

ADA Legacy Tour

History of Self-Advocacy Exhibit - Panel Two of Four

Early Twentieth Century Organizing

The early twentieth century was witness to the continuing growth of advocacy for and by individuals with disabilities. Organizations for the integration into society of individuals considered deaf and blind as well as those with physical disabilities and those labeled “insane” or “mad” became increasingly active.

An achievement in advocacy for individuals who were hard of hearing was the founding of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf in 1901, which secured the right of deaf people to buy life insurance and obtain drivers’ licenses.

Advocacy for reform of mental health care continued during this period. A pivotal moment was in 1908 with Clifford Beers’ autobiography, *A Mind That Found Itself*, which exposed unfavorable conditions and treatment endured during his confinement in mental institutions. This led to the formation of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene.

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) was founded in 1921 to increase and enhance access to information for individuals with vision loss. Helen Keller worked for the AFB for over forty years as an advocate, writer, lecturer and fundraiser. In 1940, The National Foundation for the Blind was formed by Jacobus ten Broek to advocate for “white cane laws” for pedestrians, and for inclusion of people with visual impairments to become full citizens.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 initiated a program for injured World War I veterans and provided vocational training and job placement. Eventually, this law extended programs to those with other disabilities. Advocacy for the end of job discrimination continued with the 1940 formation of the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped. This group urged the establishment of National Employ the Handicapped Week, which was signed into law by President Truman in 1945.

In 1946, the grassroots of United Cerebral Palsy Association and The National Association for Retarded Children were formed. These Parent’s Groups marked a new chapter in the advocacy for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In 1956, “Polio Living,” a national magazine dedicated to serving all persons who have had poliomyelitis was published and in 1958, the “Toomeyville Gazette” began. Both magazines addressed the “polio nation” created by the epidemics of the 20th century and provided its readers disability related advice, information and advocacy.

Courtesy of The Museum of disABILITY History - Buffalo, NY