

# Women's efforts aided veterans with disabilities

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In the United States, the history of providing benefits for veterans with disabilities dates back to 1636, when the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony were at war with the Pequot Indians. The Pilgrims passed legislation that stated that disabled veteran soldiers would be supported by their colony.

Revolutionary War veterans with disabilities obtained a pension provided by the Continental Congress of 1776. But the care of ill and disabled veterans was largely left in the hands of states and a few federal agencies, with a standardized system not going into place until the Veterans' Administration was established in 1930.

In Minnesota, the first veterans' hospitals were created by the American Legion Auxiliary. In his book **Legion 50**, author Ben Gimmestad describes how women stepped forward after World War I to help the veterans. After the Auxiliary formed in Minnesota in 1919, hospital visitation became its first major program.

Conditions for many disabled and ill veterans were grim. Gimmestad wrote: "These men had been housed wherever room could be found, in the basements of city hospitals, in jails, in county poor houses, even in insane asylums. Many were destitute, and were bowed down with a feeling of depression and disgust. They had been forgotten by their government and everyone else, they reasoned. Many were without a change of clothing, and were in dire need of such items as pajamas, socks, bathrobes, slippers and handkerchiefs. Many were without fund to buy personal needs such as shaving cream, razors, tooth brushes and tooth paste, stationery, stamps or carfare."

The women sprang into action to meet these needs, to raise the veterans' morale and to visit these forgotten veterans regularly. Gimmestad noted that the women wanted to let veterans with disabilities or disease know that someone cared and that their country had not forgotten them.

The women worked with what was then the United States Health Service to open two veterans' hospitals.

The old Asbury Hospital in Minneapolis was leased in 1920. The old Aberdeen Hotel, a once-grand structure in St. Paul's Ramsey Hill neighborhood, was leased and converted into a makeshift hospital in 1921. Another Twin Cities hospital was later converted for men with tuberculosis. Though these were far from ideal facilities, they were much better than the grim conditions the men had faced before. All of the buildings are gone today.

Auxiliaries across the state organized to meet the needs of the veterans. Women raised funds, including the sale of paper poppies, to help pay for veterans' service. Soon the statewide Auxiliary had a large and active "committee on the sick and disabled." Gimmestad noted this was done by a very new organization, with a "thin purse." The women became adept at seeking donations.

One 1921 report notes that "We found the boys in want of many things which make for the decencies of life." Along with clothing and personal care items, the women provided candy, fruit, cakes, jellies and other food items. Birthday cakes were made for each veteran. At Christmas the women brought trees and decorations, as well as flowers, fruit baskets and baked treats.

Donations also helped start work programs, so that veterans could make and sell items. The Minneapolis Fire Department made 32 looms, so that the men could weave and sell items. The men made baskets, lampshades and other items so that they could have spending money.

Although government programs took over some of the Auxiliary's work, providing gifts and friendly visits to veterans is an activity many Auxiliary chapters continue today.

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***Would you like to make history?***

*Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of physical and cognitive disabilities, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Past History Note articles can be found on [www.accesspress.org](http://www.accesspress.org). Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions.*

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