

Why Olmstead Matters In Plain Language



01 In 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Americans with disabilities have the right to live in their communities. This can mean living in a home alone or with others even when the person needs support. This was called the Olmstead Decision.

02 The Supreme Court said that moving people with disabilities away from other people was unfair and illegal. People should not have to live in institutions just because they have a disability. Institution is a word for a place that houses many people. The people who live there do not have as many choices as others. They may not have their own rooms and may not be allowed to leave when they want to. Someone else may decide what they can eat or wear.

03 The Olmstead decision was based on the understanding that all humans have value and dignity. This includes people with disabilities.

04 Some people who had been in institutions for many years now live in their own homes. They are still able to have the supports they need.

05 Now that there are more services for people living in their own homes, not as many people have to go to institutions.

06 Today, more people with disabilities can make their own choices about where to live. They can choose the kinds of help they need and who will support them.

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07 More people with disabilities are now able to have real jobs where they are paid for their work.

08 People with disabilities can make friends in their neighborhoods, at work, and through other activities they like.

09 People with disabilities can go to any place they choose to worship.

10 When people can choose where to live, where to work, and who they want for friends, they are safer than people who don't get to make those choices.

This is part of what Justice Ginsburg wrote in the Olmstead Decision:

“Recognition that unjustified institutional isolation of persons with disabilities is a form of discrimination reflects two evident judgments. First, institutional placement of persons who can handle and benefit from community settings perpetuates unwarranted assumptions that persons so isolated are incapable or unworthy of participating in community life... Second, confinement in an institution severely diminishes the everyday life activities of individuals, including family relations, social contacts, work options, economic independence, educational advancement, and cultural enrichment.”

In plain language, this means:

The Supreme Court ruled that putting someone in an institution because they have a disability is wrong. The Court named two problems they saw. First, they said that putting people with disabilities in institutions tells the world that they are less valued than others. Second, they said that this hurt people's chances for having friends, family, and jobs. The Court said this was unfair. They ruled that people with disabilities have the right to live in their own homes.