

ISSN: 2450-6869

eISSN: 2719-6763

No. 20, 2024

DEFENCE SCIENCE REVIEW

<http://www.journalssystem.com/pno/>

[DOI: 10.37055/pno/202036](https://doi.org/10.37055/pno/202036)

Integration of people with disabilities in the United States Armed Forces – on the example of the Air Force

Original article

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A – Research concept and design, B – Collection and/or assembly of data,
C – Data analysis and interpretation, D – Writing the article,
E – Critical revision of the article, F – Final approval of article

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Received: 2025-01-14

Revised: 2025-02-17

Accepted: 2025-02-18

Final review: 2025-01-30

Peer review: 2024-12-11

Double blind

Keywords:

military disability, disabled in
the U.S. Air Force, military
service, veterans

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Abstract

Objectives: The aim of this article is to analyze the integration processes of people with disabilities in the U.S. Air Force, with particular emphasis on changes in equality policy and regulations, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. In particular, the aim is to understand how these changes have affected the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the context of everyday life in the Air Force, and what benefits and challenges arise from this integration for both military units and persons with disabilities themselves

Methods: Analysis of existing documents, legal regulations, policies and initiatives concerning persons with disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces. This method allows for the identification of key legal provisions that enable the inclusion of persons with disabilities in military service and the assessment of their impact on military practices.

Results: Identification of the main legal acts that have a direct impact on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in military service.

Conclusions: Despite the progress made in the integration of people with disabilities, the analysis of legal regulations and integration policies in the U.S. Air Force indicates the need for further action to increase the participation of people with disabilities in military service. It will be crucial to adapt infrastructure, training, recruitment procedures, psychological support, as well as continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of integration policies. Increasing awareness and engagement on this issue will help further improve the quality of working life for people with disabilities in the U.S. Air Force.

Introduction

The modern U.S. Armed Forces, including the Air Force, play a critical role in ensuring both national and international security. Over the past few decades, the U.S. Armed Forces have undergone a number of changes, including the integration of various social groups, such as people with disabilities. For many years, people with various types of disabilities were excluded from military service or could participate in it only to a limited extent. However, changes in equality and diversity policies, including the introduction of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and new initiatives from the Department of Defense, have created a range of opportunities for people with disabilities in military services.

In this context, the U.S. Air Force faces the challenge of effectively integrating people with various types of disabilities into both active and reserve service. On the one hand, policies and legal regulations are aimed at including people with disabilities in military service. However, on the other hand, their implementation requires the adaptation of infrastructure, staff training and a change of mentality in the organization.

The purpose of this article is to analyze current policies, challenges, and initiatives regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces, including the Air Force, and to assess their effectiveness in the context of implementing the principles of equality, inclusion, and ensuring access to full military service. The article also aims to indicate areas in which further actions can contribute to improving the integration of this group in the army.

The article is based mainly on foreign legal regulations, scientific publications and information from websites specializing in this subject.

1. History of Disability Inclusion in the U.S. Armed Forces

The inclusion of people with disabilities in military service in the United States is the result of a long-term process that gained particular momentum after the end of the Cold War, when public awareness of the importance of equality and inclusion in the military increased. In the early years of U.S. history, individuals with physical and mental disabilities were automatically excluded from joining the military. Over time, however, and in response to the growing public awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, changes were made to the recruitment policy of the United States Armed Forces to integrate such persons.

The social and political context of the 1960s and 1980s, including the struggle for civil rights, was decisive in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which aimed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the "Independent Living" movement, and organizations such as the National Council on Disability (National Council on Disability, 2024) have been instrumental in lobbying for changes in equality policy in the United States. Examples from history, such as protests by people with disabilities, were fundamental to the implementation of legislation that ensured civil rights and removed barriers to access to education, work, or other areas of public life for people with disabilities.

The Civil Rights Movement is a civil rights movement in the United States that took place in the 1950s and 1960s and played a key role in the fight for equality and against racial

discrimination. While he primarily focused on African American rights, his successes also had an impact on other groups in society, including people with disabilities. An example of the success of the Civil Rights Movement is the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender, and nationality. This law was a milestone in the pursuit of equality, inspiring the extension of these rights to other groups, including people with disabilities. As a result, it has contributed to efforts to improve the situation of people with disabilities (Schneider, 2021, pp. 213-230).

