Event: Welcome and Keynote

Org: Georgia Virtual ADA Conference for State and Local Governments

Time: 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM

Date: 6/3/2025

**Johan Rempel:** All right good morning, everyone. This is Johan Rempel with Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation at Georgia Tech. Welcome to the 2025 virtual ADA conference for state and local governments. Hosted by the ADA coordinator's office here in Georgia. I'm going to be covering housekeeping items and then pass it over to the State ADA Coordinator of Georgia Stacey Valrie Peace.

This is being recorded. All of these sessions are going to be archived and made available for everyone who registered and posted on the ADA website as well.

So, we practice what we preach here. Captions are offered. There's two options. One is through the StreamText link that will be posted in the chat.

Keep in mind that the chat is going to be available for the panelist and presenters to push out information. If you have questions or comments, use the Q&A session within Zoom to post any questions or comments.

Within Zoom there's also another way of accessing the closed captions. That's through the closed captioning or CC in the toolbar of Zoom.

Spotlighting and pinning. We practice what we preach here. We have two ASL interpreters. Thank you very much for providing your ASL services. They are being spotlighted so that they are highlighted. Only the host or cohost can spotlight someone. Pinning, any participant can pin any other participant's video. How to pin participants. You hover over the participant you want to pin, select ellipsis from the menu and choose pin. With that I will pass it over to Stacey Valrie Peace. This conference would not take place without her leadership and help from her team. Stacey Valrie Peace serves as the State ADA Coordinator of Georgia. With that I will pass it on to Stacey.
**Stacey Valrie Peace:** Thank you, Johan.
Good morning, and welcome. As Johan stated, my name is Stacey Valrie Peace, and I have the pleasure of serving as the State ADA Coordinator for the State of Georgia. I would like to thank my State ADA Coordinator’s Office colleagues for helping to make this year’s virtual conference a reality. Thank you to Barbara Tucker, who
serves as the ADA Administrative Services Coordinator. Barbara will serve as the
moderator for all the conference sessions, and she has been essential to the successful
execution of this years’ conference.
Thank you to Lisa Williams, who serves as our new Georgia As Model Employer (Or GAME for short) Employment Specialist.
We are excited to have you on our team as our office rises to
the challenge of administering the State of Georgia’s first State As Model Employer initiative. I would also like to thank Donna Hall‑McDowell, who also serves the Senior ADA Architect. Later today, Donna will present a session on Best Practices for Planning
Accessible Events. I would also like to thank our Virtual ADA Conference team
members: Johan Rempel, who serves as the Associate Director of Research Operations and the User Experience/ Information and Communication Technology Manager
with the Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation at Georgia Tech. Johan, we could not have pulled this conference off without you and thank you for also serving a session
Co‑presenter. And thank you to Amy Daniel, who is a member of our consulting team, along with former State ADA Coordinator, Mike Galifianakis. Thank you, Amy and Mike, for all your “behind the scenes” assistance and support. I would also like to thank the
board for the National Association of ADA Coordinator’s for having the level of faith in
our office that is required to make a collaborative partnership work. This is our 3rd collaborative virtual conference.

So Thank you once AGAIN for working with and trusting us. And finally, thank you to our
AMAZING slate of presenters: John, Barry, Rachel, Eve, Cheryl, Talley, Larry, and Elizabeth. Without all of you, there would NOT be a 2025 Virtual ADA Conference. We appreciate you for sharing your expertise and insights with all of us.
I am honored to open this important convening of dedicated professionals — ADA
coordinators, HR and legal professionals, program officials, facility administrators, first
responders, courtroom officials, disability services providers and higher education academic staff, from across the United States.
Your presence today speaks volumes about your commitment to advancing equity, access, and inclusion for people with disabilities in every corner of our nation. Whether you are newly stepping into this work, or have been a steward of ADA compliance for decades, thank you for being here.
As we gather in this virtual space, we do so at a time of both incredible progress and
undeniable challenge. The Americans with Disabilities Act — a landmark civil rights law
passed over three decades ago — remains a cornerstone of justice. It has reshaped public spaces, schools, workplaces, transportation systems, and digital platforms.
Yet, we know that full access and true inclusion are still out of reach for far too many.
The current climate surrounding disability rights work is complex. While there is growing awareness of the rights and diverse needs of individuals in the disability community, we are also seeing constrained resources, fragmented support, and — at times — a lack of institutional urgency. Many of you are operating with limited staff, minimal budgets,
and increasing mandates. You are expected to navigate evolving legal landscapes, respond to growing community needs, and build cultures of inclusion in environments that sometimes treat accessibility as a compliance task rather than a shared value.
It is not lost on anyone in this room that the type of important work we do — is facing
significant headwinds. Across sectors, we've seen programs restructured, priorities shift, and conversations regarding inclusion become part of a broader narrative. The ripple effects have landed squarely in the laps of professionals like you — professionals who now that disability justice is not a trend, not an afterthought, but a matter of rights and human dignity.
Despite the challenges, the work you are doing has never been more critical. People with disabilities — particularly those who are also part of other marginalized communities — continue to face disproportionate barriers in housing, employment, transportation, education, health care, and digital access. And yet, there is strength and
momentum in this community. We are seeing advocacy from grassroots to the policy level. We are seeing innovation in accessible design and technology. And perhaps most
importantly, we are seeing a new generation of leaders with disabilities stepping forward to shape the systems that once excluded them.

