

Section 504 History - Overview

by Kitty Cone

October 1996

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed after being pocket vetoed two times by President Nixon. In order for the critical Section 504 that prohibited programs receiving federal funds from discriminating against qualified handicapped individuals to be implemented, regulations needed to be promulgated by the department of HEW.

In the election campaign of 1976, candidate Jimmy Carter promised that his administration would sign regulations that had received extensive input from affected agencies and the disability community nationwide, and which had taken years to finalize. However, when the new administration took office, the Department immediately began revising and watering down the regulations, with no input from the disability community.

A national coalition, the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD) announced that demonstrations would begin on April 5th if the regulations were not signed as they were on the day the Carter administration took office.

Demonstrations took place in a number of cities around the country. Sit-ins were held in Washington D.C., Eugene, Oregon, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. On April 5th, a group of disabled people took over the San Francisco offices of the Health, Education, and Welfare Department to protest Secretary Joseph Califano's refusal to sign meaningful regulations for Section 504. No one expected to live there for almost a month, but they did. The action became the longest sit-in of a federal building to date. The historic demonstrations were successful and the 504 regulations were finally signed.

The 504 demonstrations were critical in securing comprehensive 504 regulations protecting people with disabilities from discrimination in all programs receiving federal financial assistance from HEW, and later, from all other federal agencies. Ultimately those regulations became the model for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

The 504 Demonstrations signaled the birth of the powerful, nation-wide disability rights movement that would achieve other important civil rights victories in the decade and a half that followed.

Last updated April 11, 1997 by Dorothy Dillon & Jean Nandi

<http://www.dredf.org/504site/histover.html>