

ADA Legacy Tour History of Self-Advocacy Exhibit - Panel One of Four

Advocacy in the Nineteenth Century

The Self-Advocacy Movement can be seen as an extension of social and civil rights movements that were waged by historically marginalized groups of people. This movement is an expression of self-determination, opportunity to achieve, and participation in an accepting society that values contributions of people with disabilities.

The roots of the Self-Advocacy Movement in America began in an era where educators, physicians, social reformers, journalists and political figures advocated for what were considered at the time as better systems of care for people with disabilities.

One of the first institutions for individuals with disabilities was the almshouse. Living conditions for individuals with disabilities in the almshouses were sometimes deplorable. However, social reformers such as Dorothea Dix and Josephine Shaw Lowell began a movement to remove individuals with disabilities from the almshouses to institutions that provided more specific care.

Educational advocacy included the establishment of schools for children with disabilities. Early private schools provided instruction and care but were expensive and could not accommodate large numbers of students. In 1851, the "New York State Asylum for Idiots" was established in Syracuse and was the first government-funded institution in North America.

Educational institutions for individuals who were deaf and blind were also established. The New England Gallaudet Association of the Deaf was established in 1854 to address the needs of children that were hard of hearing. In 1880, the National Association for the Deaf was founded to advocate for reforms on behalf of people who were deaf.

Advocacy for individuals with mental illness included "first hand reports" by former inmates. Institutions for "the insane" were the subject of a number of media outlets that exposed abuses within institutions and called for reform of care and treatment.

Advocacy for the development of improved care and construction of institutions for people with disabilities took on a broader scope with the establishment of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1874.

Courtesy of The Museum of disABILITY History - Buffalo, NY