In the 1970s, after the great successes of the Civil Rights Movement, people with disabilities in the United States began to demand their rights and equal opportunities. A high-profile event that drew public attention to the problems of this social group was the Berkeley protest in 1977, when about 150 people with disabilities occupied the offices of the Department of Health, Education and Human Services in Washington for 28 days. The purpose of the protest was to put pressure on President Jimmy Carter's administration to implement the Rehabilitation Regulations of 1973, which prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in government institutions. The protest was successful and administrative decisions were finally taken, which was an important step towards the full integration of people with disabilities in various spheres of life (Linton, 2022). After this protest, President Carter's administration introduced legislation that permanently initiated the process of removing barriers to access to government institutions for people with disabilities.

Another important step on the way to the adoption of the ADA was the activity of non-governmental organizations, such as the National Council on Disability (NCD), which promoted the rights of people with disabilities. NCDs, formed in 1978, have become a major advocate for legislative changes such as the ADA. These organizations were also responsible for organizing social campaigns and lobbying for the rights of people with disabilities. In 1986, NCD published a report pointing to the need for a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that would cover people with disabilities in various areas of life, including work, education, transport and access to public buildings. This report was one of the cornerstones used by those working on the draft ADA (National Council on Disability, 1986).

The Independent Living Movement was also very important in the process of enacting the ADA. It was initiated by people with disabilities who demanded the right to full independence, including access to housing, transport and work. This movement promoted the idea that people with disabilities should be able to live in society on the same terms as people without disabilities, which included access to education, work and public life. As part of this movement, centers for people with disabilities were created, which offered assistance in social integration and promoted the idea of equality (Shapiro, 2020).

The main step towards change was the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by the United States Congress in 1990. The ADA is a federal law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in many areas of life, including employment. Thanks to this act, people with disabilities have gained the right to participate in many aspects of professional life, including military service. This document provides comprehensive protection for the civil rights of people with disabilities, including access to employment, public facilities, transport and telecommunications services, as well as participation in government

programs. Thanks to the ADA, people with various types of disabilities have become part of the broader equality and inclusion policy in the United States. *No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity”* (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, Section 12132).

The groundbreaking impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was not limited to the civilian sphere, but was also critical to changes in military structures. After the ADA was passed in 1990, the U.S. Armed Forces began revising its recruitment procedures and integration policies to allow people with disabilities to participate more fully in military service. The recruitment rules have been adapted, and appropriate support and rehabilitation programs have been introduced to facilitate the adaptation of people with disabilities to service. These changes allowed for the gradual inclusion of people with various types of disabilities into the ranks of the army, which was a step towards full equality and inclusion. Through these reforms, people with disabilities began to play an active role in the Armed Forces, which confirmed the validity of the policy of equality changes, the foundations of which were laid by the ADA.

2. Support Programs for Persons with Disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces, Including the Air Force

After the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the United States Armed Forces began developing inclusive programs that supported people with various types of disabilities, including physical and intellectual disabilities. The introduction of appropriate guidelines to the recruitment process enabled people with disabilities to fully participate in the verification process. In addition, these measures have introduced facilities for people with mobility limitations, such as tailored medical examinations and recruitment procedures that take into account the individual needs of candidates.

The U.S. Air Force, as one of the leading branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, has adapted its recruitment and integration programs to the needs of people with disabilities. The aim of these activities was to enable the full integration of people with various types of disabilities, as well as to include them in broadly understood military activities. These programs include not only changes in the recruitment process, but also a number of activities supporting people with disabilities, such as support in adapting to military life, adapting workstations, or the use of modern technologies supporting functioning in the army. As part of this effort, the U.S. Air Force strives to create an environment that enables people with disabilities to perform their duties as effectively as their fully abled counterparts. This includes, among others, adapting workstations, as well as implementing modern technologies to support daily service, such as computer simulators or advanced visual communication systems. Among others, there are the following examples of such programs:

1. The *Army Disabled Veteran's Program* was a key component of the U.S. Armed Forces' integration policy, introduced after the ADA was enacted in 1990. This program was designed to allow people with various types of disabilities, including both physical and intellectual, to join the army. In particular, it was designed so that people who had previously been excluded from military service, because of their disability, could now join the military, as long as they were able to perform the relevant

duties. The program enabled people with disabilities to serve in various roles – from administrative positions, through logistics, to technical functions. The Army Disabled Veteran's Program was one of the first steps in adapting the Armed Forces' recruitment policy to the requirements of the ADA. The program not only enabled people with disabilities to join the service, but also contributed to the development of training and recruitment strategies that took into account the individual needs of candidates. Adapting the recruitment process, including the possibility of individual health assessments and adapting medical procedures (e.g. adapted medical examinations), allowed for a wider inclusion of people with different types of disabilities. In addition, a support system was created as part of this program, which included career and psychological counseling for people with disabilities, helping them adapt to life in the army. The program has influenced the development of equal opportunities policy, which has increased the number of people with disabilities in military service and introduced a more inclusive approach in the organisation of the Armed Forces.