So, what does this mean for all of us gathered here today?

It means that our work must continue — not just as a matter of compliance, but as a matter of conscience. It means we must stay informed, stay connected, and stay courageous in the face of complexity. It means holding our institutions accountable
while also being allies, educators, and bridge builders. It means seeing accessibility
not just as a legal requirement but as a catalyst for equity — one that benefits all people, not just some.
And here's the good news: We are not alone. This conference is proof of that. We have close to one‑thousand conference registrants. Over the next few days, you’ll have opportunities to hear from experts, share strategies, learn new tools, and connect with peers who understand the weight and the worth of this work. Take this time to refuel. Ask the hard questions. Celebrate the wins. And remember why you started doing this work in the first place.
I’ll leave you with this: Every time you push for an accessible entrance, every time you
challenge an in‑accessible digital form, every time you explain why captioning matters,
or advocate for inclusive hiring — you are opening doors. You are laying the groundwork for a more just and welcoming society. And while the path may not always be easy, the destination is absolutely worth it.

Thank you for what you’ve done, what you’re doing, and what you will continue to do. Here's to a powerful and purposeful conference — and to a future where accessibility is not just policy, but practice.

And now it is my distinct pleasure to introduce our Keynote Speaker, John Wodatch.
John Wodatch is a disability rights attorney who retired after 42 years of Federal
government service. He authored the Federal government’s first comprehensive disability rights regulations, the regulations implementing section 504 of the
Rehabilitation Act. He is one of the drafters of the Americans with Disabilities Act as he
served as the Department of Justice’s chief technical expert during the writing and passage of the ADA. He was the chief author of the Department of Justice’s 1991 ADA regulations, created the DOJ’s initial ADA technical assistance programs,
and assembled the Department’s ADA enforcement staff. From 1990 until 2011 he served as the Director and Section Chief. Overseeing all interpretation, technical assistance, and enforcement of the ADA at the Department of Justice. Just before he retired, he was responsible for the first major revision of the Department’s ADA regulations, including the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design. In 2010 he was honored with the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award for exceptional achievement in his career. He is now serving clients as an expert in the application of the ADA’s requirements for accessible design and program accessibility for State and local governments and private businesses. On the international level, John is continuing his work seeking U.S. ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. He received a B.A. from Trinity College, an M.P.A. from Harvard University, and a J.D. from the Georgetown University Law School. John is the Past President the National Association of ADA Coordinators’ and currently serves on their Board of Directors.
Please join me in welcoming our keynote speaker, Johan Wodatch.
**Johan Wodatch:** Thank you so much for that lovely introduction, Stacey. I'm appreciative of Stacey Valrie Peace for organizing such an amazing ADA conference and asking me to participate in it. Good morning to everyone. I'm delighted to take a look at the Americans with Disabilities Act at 35.

How have we done?
What’s next?
Is it still relevant?

I will begin in 1989.
It’s the start of a newly elected Administration. Members of congress, the newly elected administration of the first President Bush, and a dynamic disability community came together in recognition that persons with disabilities were not participating fully in American life. There was a recognition that what was needed was a Comprehensive law to provide full opportunities for persons with disabilities.

A couple important concepts motivated the thinking behind the law. The first was to give to persons with disabilities the same federal civil rights participation that people of color and women already received in this country. Duplicating the famous landmark civil rights of 1964 and other laws. So what seemed libeling a radical revolution was to open up American life to groups of people who would been excluded or ignored.
Next, the idea that for any new law to work to transform

And needed new scope. We needed nondiscrimination provisions to ensure that a
person with a disability can get a job.

We needed provisions to provide transportation. The person isn't eligible for a job if they don't have skills. So we needed changes in the education system.
And that person can’t enjoy the fruits of their job without
access to entertainment, sports, and travel. So it’s necessary to cover businesses that serve the public.

