**Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the Department of Justice's ADA 20th Anniversary Commemoration**

Washington, D.C. ~ Friday, July 23, 2010

Thank you, Tom [Perez]. I appreciate your kind words, but I am especially grateful for your committed and passionate leadership of the Civil Rights Division. You and your team have done an outstanding job of revitalizing the Civil Rights Division, and renewing the spirit of the law we’ve gathered here to celebrate.

Today, we commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the legacy of progress that the ADA helped to create. It’s an honor to celebrate this milestone with so many friends, colleagues, and partners – and with many of the leaders who called for and helped to develop this landmark legislation. In particular, I want to thank today’s panelists – a group of advocates who were instrumental in the ADA’s creation and implementation. Thank you all for being here and for sharing your unique experiences and perspectives with us.

I’m also pleased that we are joined by three former leaders of the Department’s Civil Right Division: Steve Pollak, John Dunne, and Jim Turner. And I’m glad to welcome two members of our extended DOJ family: Cheryl Sensenbrenner and Ginny Thornburgh.

I’m also grateful that we are joined by Tony Coelho – a good friend, a long-time advocate for equal opportunity, and a principal author of the ADA. And it’s a special privilege to welcome back to this Department one of my predecessors, my first boss as a lawyer – and, as many of you will remember, one of the ADA’s greatest champions – Attorney General Dick Thornburgh.

In July of 1990, Attorney General Thornburgh said that the ADA’s enactment amounted to “another emancipation . . . one more opportunity to further guarantee equal protection under the law for every citizen of this nation.”

With those wonderful words – and guided by that vision – he set the tone for all that would come. Over the past two decades, the ADA helped create revolutionary improvements in the lives of Americans with disabilities. But just as important, the ADA helped improve our society’s understanding of what Americans with disabilities could accomplish when given the chance to participate on equal terms. The work of the Justice Department – the work done by many of you – helped to drive this progress.

In the 1990s, the Department compelled facilities in every corner of America to provide access to people with disabilities; tackled HIV/AIDS discrimination head on; secured full health-care access for deaf Americans and others suffering from hearing loss; accommodated children with disabilities in child care programs; and agreed with the Olympic Games Committee to ensure that sports venues under construction for the 1996 Olympics and Paralympics in Atlanta were fully accessible to fans with disabilities.

These were just a few of many breakthroughs that helped to rewrite legal paradigms, enlighten attitudes, and change lives. These actions were also a model for the aggressive – and appropriate – enforcement of the ADA.

In July of 2010, I’m pleased to report that the Justice Department has returned to this model. At every level of our work – and in cooperation with our partners across the Administration – we have placed a renewed focus on enforcing the ADA. And we’re seeing results.

Our Civil Rights Division is leading this work, and – in recent months – has settled several lawsuits alleging egregious discrimination against people with disabilities. The Department has renewed its commitment to the aggressive enforcement of the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Olmstead* – recognizing the right of Americans with disabilities to access the care and services they need in their own homes and communities – with suits against three states and participation in suits against another eight.

We’re also working hard to ensure that the ADA keeps up with technological advances that were – quite simply – unimaginable 20 years ago.  Just as these quantum leaps can help all of us, they can also set us back – if regulations are not updated or compliance codes become too confusing to implement. We won’t let that happen. To avoid this, the Department will soon publish four advanced notices of proposed rulemaking regarding accessibility requirements for websites, movies, equipment and furniture, and 911 call-taking technologies.

And because, at its core, the ADA is about ensuring that all Americans can participate fully in our democracy, we are taking meaningful steps to offer fully accessible voter registration services at federal agencies, as intended by the National Voter Registration Act.

But our ongoing enforcement efforts extend – as they should – far beyond lawsuits and settlements.  The last two decades have taught us that when the ADA is well understood, its provisions are almost invariably well executed. That’s why – to expand the ADA’s reach and to save scarce resources – we’ve launched multiple educational outreach initiatives. In communities across the country, programs such as Project Civic Access, the ADA Mediation Program, and the Department's Technical Assistance Program are making a difference.

The Department’s leading role in enforcing the ADA – and our obligation as a federal agency that employs more than 100,000 people – carries an additional, and very solemn, responsibility: to make sure that our own house is in order… and open to all qualified candidates with disabilities.

We are not yet where we want to be on this front. Put bluntly, we do not have sufficient numbers of people with disabilities who serve as our colleagues in this great agency. But the Justice Department is taking bold steps to ensure that opportunities to serve and thrive here are accessible to every qualified candidate and employee. The Attorney General’s Committee on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities continues to advise me on the best ways to incorporate persons with disabilities into the recruitment, hiring, retention, accommodation, and promotion practices of the Department. And I am proud to announce that, as part of our new Diversity Management Plan, there is now a vacancy – to be filled within several weeks – for a critical new position within the Department: a Special Assistant for Disability Resources.

I am firmly committed to holding the Department’s senior leadership accountable for encouraging the contributions of employees with disabilities, and working to attract qualified candidates with disabilities. This is a top objective of mine – and it must be our shared priority.

As Attorney General Thornburgh put it in 1990, “Each time civil rights are enlarged in our country, they extend over the whole of our society.

“So,” he added, “do not let this bright moment in American history escape you.”

Twenty years later, we must renew our commitment to seize “this bright moment” for our fellow citizens with disabilities and also for our nation. History, again, is calling us. And together, once more, the Justice Department will lead through its work, enrich our nation, and help to fulfill the promise of equal justice, and equal opportunity, for all. These are our goals; this is our responsibility.

Thank you.