



DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
BY THE HON. JANET RENO,
UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL
TO THE
BALTIMORE 9-1-1 '97
CHARTING THE COURSE FOR 9-1-1

Opening Session,

Monday, June 16, 1997

Baltimore Convention Center

Baltimore, Maryland

P R O C E E D I N G S

(10:20 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much. It is a special honor for me to be here today with you. For in 15 years as the chief prosecutor in Miami, Florida, I saw the work of 9-1-1 day in and day out. I saw the lives that you saved. I saw all that you did. And I just want to say thank you. That experience made me a believer in the work that you do and in the care with which you do it.

In addition, NENA has been in the forefront of efforts to ensure that 9-1-1 emergency services are available to all Americans. I would especially like to

recognize Toni Dunn of the Texas 9-1-1 Commission.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: In addition to serving as the head of NENA's accessibility committee, she has been an invaluable resource to the Department of Justice. And my experts in this field tell me she has just been wonderful to work with.

The Americans with Disabilities Act is now almost 7 years old. In the short time it has been in force, the ADA's effects have been dramatic. The ADA is already changing the face of America. All across this Nation, barriers are falling. Because of the Act, doors are open to 9-1-1 services, to jobs, to stores, to city halls, to courthouses, all of which are an essential part of life for every American.

But doors are also opening to places of rest and relaxation, places that are also part of any well-rounded life -- places like movie theaters, restaurants, hotels, and sports stadium. All that this Nation has to offer is becoming more accessible to more Americans every day. And it is happening because Americans are coming together to understand how important the ADA really is.

I suspect that every one in this hall has a family member, a friend, a neighbor, or someone with whom you work who has a disability. I suspect that in these 7 years, you have seen them gain access to more and more of what we all take for granted each day.

I have made the enforcement of the ADA one of my highest priorities at the Justice Department. For there should be no doubt about what is at stake. It is nothing less than assuring that Nation's future is barrier-free and open to all. It is about assuring that every American has a full and equal opportunity to make the most of their talents and to participate fully in our Nation's social, economic and civil life.

A great deal of the credit has to go to caring, conscientious professionals like yourselves, fully committed to making 9-1-1 services accessible to everyone. NENA has been very active in promoting compliance with the ADA by its members. Because of you, far more people now have access.

I just want to thank you and tell you how much I appreciate all that you have done, and how much I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure compliance at every level. Most of all, I would appreciate your suggestions as to how the Department of Justice can serve with you as a partner in improving

training, in addressing questions about equipment, in doing everything we can to make 9-1-1 accessible to all.

You know how important it is. People with disabilities depend on you for their lives, their health, their safety. Whenever access to 9-1-1 is denied or delayed, the results can be disastrous. And when a person cannot use 9-1-1 because he or she is deaf or hard of hearing or has a speech impediment, the results can be truly tragic.

We know how to make 9-1-1 services accessible to people with disabilities. And together, I think we can do it for all Americans.

How can we do better? That is a continuing question that I would like to hear from NENA on every day. As I approach the endorsement of the ADA, I have tried to develop a three-stage process.

First of all, to reach out, to educate people about the requirements of the law, about why it is right to do it, about what a difference it can make for so many people. I try to provide technical expertise, to teach people how they can comply with the law in a reasonable way, so that it will not be burdensome.

Secondly, we try to negotiate with those who still do not comply, try to work together with them, using alternative dispute resolution and other techniques, to try to reach a common understanding that will serve everyone's concerns about burdensome requirements, while at the time serving all Americans. And if we have to -- and I do not like doing it at all -- we will litigate and litigate vigorously. But, with NENA's help, I think we can avoid litigation. And I want you to know that I will work with you every step of the way to do that.

In our enforcement of the ADA, we have worked closely with State and local governments, as well as the businesses that are covered by the law, to achieve voluntary compliance. We found that many States and localities will voluntarily comply with the law once they know what it entails. It is a common sense law. It is flexible. And it is reasonable. And as localities come to understand this, more and more choose to comply on their own.

That is the reason we have conducted a nationwide campaign of public education. We have done this not just to familiarize local governments with their obligations under the law, but also to provide the tools for people with disabilities to use in their attempts to achieve compliance.

Our efforts have been extensive. Over the past 4 years, we have blanketed the

airwaves and filled mailboxes with information about the law. We have put ADA information files in 15,000 public libraries across the country. We have mailed information packets to millions of businesses. We have put an ADA home page on the World Wide Web. And we maintain a toll-free information line that receives more than 75,000 calls each year.

I have been to the office where they answer the information lines. I have heard some of the calls. It is an extraordinary event to see what one telephone call can do to break down a barrier or open a door.