Following the introduction of this program, the number of people with disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces, including the Air Force, increased, although exact statistics on this increase may vary in time. The program made it possible to recruit people who had been excluded in the past because of their disability, which allowed them to be actively included in military service. Through these activities, people with disabilities have begun to play a role in various areas of the army, contributing to the spread of a culture of equality and inclusion.

According to U.S. Department of Defense reports, the number of people with disabilities in military service has increased, showing how changing attitudes in recruitment policies have increased the participation of this group in the army (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

2. *The Wings for Warriors program*, created by the United States Air Force, is designed to support people with disabilities, especially veterans, in gaining aviation skills. It allows people who have suffered serious injuries or war traumas to receive training in aviation and other positions in the army, such as technical or administrative positions. The program is part of a broader inclusion strategy within the Air Force to increase participation of people with disabilities in military service by ensuring they have access to education and training tailored to their needs.

As a result of the implementation of this program, the number of people with disabilities in the military services has increased, especially in the context of people after war injuries who have obtained new qualifications under the program. While there is no clear number of people who have benefited from the Wings for Warriors program, its success in integrating people with disabilities into the Air Force has exemplified the impact of equity initiatives on the structure of the U.S. Armed Forces. The program not only supports war veterans, but also helps keep them engaged and active in the Air Force, improving their quality of life and enabling them to participate fully in service (U.S. Air Force, 2024).

3. *The Warrior Care Program* (as part of its equality policy) was introduced by the U.S. Department of Defense to support servicemen who have suffered injuries during military service, including people with disabilities. Its main goal was not only to provide medical care, but also to support the process of integrating such people back into military service. The program includes various forms of support, such as adapting workplaces, training, assistance in adapting to new conditions of service, as well as providing psychological support. The Warrior Care Program is an integral part of the U.S. Armed Forces' disability integration policy. Its introduction had a huge impact on changes in the way people with disabilities are perceived, as well as on preparing them to serve in various areas of the army. The program allows soldiers who have been injured in the course of their service to continue the military careers by adjusting their physical requirements and offering a wide range of support, from training to rehabilitation. This makes it possible to increase the number of people with disabilities in military service, helping them to further advance their military careers or transition to new roles in the military. The program has contributed to increasing the number of people with disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces, especially as a result of military injuries. The program has enabled soldiers who might have previously been excluded from service to continue to perform their duties in the military, albeit in different roles than before, such as administrative, logistical or technical support positions. Data from the Department of Defense show an increase in the number of people with disabilities serving in the military after the program was introduced, as well as a reduction in the number of people who would be excluded from it due to injuries sustained on the battlefield (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).
4. *The U.S. Air Force Psychological Support Program* focuses on emotional and psychological assistance for people with disabilities, particularly those who have been injured or have had difficulty adapting to new conditions of service. It includes individual, group, and trauma management assistance, including PTSD (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).
5. *The Mentoring and Coaching Program for Soldiers with Disabilities* provides support from experienced Army members who help integrate new recruits and develop their professional skills. These programs focus on supporting soldiers in adapting to military life and to new working conditions. Mentors, who often have their own experience related to disability, are more able to recognize the needs of their mentees and help them overcome difficulties more effectively. Coaching, on the other hand, focuses on personal and professional development, helping soldiers with disabilities improve their professional competencies and cope with the challenges of military service (Wounded Warrior Project, 2023).
6. *Adaptive Sports Program* – The program offers soldiers with disabilities the opportunity to participate in a variety of sporting events that are tailored to their physical needs. Participation in such competitions helps soldiers with disabilities to rebuild their confidence and participate more fully in military and social life (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).

Through the implementation of these programs, the U.S. Air Force and other branches of the military have become more open and accessible to people with disabilities, which has an impact on the entire organizational structure of the army, promoting a culture of equality and inclusion. These changes have allowed more people with disabilities to be included in military duties, as well as facilitating their further professional development and integration into the military community. All these activities are an example of a modern approach to the integration of people with disabilities in the U.S. Armed Forces. With support that includes physical, emotional, and professional adaptation, people with disabilities can fully participate in military service, contributing to its potential and effectiveness.