And getting to our subject today. If the person can’t participate in their own

Community and state government we needed changes and cover all aspects of state government.
I think that you can see this picture and understand its need for breath. During the 198s the federal government had issued over 100 Section 504 regulations ‑ Yes,
that is how I spent the 1980’s ‑ These provisions with common provisions on the
definition of disability and what practices constitute nondiscrimination. Because most of these regulations were adopted during the Reagan Administration, Republican embers of Congress, and members of the Bush Administration felt a sense of security in adopting these approaches. Thus the ADA included the broad definition of disability used in and nondiscriminatory practices was drawn directly from Section 504
regulations.

Another key to passing the ADA was to address the fears that many that the new law would lead to excesses and unpredicted outcomes by balancing the full access envisioned by the ADA with the concerns of the business and State governmental
communities. So the new law took limitations from Section 504. So nothing would be required if it created undue burdens or if it would result in a fundamental alteration of programs or activities.

Keep in mind, it wasn't just altruism that led to the ADA. Another compelling issue was
economics.
Congress realized that the segregation and isolation of persons with disabilities resulted in a major waste of human resources. The Federal government was spending billions of dollars in payment to persons with disabilities in income support and conditioning receipt of these funds with the requirement that persons could not and would not work.

Thus, there was the brief that the new civil rights bill would have a positive impact on the Federal budget and would eventually improve the nation’s GNP. This legislation could allow people with disabilities to be employed, tax‑paying citizens, rather than at home, dependent, and a drag on the economy – over time increasing the country’s tax base and lessening the outlay of funds for income support.

Okay, now it’s 35 years later; how have we done? In my estimation, the ADA and
the other related disability rights laws have transformed American life. Just as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act, the Voting Rights Act, and Title IX of the education amendments have spurred a transformation in the role and participation of
African Americans, women, and Latinos and other members of Minority groups, so have
the ADA and Section 504 opened up every day American life for People with disabilities.
The changes are all‑around us. Look at our built environment. All of our new buildings are required to be accessible and, for the most part, they are being designed and constructed to provide ready access.

I love this next part: Our town halls, sports stadiums, movie theaters, chain restaurants, governmental offices, courtrooms, classrooms, hotels, shopping malls, museums, libraries, dormitories, polling places, even our prisons and jails, are being made accessible. We are not just making our new facilities accessible, we are going back and
also retrofitting old Facilities.
Our transportation systems have been totally transformed. Virtually all city bus systems are now accessible; curb cuts are commonplace in our cities and counties. We have accessible subway systems, the ability to travel between cities on intercity rail, and standards for over‑the‑road buses that are making nationwide travel accessible. In education, the concept that is very important here is that every child, no matter how severe his or her disability, is entitled to an appropriate education and can benefit from
educational services is a bedrock, accepted principle. Every public elementary and
secondary school in our country is required to provide additional educational programming at public expense for children with disabilities. As a result, now 20% of the students enrolled undergraduate institutions in the US are persons with disabilities, a statistic that was unimaginable even a short time ago. Many colleges have established
student disability services programs that have been essential in easing the path to higher ed for students with disabilities. Similar advancements for post graduate level with 11% of students with disabilities.

In healthcare, sign language interpreters are being provided in hospital and doctor’s offices and new hospital design, including wheelchair accessible, in‑room toilet facilities, is making hospital stays more welcoming for patients and visitors with disabilities. And we are beginning to see accessible medical equipment, from a simple scale for measuring weight to accessible radiologic equipment.

And I think you all know we are in the midst of a revolution in accessible information technology and telecommunications.

On a simple note: Our telephone system, once an insurmountable barrier to persons who are deaf, is fully accessible through the Telephone Relay and Video Relay Systems. We now recognize that we have to make our websites, online learning systems, e‑readers, and new information technology accessible to persons who are
blind or have low vision, are deaf, are color blind, or have manual dexterity disabilities. Now, while we are making gains in the employment of persons with disabilities, the unemployment of persons with disabilities remains a persistent problem in our country.
Statistics from 2024 show that in terms of employment, approximately 22.7 % of working age persons with disabilities are employed, compared to a similar figure of people without disabilities of approximately 65.5% of working age persons without
disabilities. The unemployment rate for persons with a disability is about twice that.
And workers with a disability are more likely to be employed part time than those with no disability.

