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OPINION

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## At ADA milestone, many promises go unfulfilled

Allan I. Bergman of Northbrook, is president and CEO of the Lester and Rosalie Anixter Center in Chicago. The center helps people with disabilities live and work successfully in the community. Anixter Center serves more than 5,000 individuals a year through 70 programs at 35 locations throughout the Chicago area, including Evanston, Elk Grove, Highland Park, Mount Prospect, Rosemont, Schaumburg, Winthrop Harbor and Zion. The center is an advocate for the rights of people with disabilities to be full and equal members of the community.

BY ALLAN I. BERGMAN

**V**anessa, Arthur and Lawrence share a passion for travel. They love planning their shared journeys — including a recent visit to Williamsburg, Va. The threesome earns money to fund their adventures by making and selling candles together.

### GUEST ESSAY

Besides a friendship and a love of the road, Vanessa, Arthur and Lawrence have something else in common: They have substantial disabilities attributable to mental illness and developmental disabilities. Along with five other adults, they live in four shared apartments licensed as a group home in Rogers Park.

Their individual and shared success stories are worth highlighting as the country marks the 15th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act on July 26.

On July 26, 1990, my wife, daughter and I sat on the White House lawn when President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA into law, landmark civil rights legislation impacting 54 million Americans with disabilities.

Today our communities are more accessible and all Americans are better off. Parents pushing strollers, workers delivering packages, in-line skaters, small children and our aging population all are accustomed to the accessibility within our architecture,

transportation and telecommunications systems.

Although progress has been made, we in Illinois experience significant remnants of the "shameful wall of exclusion" that President

Bush asserted would come tumbling down for Americans with disabilities. For example, only 35 percent of people with disabilities are employed, according to a 2004 Harris Poll. It's unfortunate more employers don't know about the impressive abilities of employees like Highwood

resident Robert Sirotti, a cashier at the Target in Highland Park. Sirotti, who is deaf, receives only the highest marks from his supervisors.

Illinois has yet to develop public policy in compliance with the ADA and the U.S. Supreme Court decision that declared that individuals with disabilities have a right to receive government-funded services in the "most integrated setting" appropriate.

Illinois spent \$1.2 billion in 2004 for long-term services and supports for individuals with developmental disabilities; 65.4 percent of that money went to public and private institutional services, placing Illinois 45th in the country in the ratio of institutional to home- and community-based services. Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota all do a better job than Illinois of providing their citizens with disabilities a more integrated way of life that offers the all-important elements of self-determination and control.

As Anixter Center embarks upon its 87th year to assist people with disabilities to live and work successfully in the community, we call upon the Illinois Legislature, the governor, the private sector and the public at large to partner with us. We will work to dispel negative stereotypes and attitudes by becoming the laboratory of innovation and best practice, so that all individuals with disabilities, regardless of diagnosis or severity, can become fully participating members of society.

Until then, the promise of the ADA in Illinois remains unfulfilled.



Bergman