3. Inclusion and diversity policy in the U.S. Air Force

Inclusion and diversity policies in the U.S. Air Force play a critical role in promoting equity and the full inclusion of people with disabilities in military service. In line with the Department of Defense's policy, the U.S. Armed Forces strive to create an environment in which every person, regardless of health or physical status, has the opportunity to serve in the military, provided they meet the necessary operational criteria and are able to perform their duties effectively. For this reason, the Air Force introduces special recruitment procedures, adapts jobs and develops programs to support people with disabilities.

One of the key elements of the U.S. Air Force's inclusion policy is the modification of recruitment procedures that allow people with disabilities to apply for military service. With the introduction of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people with physical and intellectual disabilities can be recruited for positions that were previously unavailable. Prior to the implementation of the ADA, people with disabilities, especially those with mobility or sensory limitations, had limited access to military service. However, following the enactment of these regulations, the U.S. Air Force adapted its procedures to ensure equal access to service by implementing the following changes (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023):

1. Training and supporting technologies in the U.S. Air Force.

The U.S. Air Force has adapted its training programs to the needs of people with disabilities, introducing modern technologies to support their participation in military service. Through Accessions and Special Programs, people with disabilities can acquire essential military skills, tailored to their individual physical and sensory abilities.

A number of technological innovations have been introduced, such as visual systems in aircraft cockpits that display key information about the machine's status and operational situation through light signals. This allows pilots with hearing impairment to respond effectively to changing conditions during flight. In addition, sound reinforcement technologies such as headphones with microphones have been introduced to support communication during training and operations, providing full access to information.

Communication technologies, including voice systems, assistive listening devices (e.g. hearing aids that can be connected to military systems) and speech recognition software, enable people with hearing impairments to fully participate in military operations. The U.S. Army's Hearing Loss Program has implemented a variety of support systems, such as

hearing devices and wireless communication systems, eliminating communication barriers and ensuring equal access to operational activities (U.S. Army, 2023).

Modern computer simulators play a key role in training people with disabilities, enabling them to carry out exercises in a virtual environment. Thanks to the simulators, people with various types of disabilities, including amputees or those with sensory problems, can undergo realistic training, tailored to their individual needs. For example, flight simulators offer personalized settings that take into account the type and severity of the participant's disability, allowing to, for instance, adjust the contrasts and sizes of text on displays for people with vision impairments.

The U.S. Air Force has also adapted its technologies to the needs of people with disabilities who perform administrative or technical functions. Assistive software, such as speech recognition programs, allows people with motor disorders to control computers and other technical devices using their voice. Thanks to such tools, people with disabilities can perform administrative and technical tasks as effectively as their healthy colleagues.

As part of its training and preparations, the U.S. Air Force has also introduced mobility assistive technologies, such as specialized vehicles that allow people with reduced mobility to move around military bases. These technologies allow trainees to fully engage in missions that require mobility, regardless of their physical limitations.

Modifications of military equipment are an important element of the process of integration of people with disabilities. An example is the adaptation of military vehicles and equipment to the needs of people with reduced mobility. Changes in the design of vehicles, such as the adaptation of cabins to wheelchair users, allow full participation in military tasks. Such technologies eliminate barriers to access to critical systems during missions. An example is the Advanced Battle Management System (ABMS) project, which integrates different types of equipment with advanced interfaces to support people with different types of disabilities (U.S. Air Force, 2022).

All of these technologies, from advanced communication systems to computer simulators and adaptive mobility technologies, are the cornerstones of the U.S. Air Force's disability integration policy. Through these innovations, the Air Force not only adapts its procedures and work environment, but also creates conditions for the full and effective integration of people with disabilities, which enables them to actively participate in military training and further military service (U.S. Air Force, 2022).

2. Adaptation of workstations and operating environment.

As part of the introduction of assistive technologies, the U.S. Air Force has introduced numerous changes in the adaptation of workplaces, including access to computer technology and simulators. The use of software that allows computers to be controlled by sight or head movements allows people with limited mobility to use advanced computer systems during military training. Such technologies are used, among others, in the Air Force's Specialized Training System, which offers simulations and advanced training systems tailored to the needs of people with various types of disabilities (U.S. Air Force, 2022).

3. Individual assessment of your ability.

The U.S. Armed Forces have begun to be more flexible about candidates' health requirements. After 1990, individual health assessments were introduced, which allowed people with disabilities who could perform certain functions to join military service. This approach assessed the physical and intellectual abilities of the candidates, taking into account the specific requirements of the role.

