

Susan Hadden Awards – Introduction of Congressman Markey

By Karen Peltz Strauss

When I volunteered to present this award to Congressman Edward Markey, I knew that my job would be easy, because nearly everything that the Congressman has done for the 30 years that he has been in Congress embodies the values that characterize the Susan Hadden Award. From bringing high speed technology to schools in America, to working to ensure that broadband service is available and affordable for every American, especially those who have little political or economic influence, and even for fighting to make our environment a safer place in which to live, Congressman Markey epitomizes what working in the public interest is all about.

Many of you are already aware of Congressman Markey’s enormous contributions to bettering our society. I would like to talk briefly about what he has done on one particular issue: that of ensuring access to communication products and services for people with disabilities. I can say from the heart that with respect to this issue, there is no single legislator more deserving of this award than you, Congressman Markey. Many of you know that market forces have not been enough to bring about disability access. In response, Congress has passed a string of laws to make sure that people with disabilities aren’t excluded as new technologies change the way we communicate and receive information.

Congressman Markey, you have been at the forefront of every one of these legislative efforts. You have consistently been there to remind your colleagues of the Communication Act’s promise of universal service and of the need to “enfranchise” people with disabilities as you have put it, so they can become “full players in our modern

society.” I recall how you came to bat for the creation of a federal relay system in 1988 (for federal agencies) at a time that other representatives did not consider this issue important enough to put to a House vote. Two years later, your House subcommittee pushed through the section of the Americans with Disabilities Act mandating nationwide telecommunications relay services at lightening speed. Disability advocates working on other sections of the ADA were astonished when this occurred only 3 weeks after the Senate approved its own version of the ADA.

Around the same time (1989-90), you were one of the original co-sponsors of the Decoder Circuitry legislation, enabling TVs to show closed captions. In the years after that, you helped the disability community add accessibility requirements to the 1996 Telecom Act, otherwise known as section 255. Along the way, Congressman Markey, you consistently elevated the importance of these issues, calling it “unconscionable” that people with disabilities might not have access to innovative technologies (such as cellular phones, fiber optics, and satellite systems) that enable us to communicate with any person, at any time, and at any place.

Finally, I would like to share with you two brief stories about the Congressman that are among my favorites. One of these occurred in January of 1994, when a few of us visited Congressman Markey’s office to push for closed captioning mandates on television. When we got to the meeting room, we noticed that captions were scrolling across the House proceedings being broadcast on a television in a corner of the ceiling. Midway through the meeting, you poked your head in to say hello and we all pointed to the captions, and told you how these were allowing your staff to go about their daily affairs while watching the House floor debates. As you looked up, we noticed a look of understanding come across

your eyes. On the spot, you pledged your support, and you told your aides to start working on a captioning amendment. Your commitment on that day turned out to be a critical turning point in the efforts to make television accessible. On January of 2006, the U.S. became the world's leader in providing closed captioned television programming, requiring 100% of all nearly all new television shows to have captions. Many deaf and hard of hearing people say that closed captioning is the single modern accessibility technology that has changed their lives the most. We have you, Congressman Markey, to thank for that.

The second story occurred back in the late 1980s. For years, consumers with hearing loss had been trying to get a law that would require all telephones to be hearing aid compatible. Congressman Markey was consistently a leading co-sponsor of these bills throughout the 1980s. But the bills had a hard time getting off the ground because of staunch industry opposition. Finally, in the late 1980s, the major telephone companies, AT&T and GTE, came out in support of such a law. But the one hold-out was the Electronics Industry Association. At a subcommittee hearing, Congressman Markey, you addressed EIA's witness about the consequences of people not having telephone access when they were older, or as you put it, during "the Fun Years." And here is what you said: "I have a secret dream and that is I get to live to be old enough that I would need to use a hearing aid. I would like to believe I could live in a society that would have something to make my life as normal as possible. I think almost everyone shares that dream. You don't want to be dependent upon who decided or didn't decide to include it in their equipment. It ought to be a part of life."(June 1988). "It ought to be a part of life." You don't just get it; you feel it.

As I present this award, I want to first congratulate you for once again becoming the Chairman of the House Telecommunications and Internet Subcommittee – many of us have waited far too long to see you back where you belong. And now, it is my great honor and privilege to present you with the 2007 Susan G. Hadden Pioneer Award for fostering a growing awareness of the need for widespread access to our nation’s communications technologies, for continually pushing these issues to the forefront of legislative debates, and for your unwavering commitment to the public interest.