

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Advocacy Pluses And Minuses

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One month after the 32nd anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the promises of the Biden administration are beginning to be kept, with yawning exceptions such as the sweeping New Deal-like homecare agenda our country needs.

Things like saving the air we breathe and the water we drink from those who would ignore climate change and saving our democracy “trumped” the huge care proposals.

Transportation Secy. Pete Buttigieg pumped USDOT dollars into infrastructure, i.e. station accessibility, and this is terrific. Even better, or at least, more significant, is the MTA finally committing to subway access. Forty-three years after Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (now called United Spinal Association) sued MTA for station access, the MTA Board has finally acknowledged the error of its ways.

For 40 years, MTA tried to spend as little as possible on subway accessibility – at first, ardently fighting access, then begrudgingly providing as little as possible, eliminating inter-borough accessible bus routes, and forcing people with disabilities to rely unnecessarily on expensive Access-A-Ride services.

Slowly, as the population grays, and parents with strollers want access to mass transit and paratransit expenses continue to rise, as autonomous transportation – yes, even autonomous mass transit – is on the horizon, MTA has made a commitment to 95 percent station accessibility by the year 2055.

I will be 104 at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the final station. A new generation of socially-responsible transit managers has been trying to see this happen for a decade or so, and to all of them, and all of the plaintiffs and their attorneys, to MTA board members, to the memories of so many advocates who dreamed the accessible dream before it was politically correct – congratulations.

Transit accomplishments aside – although subway access is a big one – the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the voice of the domestic worker labor movement, which is primarily composed of women of color and immigrants, is not ready to abandon the fight around homecare, at least insofar as workers’ rights are concerned.

The House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Workforce Protections held hearings on HR 4826, Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Act, to ensure these domestic worker protections:

- Paid sick leave
- Civil rights protections, including against workplace harassment
- Meal and rest breaks
- Written contracts of employment
- No lost pay for client cancellations

The deals with Sens. Manchin and Sinema, and the 50-50, Republican-Democrat split in the Senate (ties decided by Vice Pres. Harris) gave the Congress little wiggle room for more than the historic infrastructure spending, and of course, the other benefits of the just-passed Inflation Reduction Act, including letting Medicare finally negotiate drug prices.

The care agenda is here to stay. Early accessible transit advocates will definitely need personal care attendants at the 2055 final station ribbon cutting. I hope by then we have acknowledged that the availability of personal-care-attendant services that facilitate those with disabilities living effectively in the community who are working, paying taxes and contributing to the common good, should not be subject to means testing for eligibility, allowing individuals who work, to pay a sliding-scale premium regardless of income level.

It is imperative that we recognize the role of new immigrants in homecare, make homecare a career path and work together to provide personal care workers and their clients’ rights and protections.