



**Retired Senator Tom Harkin remembers “friend and polestar on disability advocacy”  
Bob Kafka as “fearless, charismatic leader”**

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Des Moines, IA, December 27, 2025: **The Harkin Institute for Public Policy and Citizen Engagement** is saddened to learn of the death of Bob Kafka, a leading advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, on December 26, at the age of 79, in Austin, TX.

Kafka was paralyzed in a car accident in 1973. In 1984, Kafka joined Americans Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT; formerly Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) and, with his wife, Stephanie Thomas, co-founded ADAPT of Texas the same year. Since that time, he worked tirelessly to bring attention to issues large and small affecting people with disabilities and to foster advancements in public policy affecting them. In recent years, Kafka drew high-profile attention to attempts by Texas Governor Greg Abbott—who himself has used a wheelchair since a spinal-cord injury at age 26—to restrict the rights of people with disabilities.

“Bob Kafka was a fearless, charismatic, and intelligent leader of the disability rights movement for over fifty years,” said retired **Senator Tom Harkin**, lead sponsor of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). “He was my friend and my polestar on disability advocacy all those years.”

“I always referred to ADAPT as the ‘Marines’ of the disability rights movement,” **Harkin** added. “They ‘hit the beach first’ in confronting inaccessibility and discrimination, and Bob, as their leader, was arrested many times. As a proud Army veteran, he objected to my description of him and ADAPT as ‘Marines,’ but he wore as a badge of honor his countless arrests! He never gave up on our long march for full inclusion and a barrier-free world. Bob Kafka’s courage and work will continue to ‘Lead On’ in the disability community.”

“Many of the gains made in the disability rights movement today would not have been achieved without Bob Kafka’s unparalleled community-organizing prowess and political-systems savvy,” said **Daniel Van Sant, director of disability policy at The Harkin Institute**. “He leaves behind an incredible legacy that we can best honor by carrying



forward with the work he started,” Van Sant added.

“The Harkin Institute is fortunate to be one part of a huge constellation of advocates, activists, and experts across our core policy areas,” **Craig Owens, The Institute’s executive director**, said. “It’s always sad to hear of the passing of someone like Bob Kafka. Above all, however, we celebrate his legacy and take heart in the many people who continue to move the mission forward.”

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**About The Harkin Institute:** The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement at Drake University builds on the legacy of former Iowa Senator Tom Harkin (retired) in the areas of wellness and nutrition, disability policy, and retirement security. It promises to improve the lives of all by giving policymakers access to high-quality information and engaging citizens as active participants in the formation of public policy. The Harkin Institute is housed at [The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center](#), among the most universally accessible buildings in the world, named in honor of the Harkins’ shared commitment to public service.