We have placed a particular emphasis on educating localities about accessible 9-1-1 services. This is so important to me, because what you are talking about are very lives. In the fall of 1995, all 94 United States Attorneys Offices throughout the country distributed educational material to the 9-1-1 providers in their districts. And in this material, we explained the basics of ADA compliance to emergency service providers. We explained how easy it is to comply and to make 9-1-1 services fully accessible to people with disabilities.

NENA has provided invaluable help in educating its members about these issues. And you have been there from the beginning. But now, however, I think we must both work together to make sure that our educational efforts are working. We have initiated a nationwide project of 9-1-1 compliance reviews.

This initiative embraces the entire Department, including all of the United States Attorneys Offices throughout the Nation. It is one of my top priorities in the ADA enforcement effort.

In the coming months, we will be working with many of the 9-1-1 centers across the country to ensure that their services are available to people with disabilities -- specifically, people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who have speech impairments. At each of these centers, we will be evaluating compliance with the accessibility standards in the ADA, determining whether 9-1-1 services are fully usable by people with disabilities.

We have already begun this process, and we will keep at it, working with you in every way that we can, to ensure that everyone in America can be confident that 9-1-1 services will be there when they need them. We have already performed compliance reviews of 40 9-1-1 centers in different parts of the Nation. Our job has been made much easier by the great cooperation we have received from you and from your colleagues. And, again, I thank you so much for that effort.

But still we have found that many centers were not in compliance with the ADA.

In some cases, the problem is a failure to acquire the necessary equipment. Under the law, 9-1-1 centers must provide direct access to TDD users. We believe that that means there must be one TDD per call-taking position in most centers.

I understand that you may have some concerns. We need to work with you to address that, to understand the issues, and to make sure that we achieve our common goal of providing access to all Americans.

In many cases, however, it is not equipment. In far too many of the cases, the problem is a lack of training. For example, it is critical to treat all silent calls as a potential TDD call. But let us work together to ensure that we develop the best training mechanisms possible, so that we again achieve our common goal.

I commend NENA for being a leader in encouraging training and professional certification of 9-1-1 operators. Your efforts are incredibly important. I urge you to continue these efforts.

We are redoubling ours as well. And in every one of the centers where our review found violation of the ADA, we are negotiating formal compliance agreements, attempting to persuade these localities to comply. We have entered into agreements with 9-1-1 providers in all regions of the country. And we expect to enter into more soon.

But where our attempts at persuasion are not successful, we have not hesitated to bring a lawsuit, as we have recently done in the District of Columbia. Access to 9-1-1 services is the law. And it is far too important for equivocation and evasion. But let us avoid those by working together to reach our common goal together and not in litigation.

We will not end our efforts at the 40 9-1-1 centers that we have already reviewed. Our goal is to ensure that everyone has a full opportunity to summon emergency help from each of the more 5,000 9-1-1 providers across the country. I am not going to rest -- and from all I know about NENA, you will not rest -- until we have reached that goal.

The ADA is about something fundamental -- the right of all Americans to have access to all those things that make for a full and happy and productive life. And nothing can be more basic to this goal than preserving access to emergency services -- the thing that may be necessary to preserve life itself.

Each of the U.S. attorneys will be working on this effort. If you have questions, I urge you to contact your U.S. attorney with suggestions about what we can do to

more effectively educate, what we can do to be a better partner in this effort. I urge you to take an extra effort to assure that your own operations are accessible to all. Working together, we can be part of something that is very exciting and that is changing the face of America.

I have told a story in these last few days that does not relate to access to 9-1-1 services, but it demonstrates, I think, what we are talking about. Several months ago, one of the Justice Department lawyers came to me and said, I think what you are doing with the enforcement of the ADA is very important, but I think we have got to look at what we are doing in the Justice Department. And I am disabled and I would like to be a trial lawyer, where people tend to think that I cannot be a trial lawyer and litigate in the courtroom because of my disability.

I agreed with him. And I knew that people with disabilities could be great advocates in the courtroom. Recently we have seen that in Oklahoma City, where the lead prosecutor came to the court with his scooter each day and made a brilliant case for the government against Timothy McVeigh.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have got to look at ourselves in the Justice Department as to what we can do to make America accessible, to make courtrooms accessible, to make services accessible for everyone in the Justice Department and throughout America.

You can look at your operations to see what more you can do. And together, we can change the face of America, so that 49 million Americans who now sometimes cannot get through that door, cannot get to that service, can know what it is like for all the rest of us that take those services and those opportunities for granted every day.

I come back to what I said at the outset. I know, on a very limited basis from my work in Miami, the tremendous work that you do, the patience that you demonstrate day in and day out, the careful attention to every detail, to the tone of voice of the caller, to all that must be done to provide emergency services. And on behalf of all Americans, I say thank you from the bottom of my heart.

(Applause.)

(Whereupon, at 10:40 a.m., the keynote address concluded.)