

The Power of 504

Transcript begins.

[on-screen text: The 504 Sit-in 20th Anniversary Committee Presents 504 Human Rights for All]

[Still photos, newspaper clippings and film footage from actual news broadcasts, April 1977]

KITTY CONE: “No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States shall, solely on the basis of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to the discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. – Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act”

[on-screen text: The Power of 504]

KITTY CONE: On April 5, 1977, people with disabilities across the nation demonstrated to demand that regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act be signed into law. The demonstrations spontaneously erupted into sit-ins. In San Francisco, over 100 people made the federal building our home for 26 days.

[on-screen text: The Demonstrations]

[The 504 rally logo: A profile of a wheelchair with a clenched fist inside the wheel. Disabled demonstrators in front of the San Francisco old federal building.]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: Some of the demonstrators occupied an area outside the office of HEW Secretary Joseph Califano. When Califano appeared, he praised their cause, but said there were problems such as enforcement. However, he promised action.

JOSEPH CALIFANO: I will sign a set of 504 Regulations by early May.

[An outdoor demonstration in San Francisco. People on stage in front of a crowd. One of them is signing to the group.]

CROWD: Now! Not May! Now! Sign or Resign! Sign or Resign! Sign or Resign!

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: The handicapped demand that Section 504 of the Civil Rights Act be signed. It was passed by Congress in 1974. It guarantees the rights of the handicapped in education and employment. The Ford Administration never implemented the Act. And now the new HEW Secretary, Joseph Califano, says he will sign it in May, The handicapped want him to sign it now.

[on-screen text: The San Francisco Sit-in]

[A collage of newspaper clippings about the bill and the protest.]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: Well, Isabelle, what's going on now is an overnight sit-in. Actually the demonstration is going on throughout the entire nation, in Washington, New York, Denver, and here in San Francisco. It all started this morning at the old federal building at 50 Fulton St., when an incident took place outside. Immediately after that demonstration this morning, the handicapped started invading the building, it's the old federal building which is now the HEW headquarters. They spent most of the day in the office of the regional director here.

[Disabled protestors move inside offices clapping and chanting, holding up signs. Many are in wheelchairs or holding white canes. One woman is signing the protest chants.]

GROUP SINGING: "I do believe that we shall overcome someday." Sign 504! Sign 504! Sign 504!

FEMALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: Well I've just gotten word that these people are now locked into the building. At 6:00, this building did close down. However, about an hour ago, they came up with an agreement, None of these people are going to be arrested or moved out of the building. Some members of the HEW staff will be remaining with them throughout the night. Those people who are here right now will be locked in. If they want to leave, it's all right, but they can't come back in. Food, we hear, is being brought over by Delancey Street, however, the Salvation Army has not been able to come up with blankets or cots, so they are still out frantically looking for that.

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: But what about the restroom facilities? Are they equipped to handle that many handicapped people? And could they get that help?

FEMALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: They absolutely are not equipped to handle them. The regional director asked me before 4:00 if he could get out of this room, because he needed to go to the restroom. And the group here said, "No." "We have had to learn all of our lives to control our bladders," and "You must learn that lesson now, too."

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: There are approximately 75 or more who are taking part in this sit-in. This makes this the largest sit-in in the nation currently going on concerning the disabled and the handicapped. In Washington, there are about 40 people sitting in the outer offices of the HEW Secretary Joe Califano. And there are about 7 people in New York.

OTHER MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: 98 people stayed overnight in the offices used by HEW Regional Director Joe Maldonado. The 50 who remain at this hour say that they have no intention of leaving.

JUDY HEUMANN: There are people that want to stay here until... and there's a significant number of those people. Quite frankly, I think it's going to be very difficult for them to put a lot of pressure on us. When we asked them questions yesterday about 504, and we said to them "Have you ever read 504?" every one of the people that we had in that office said, "No." I mean I think that they should thank us for being here, and welcome the opportunity that finally they're going to get educated about the law that they're supposed to be enforcing.

[on-screen text: HEW reacts...]