This change was particularly important for amputees, vision problems and other physical impairments. These people, who previously might have had limited access to the service, could now perform administrative, logistical or technical roles, adapted to their abilities. An important step was a change in the method of assessing physical ability, consisting in adapting physical requirements to the type of disability. Thanks to this flexibility, people with limited physical abilities, such as amputees, with vision problems, as well as other people with physical difficulties, could perform important tasks in the army, including in the administrative and logistical area.

4. Rehabilitation and technologies supporting the recovery of physical fitness.

In the case of people who have suffered damage to their health during military service, modern rehabilitation technologies play a key role. Technologies supporting rehabilitation, such as rehabilitation robots, artificial intelligence technologies in medicine and systems supporting psychological rehabilitation, allow for quick return to full military efficiency. An example is rehabilitation programs based on VR (virtual reality) technology, which allow soldiers with physical injuries to improve their motor skills in a controlled environment (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

In conclusion, the proposed changes to inclusion and diversity policies in the U.S. Air Force represent an important step toward more fully integrating people with disabilities into military service. These changes include, among others, the introduction of more flexible recruitment procedures, the adaptation of workplaces, and the introduction of modern technologies to support communication, mobility and rehabilitation. Thanks to these innovations, people with various types of disabilities, including mobility, vision or hearing problems, can fully participate in military training and carry out operational missions, both in administrative and technical positions.

These changes not only promote increased diversity within the ranks of the U.S. Air Force, but also improve the efficiency and morale of the entire military, allowing people with disabilities to reach their full potential in service. The introduction of individual ability assessments, the adaptation of physical requirements to individual needs, and the development of rehabilitation technologies such as computer simulators and virtual reality are the cornerstones of this reform. As a result, the U.S. Air Force is becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities, fostering a more diverse, effective, and inclusive military environment.

4. Cooperation with non-governmental organizations

The U.S. Air Force also cooperates with non-governmental organizations that offer comprehensive support to people with disabilities. Organizations such as the *Wounded Warrior Project* and *The American Veterans with Disabilities (AVD)* play a key role in the process of integrating people with disabilities into military service, providing rehabilitation, mental health support, and assistance in adapting to military life after injuries (Wounded Warrior Project, 2023).

The Wounded Warrior Project is an organization that supports veterans with disabilities by offering a wide range of services, such as psychological support, career counseling, rehabilitation, and access to training programs. Thanks to these programs, people who struggle with health problems after military service can more easily adapt to civilian life and find themselves in the labor market again. In addition, the organization allows veterans to participate in team-building events that help rebuild their self-esteem and prepare them to continue their careers in various industries (Wounded Warrior Project, 2023).

The American Veterans with Disabilities (AVD), on the other hand, is an organization that provides assistance to people with war disabilities, offering legal advice, support in obtaining military benefits, as well as assistance in social integration. AVD also plays a vital role in facilitating access to specialized health and rehabilitation services, helping veterans with disabilities return more fully to professional and community activity (The American Veterans with Disabilities, 2023).

Through such initiatives, people who were previously excluded from full participation in military life receive support that enables them to go through the process of adaptation to a new stage of life. NGOs therefore play an invaluable role in helping veterans with disabilities re-engage in military service and civilian life.

The introduction of a number of reforms in the U.S. Air Force, such as adapting recruitment procedures, modern technologies, job modifications, and cooperation with non-governmental organizations, effectively supports the integration of people with disabilities in military service. These initiatives allow for the creation of full-fledged conditions for participation in the life of the U.S. military, enabling people with various types of disabilities to play an active role in military structures. In turn, organizations such as *the Wounded Warrior Project* and *AVD* play a key role in the process of reintegrating these individuals, both in terms of returning to service and adjusting to civilian life after their military careers.

Conclusions

The inclusion of people with disabilities in the U.S. Air Force not only demonstrates a commitment to equality and diversity, but also reflects the broad philosophy of inclusivity in the U.S. Armed Forces. Through reforms, assistive technology, and collaboration with non-governmental organizations, the U.S. Air Force is creating better conditions for the full participation of people with disabilities in military service. While the process faces some challenges, such as adapting infrastructure and tackling bias, key actions and the continuation of reforms have the potential to further improve the situation.

From a long-term perspective, this inclusion not only enables people with disabilities to fulfill their roles in the army, but also contributes to strengthening the overall efficiency and diversity of military teams. Further investment in technology, the development of individualised career paths, psychological support and education of military personnel will be key to enabling the full inclusion of this group. Thus, the future of disability inclusion in the U.S. Air Force is based on continuing to change attitudes and adapt procedures to create a fully diverse and effective team ready to meet the challenges of the modern world.

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