do is be productive. There are people who are blind working as machinists. There are people who are amputees working on shipping platforms, loading and unloading cargo from trucks. There are sports announcers who cannot see, teachers who are deaf, business executives who are paraplegic, and employees with mental retardation packaging goods for catalogue companies and other major shippers.

They are working on Main Street and on Wall Street, in finance and high fashion, in the suburbs and in cities across the country. In high-profile jobs on network television and in routine, everyday jobs in thousands of ordinary workplace settings, people with disabilities are proving day after day that they have the talent, skill, and ability to do the job.

Whatever the challenge, people with disabilities have demonstrated an indomitable attitude and a will to meet the challenge. They have excelled at every level of industry and government. In the darkest days of World War II, the American people looked for inspiration to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man with a disability.

Yet, 50 years later for far too many of us, the door to employment opportunity remains closed. While the ADA now forbids open discrimination against people with disabilities, prejudice has not disappeared from the marketplace. Prohibition of overt discrimination has not eliminated a more subtle level of bias. Too many qualified applicants still encounter doubt, distrust and discouragement. In too many offices, factories and retail shops, there's a hidden message in help-wanted signs that says, "No one with disabilities need apply."

Laws can require compliance by business and public accommodations, but legislation by itself cannot enforce fairness. We can build ramps and widen doorways, but we won't get the access we need and gain full admittance to

the job market until we eliminate doubts about our ability and eliminate mindless discrimination in the workplace. The ramps we need to build are ramps to the mind.

Recent surveys tell us things are getting better. But not fast enough to make a difference to millions of unemployed Americans with disabilities. Signs of incremental progress offer encouragement, but provide little comfort to individuals who are locked out of jobs. We have succeeded in making overt discrimination illegal, but we have a long way to go before people with disabilities are offered equal opportunities. Equality based on ability remains an ideal rather than a reality.

We can change that. Your efforts to develop awareness and educate the public can help close the gap and bring reality into line with our expectations of liberty and justice for all.