[Inside the building, handmade signs on the walls. People using pay phones, people playing cards.]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: 130 disabled and handicapped spent the second night of the sit-in in a string of offices on the 4th floor of the building. HEW officials are stiffening their easy attitude about the demonstrators. All outside phone lines, except one emergency line, have been cut off. Incoming calls, however, are still coming through. Food is still being delivered in to the building, but demonstrators no longer can enter. If they leave the building, well, they just stay out.

FEMALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: By now this demonstration here in San Francisco is clearly symbolic. The group, which left the Washington, D.C. offices of HEW yesterday afternoon, were the only ones who really had direct access to Secretary Joseph Califano. Any demonstration here in San Francisco, well, can only be to show support. But it can't do anything tangible to get that anti-discrimination law signed right now.

[on-screen text: DC, LA, New York forced out; San Francisco digs in...]

[Demonstrators asleep on the floors and stairways]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: They're tired. They're grubby. They're uncomfortable. But their spirits are soaring. The sit-in at San Francisco's HEW headquarters now is in its third day, and 125 disabled and handicapped are pledging they'll continue the sit-on through tomorrow night, if not longer. The squeeze is on though. Hot water has been turned off on the 4th floor, where the occupation of the army of cripples has taken over.

[News anchor reports in front of the old federal building]

NEWS ANCHOR: The demonstration here is now in its fourth day. It is by far the largest and longest protest ever organized by disabled people in this area. But the problem on this, the fourth day, is still the same as it was on Tuesday; trying to get the attention of the people in Washington.

[Demonstrators march in front of the old federal building, holding up signs that read 504 Now.]

CECE WEEKS: One thing, it's the first really militant thing disabled people have ever done, and we feel like we're building a real social movement. We want people to listen to us. We have tried negotiations. They do not work. At this point, we are non-negotiable. We want those regulations signed.

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: Their cause has drawn the support and rank and file of HEW workers, labor unions, church groups, farm workers, the Gray and Black Panthers, California legislators, and the governor.

OTHER MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: He might be the mayor of San Francisco, but it wasn't enough for George Mascone and other city officials on federal turf today. They came to the HEW offices to endorse and assist the handicapped. But the federal officials drew the line when it came to installing a device which converts a sink into a makeshift shower, and that's when the mayor and his delegation discovered the limits of their authority.

[George Moscone on the phone.]

MAYOR ON PHONE: We thank you for trying, anyhow. All right, Joe. Bye.

NEWSMAN: Are the showers on or off mayor?

MAYOR: Huh?

NEWSMAN: Are the showers on or off?

MAYOR: He can't give any permission for the showers.

NEWSMAN: What was his reasoning?

MAYOR: He's "not running a hotel."

[A woman washes her hair in the sink]

WOMAN: Oh, God that feels so good! Oh, Lord that feels good!

[on-screen text: The Hearings]

FEMALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: With one unified voice, the disabled of California said today, "We have waited long enough!" And with that, the rally outside the old federal building, which houses the HEW offices, reached a climax. The show of support was impressive, and offered the mental and vocal backing that those inside really needed. It is nearing two weeks now since 150 handicapped people moved into the HEW offices. And it was today, in response, to that occupation, that a special congressional hearing convened.

[Handicapped protesters and reporters face Congressmen Phil Burton and George Miller.]

DEBBY KAPLAN: I think one of the things that Secretary Califano and his representatives, whom we've been negotiating with since they came into office, forget when they sit around and intellectualize about what started off as 8 issues, then it escalated to 15 issues, then it went up to 18, then it went up to 25, and God knows where it's going to go next... is while they sit around and think about how they're gonna enforce regulations, that they don't seem to understand our lives are not changed. Our civil rights are not granted. And I personally react to that. That's my civil rights they're messing around with!

ED ROBERTS: And I've found, and millions of other people with disabilities are finding that access—that my ability to move around and my ability to regain the pride in myself as a person with a disability is one of the most important things that's coming out of what's happening here today. To see hundreds of people with disabilities rolling, signing, using canes—the more severely retarded joining us for the first time in this incredible struggle—is one that leads me to believe that we're going to win this. We're down to the bottom line. We're down to the basic issue here. Are we going to perpetuate segregation in our society? We're one of the largest minorities in this country. I looked at the 18 points that HEW put out this morning. I have never seen a better blueprint for segregation. These kinds of issues—the issues of civil rights, of human rights, are not issues that people with disabilities can compromise any further.

