



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – February 21, 2025

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A.G. KNUDSEN MOVES TO ABOLISH SECTION 504, SEND DISABLED MONTANAN'S RIGHTS BACK OVER 50 YEARS

INACCURATE MESSAGES SENT FROM A.G. OFFICE, DISABILITY COMMUNITY WILL SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

Helena, MT – Leaders from Montana's disability community will hold a joint press conference regarding the callous actions of Attorney General Austin Knudsen to roll back the civil rights of more than a quarter of Montana residents by his participation in a national lawsuit to abolish Section 504. All press and policy makers are invited to attend.

Where: Disability Rights Montana, 1022 Chestnut Street, Helena, MT 59601

When: Monday, February 24, 2025, 1:00pm

"Section 504 is what gives us a seat at the table, helps us to learn, receive healthcare, and ultimately give back to our communities," says Opal Besaw, a disabled advocate and author based in Kalispell. **"Without Section 504, I would not have received an education."**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Speakers from across Montana advocating for A.G. Knudsen's withdrawal from this litigation will include:

- Montana Centers for Independent Living Leadership;
- The National Federation of the Blind of Montana;
- Members of the disability community; and
- Community Service providers.

Scott Birkenbuel, CEO of Ability Montana and a wheelchair user is exasperated at the stance A.G. Knudsen has taken. **"Knudsen's choice to be part of a lawsuit aimed at eliminating protections of Montanans with disabilities shows an unimaginable level of ignorance for thousands of disabled people who call Montana their home."**

In the fall of 2024, Knudsen joined 16 other state attorneys general in a federal lawsuit, *Texas v. Becerra*. The lawsuit is requesting the court "declare Section 504, 29 U.S.C. § 794, unconstitutional" and "issue permanent injunctive relief against Defendants enjoining them from enforcing Section 504."

"Section 504 is a landmark civil rights law that has protected disabled Americans from discrimination for more than 50 years," states Molly Kimmel, Director of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities at the University of Montana. **"At K-12 public schools, at four-year colleges, and at career and technical schools, thousands of Montana students with disabilities receive an education through essential disability-related**

accommodations that exist because of Section 504. This in turn supports our communities and the future careers of our students.”

Jacob Krissovich, Advocacy and Public Policy Chair of the National Federation of the Blind of Montana expresses grave concerns about the aftermath of such a drastic change. **“As both a policy professional and a person who is blind, I am shook by this lawsuit. If successful, it will strip fundamental rights from thousands of Montana children and adults in areas of, healthcare, employment, transportation, and community living.”**

“Knudsen’s lawsuit carries an alarming message that the government of Montana does not value people with disabilities. The disability community fought hard to get Section 504 and its original implementing regulations passed in the 1970s. I am disappointed by A.G. Knudsen’s cavalier lawsuit which aims at dismissing the welfare and well being of an entire segment of valued Montanans who significantly contribute to the ongoing success of our daily lives” explained Carlos Ramalho, Executive Director of LIFTT and attorney with hearing and vision disabilities. **“Montana’s disability community cannot sit by idly and let one man’s misguided campaign tear down decades of progress.”**

“Our community’s resistance is already having an effect,” said David Carlson, Executive Director of Disability Rights Montana and attorney with dyslexia. **“Montanans have already sent messages to A.G. Knudsen stating their concerns. Responses from his office desperately try to obscure his attack on disabled people as an attack on transgender people. Yesterday, he and his co-counsel filed a document in federal court trying to claim they were only trying to get Section 504 found unconstitutional ‘as applied,’ not ‘on its a face,’ which to me is a distinction without a difference. Especially, when they turn right around and make it clear they are against 504’s efforts to require people with disabilities be integrated in our communities.”**

“This lawsuit is about ending Section 504,” States Tami Hoar, Executive Director of Summit Independent Living. **“Any other reason given by A.G. Knudsen’s office is either a red herring or a copy/paste response from someone who has not actually read the filed complaint. Attacks to oppress the disability community are not new to us. Our history shows our ability to mobilize, persevere, and prevail. Reverse is not an available gear.”**

The press conference will be live streamed. Link will be available at disabilityrightsmt.org day of event. Following the conclusion of the last speaker, interviews will be available one on one with each speaker and other disability advocates. American Sign Language interpretation will be provided. Please contact Kona Franks-Ongoy to request other accommodations, kona@dr-mt.org, 406-449-2344.

Montana Centers for Independent Living are consumer-driven, non-residential, private 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations providing peer-delivered services to give people with all types of disabilities the tools and resources needed to improve independence, self-confidence, knowledge, skills and access to community resources.

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