On a more positive note we have developed a nationwide structure to see that the ADA is implemented and enforced. The Department of Justice established professionals to give teeth to the law enforcement tools, mediation and technical assistance. And over the past 35 years Department of Justice has used its enforcement powers wisely
and vigorously – getting systemic relief in cases of nationwide significance, that
deal with fundamental issues affecting persons with disabilities, and avoiding frivolous cases, taking actions in every State in the Union providing relief for persons with disabilities and at the I will give you a couple examples. Providing test accommodations on the SATs and other standardized Tests. Allowing persons with disabilities to serve as jurors making America’s major attractions accessible from the Empire State Building to

Disney worlds to a lot of facilities in Las Vagas making county governments and local government accessible through Project Civic Access.
Making 9‑1‑1 emergency call systems usable by persons who are deaf.
Ensuring that children with disabilities are not denied access to child care.

That's a scattering of things that have been done. Similarly the Department of Education and Health and Human Services established large nationwide civil rights offices to provide guidance and where necessary take enforcement actions. All of you at the state and local government level have taken your responsibility seriously. In the private sector people with disabilities and the organizations representing them have been an effective force.
Some of these organizations concentrate on specific issues, like Paralyzed Veterans of
America and United Spinal, which some are more broad‑based in their approach,
like DREDF, the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund, Equip for Equality in Illinois,
the Colorado Cross‑Disability Coalition, and Disability Rights Advocates. There are others.
In addition, each state has a federally‑funded agency, called a protection and advocacy agency that performance a similar role. For the past 35 years these various agencies have been a formidable force for implementation of the ADA:

The federal government also has established an incredible resource the national ADA network that provide information on how to achieve compliance.
And we are not the only ones who think that the ADA is a good idea. In 2006 the UN adopted a disability rights treaty, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Called the CRPD.
The CRPD is based on US disability law, including the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and
the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many of the same concepts, words
and phrases in our laws are adopted verbatim in the laws of Constitutions of
countries around the world. Another area that has shaped the ADA over the past 35 years is the courts and their role. They have shaped the nature and the reach of the ADA. There's been outstanding successes. Recognizing that breath of the ADA covering all activities through state and local government including jails and prisons. Recognizing how individuals with HIV have been treated in Bragdon verses Abbott. Blessing the ADA use and scope of the reasonable accommodation in PGA tour verses martin. And the Olmstead case. The Olmstead landmark case established that states are obligated to provide community based services to qualified individuals when deemed appropriate, when the individual wants the placement and the state can accommodation the placement.

Of course, with all this there's setbacks as well.

The Sutton trilogy at the Supreme Court, dealing with cases of extreme nearsightedness, high blood pressure and monocular vision, led to a strict interpretation
of these conditions and the Toyota case limited the reach of what "substantially limits" within the ADA, a case dealing with carpal tunnel syndrome and the ability to carry out manual tasks.
These and other cases led Bob Dole, one of the campions of the ADA to state that the law he worked to pass and in his mind covered him no longer covered him in the definition of disability. These Supreme Court and other Federal decisions were addressed by Congress in the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, which rejected
these Supreme Court decisions narrowed the definition of "disability" and broadened the
scope of the ADA to include more individuals and made it easier for them to claim they had a disability under the ADA.
And a series of cases tested the constitutionality of the ADA. Many cases state that the ADA could not apply to them.
In the Garrett case, it found that suits by State employees to recover damages under Title I were barred by the 11th Amendment. To the constitution. Fortunately, a later case, took a broader approach. In Tennessee v. Lane, found in the ADA a fundamental right of
access to courts and that Title II was a valid exercise of Congressional authority under the constitution.
and in US v. Georgia the Supreme Court held that the ADA protects inmates with disabilities in state prisons from discrimination by authorities, and it overrides state sovereign immunity for prisoners who bring suits alleging violations of Title II.

Although I have gone on about the successes of the ADA, I must recognize that the promises and goals of the ADA are not yet met. In enacting the ADA, Congress
noted that its purpose was “to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate
for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.” Despite our many advances and successes, this standard has clearly not been accomplished or met. You are probably familiar with this litany. For me some of the continued under employment of persons with disabilities, lack of mental health services. Our nation continuing inadequate response to disasters for persons with disabilities. The lack of affordable housing. Our political climate has changed casting in some minds the uncertain future of the ADA. The recent efforts of the trump administration to stream line the executive branch is casting a shadow.
Those of you who follow the recent efforts to shrink the size of the Federal government
are aware of these changes. The offices for civil rights at the Education Department and HHS are now a shadow of their former selves. The Section in the Justice Department that implements the ADA now has fewer employees than at any time in its history.

The section that over saw section 504 has disappeared entirely.

