

Judge David L.

BAZELON CENTER
for Mental Health Law

NEWS

Supreme Court Decides Tennessee v. Lane and Jones, Upholds Civil Rights Protections for People with Disabilities

(Washington, DC) May 17, 2004--The Supreme Court today issued an important decision on the civil rights of people with disabilities, ruling 5-4 that states can be sued for money damages under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act for failing to provide people with disabilities access to the courts.

The following is a statement by Ira Burnim, legal director at the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, a national legal advocacy group for the rights of people with mental disabilities:

"Today's decision is a huge win at a critical time for millions of Americans with disabilities. The Supreme Court today narrowly rejected a radical interpretation of states' rights that would have robbed millions of a vital means of protecting their civil rights.

"Unfortunately, the razor-thin margin and limited scope of the decision in Tennessee v. Lane underscores the fact that disability rights in this country hang by a thread.

"Court rulings in recent years have threatened to eviscerate the Americans with Disabilities Act. While the ultimate impact of the Court's decision in Lane won't be known for years, today's ruling is an essential acknowledgement of the federal government's important role in enforcing civil rights."