PHIL NEWMARK: If they had to choose the most important part of these regulations to eliminate and to reconsider, they chose them. So I resent the fact that they say, "We're in fundamental agreement." We're not in fundamental agreement! We're in fundamental disagreement!

JUDY HEUMANN: Whether there was a Section 504, whether there was a PL 94-142, there was a Brown v. Board of Education. The harassment, the lack of equity that has been provided for disabled individuals, and that now is even being discussed by the Administration, is so intolerable that I can't quite put it into words. I can tell you that every time you raise issues of "separate but equal," the outrage of disabled individuals across the country is going to continue, it is going to be ignited. There will be more takeovers of buildings until finally maybe you begin to understand our position. We will no longer allow the government to oppress disabled individuals. We want the law enforced. We want no more segregation. We will accept no more discussion of segregation! And I would appreciate it if you would stop shaking your head in agreement when I don't think you understand what I'm talking about!

[Judy puts her head in her hands. Behind her, disabled participants and reporters clap]

[on-screen text: To Washington...]

[Disabled representatives prepare to go to Washington, D.C.]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: The group this afternoon put the final touches on their next plan of action. They're taking their protest to the source. 14 handicapped demonstrators and 8 attendants will fly tomorrow to Washington, where they hope to see President Carter himself, or at least tell HEW Secretary Joseph Califano themselves how they feel.

GROUP SINGING: "Oh deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome today."

[Outside the HEW building, Washington, D.C.]

FEMALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: It was sweltering hot, but they went to HEW anyway, staying in the street when the curbs stopped them. They were trying to reschedule a meeting with Califano after he had cancelled the one scheduled earlier. But they were blocked.

JUDY HEUMANN: I felt like I was being excluded from the building that I pay taxes to keep open. And I am absolutely mortified that President Carter is allowing this to go on. His "Open Door Policy" certainly is not very open. And to have these big 6-7 foot cops standing there with people my size is the most ludicrous thing that I have ever been involved in.

OTHER FEMALE ANNOUNCER: Back in Washington today, more than 100 people marched in front of the White House. The demonstrators would be content if Carter would only put pressure on the HEW Director Califano to sign the civil rights bill guaranteeing the rights of the handicapped people. But it doesn't look as if Carter will even do that. It looks even less promising for Carter to see the demonstrators personally, even though they've traveled there from San Francisco for that very purpose. And in the meantime, the group of handicapped people are sticking to their guns here in San Francisco. Today starts the third week of their sit-in at the old federal building.

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: San Francisco is kind of a special and unique place. After all, it's the only place in the country where the blind, and the deaf and the arthritic and the retarded and the para-and the quadriplegic, those with cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy can get it together enough to journey 6,000 miles to fight for their civil rights. They came home tired tonight, but then justifiably I think quite proud of their trip.

[on-screen text: Victory!]

MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: Good evening. 35 million Americans, handicapped Americans, won a big victory today.

OTHER MALE NEWS ANNOUNCER: When HEW Secretary Joseph Califano signed a paper today, the implementation of the law began.

[Outside the old federal building in San Francisco. The protestors leave the building one by one.]

MALE SPEAKER: But I discovered something about myself that I didn't know, that I counted as a person. And through 504, I now have more of a chance to count. And I just really feel fantastic.

[State Senator Milton Marks accompanies the demonstrators leaving the building. They're smiling, holding signs, and waving. A woman in large sunglasses smiles into the camera.]

FEMALE SPEAKER: This is a beginning. It's a huge tremendous beginning. It's really a leap forward for us.

[The protestors wheel out of the building. Some have plastic crates with belongings.]

[A woman with a cane hugged by two of her friends.]

GROUP CHANTING: Power to the people! Power to the people! Power to the people!

[The mood is jubilant. Everyone is smiling and waving]

KITTY CONE: The signing of the regulations signified the public birth of the disability rights movement. It ushered in an era of disability activism, empowerment, and legislative victories based on the legal concepts of non-discrimination and integration embodied in Section 504.

[on-screen text: To the heroes who were inside and outside the building.]

[Credits text scrolls]

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The 504 Sit-in
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End of transcript.