What this means is that covered entities, you here today, will not be able to rely on these institutions provide you with information and support.
Similarly, if complaints are filed about your institution or entities in your state or local governments, it's not likely that any action will be taken to address them. One example, there was an important robust special unit in the civil rights office of the Department of
Education that was created to address the avalanche of complaints involving colleges
and inaccessible digital information and websites. That group has been reduced to one person. One person will not be able to address the thousands of complaints that the agency has on their plate. Employees have been fired or have left voluntarily, removing
incredible expertise and knowledge from these organizations. And we have seen
no declarations of the promise of robust enforcement of the ADA or Section 504.

And it's unfortunate ‑‑ let me mention the challenge to section 504 and the recently issued Section 504 update by the Department of Health and Human Services by 19
States, led by Texas, remains in play. Fortunately, the 19 States have stated that they
will no longer pursue challenging the constitutional validity of Section 504 itself,
but those States still seek to that regulation invalidated and seek to have
implementation of Olmstead enforcement seriously curtailed.

So what we are witnessing is that the enforcement dynamic for the ADA, carefully developed over 35 years, is crumbling quickly. And it’s likely that this trend
will continue. The President’s Budget may seek to end the state protection and advocacy system, threatening the existence of organizations in every state. And Federal funding for the ADA National Network is another target for dissolution. These cutbacks come on the heels of new regulations. You will hear about them during this conference. Public entities that provide entities that provide or make available to the public web
content or mobile apps, whether directly or through contractual, licensing, or other
arrangements, must make the information accessible. The standard is level A and AA of the Web content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1.

You will hear more about this today. In addition, there's a regulation from justice and Health and Human Services having new requirements concerning finally the provision of professional medical diagnostic equipment. The rule uses the access board standards for examine tables, weight tables. You should have examined the implications for your programs and begin the process of compliance. So what does this mean for you and the ADA and for state and local governments?

There are some nay sayers who worry that the federal governments disinterest in civil rights enforcement and the enforcement will trigger the neglect. They will stop their own due diligence. I know I am and have been called an unbridled optimist but I don't think that's the necessary result. Part of my optimism comes from the disability community itself. People with disabilities who have fought so hard for their rights are not sitting idly by. They will not allow it to fall into disuse. My optimism results from you being here today. The ADA coordinator here and around the country. Your attendance here today and your past efforts is a testament to your commitment. I know this means that you are responsible for implementing the ADA at a time when many of the supporting resources that made this job easier are disappearing. That may include financial resources to you. So why continue? First, it's still the law and public entities are responsible for following it. Also in the vernacular, it’s the right thing to do. You are in positions where you are expected to foster compliance with the ADA. And the ADA is a good blueprint for success. You have worked over the years to educate your covered entity on the ADA’s
requirements and have worked to bring creative solutions to achieving success. Your work has dramatically changed the participation of disabled persons in the programs and activities of their own State and local governments over the past 35 years. You are in a position to continue those achievements.
It is a daunting time, but I believe that you are up to this task. Your presence here today
and the work that you did and your seriousness about your task and the importance that this college places. I believe I'm an optimist. Today. I align myself with the
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and his view that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it
bends towards justice. Yes, we recognize that there will be setbacks, a step backward before we can take those two steps forward. But the steps towards justice, towards ADA successes ADA and local governments will take the determined effort by all of you assembled here today. Because of the ADA we have made significant advances
in so many aspects of American life. The lives of persons with disabilities are incredibly
different now than they were when I began my work in this area over fifty years ago. The
ADA, which I believe to be a balanced, well‑crafted, thoughtful, powerful, but not
perfect law, has provided one of the bases for these changes in our society. You have all played, you know that law and have helped people with it. You have played a
a key role in this transformation and I know you will continue, despite the evident hardships that we face, to take the steps to take the lofty goals of the ADA and make
them real. Yes, you can do it.
Many thanks for inviting me to be you today. I wish you an informative, entertaining
conference. I know it will form the basis for the ADA successes in the days to come.

Thank you.

**Stacey Valrie Peace:** Thank you so much, John. Please accept my sincere gratitude for sharing your knowledge, your insight, your expertise and leaving us with a sense of encouragement and hope. We appreciate all that you have done for individual with disabilities across this great nation of ours. We appreciate what you continue to do well into retirement. What you do for NAADAC and being a supporter of our office and this conference. So thank you so very much. With that we will be closing until 10 a.m. when we have our first session. Session 1A. I will leave it to Johan. We'll see everyone again in the same Zoom link at 10 a.m.

**Johan Rempel:** Thank you, John Wodatch and Stacey Valrie Peace. Very inspiring words from you both and you both are pillars in the ADA community. As Stacey mentioned we're going to close it down now and then please log back in using the same link you used this morning and throughout the remaining ADA conference we'll be doing this every time. So as Stacey Valrie Peace mentioned the next session starts at 10 a.m. We hope to see you at 10 a.m.