

# U.S. Dept of Labor marks centennial this year

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March 4, 1913, marked a milestone event in the history of the American workforce. On that day 100 years ago, President William Howard Taft—on his last day in office—reluctantly signed legislation creating the U.S. Department of Labor and giving workers a direct seat in the President’s Cabinet for the first time.



Observance of the federal department’s centennial got underway last year, with the production of a centennial video, an interactive timeline, a series of historical posters and collection a of historical vignettes in its DOL newsletter—all designed to educate, inform and inspire the public about a rich and complex history. The website has many fun pieces of information about everything from when various pieces of legislation were signed to stories of people who played roles in U.S. labor history. Go to [www.dol.gov/](http://www.dol.gov/)

Taft had lost his bid for another term and signed the legislation just hours before President-elect Woodrow Wilson took office. A federal Department of Labor was the product of a half-century campaign by organized labor and the Progressive Movement for a “Voice in the Cabinet.”

When the federal Department of Labor was founded, treatment of workers was a huge concern nationally. Child labor was still common. Exploitation of workers in a variety of industries regularly made newspaper and magazine headlines. Workers of all ages often found themselves in unsafe conditions, working with no protection for low pay.

One interesting bit of information on the Department of Labor’s website notes that on Dec. 16, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. Legislative efforts to include age as a factor by which employers could not discriminate began with the Employment Opportunity Act of 1962 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The lack of data on age discrimination in the workplace prompted Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to commission the report “The Older American Worker: Age Discrimination in Employment.” On the department’s centennial day, Kathy Martinez, assistant secretary of labor for disability employment policy, also had reason to celebrate.

Martinez was among nine people honored by the Viscardi Center for their contributions to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities. The Henry Viscardi Achievement Awards recognizes contemporary members of the global disability community who have impacted the quality of life of people with disabilities. Martinez has been a tireless advocate for people with disabilities, creating opportunities for traditional diversity entities to collaborate with the disability community in true sustainable partnerships that can move toward full inclusion and real systems change.

“This award is an honor, and it is very much in keeping with principles the Department of Labor has espoused throughout its 100-year history: advancing opportunities for profitable employment,

protecting work-related benefits and rights, and guaranteeing fair compensation for all members of the diverse American workforce,” said Martinez.

***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. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions.*

*The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, [www.mncdd.org](http://www.mncdd.org) and [www.partnersinpolicymaking.com](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com)*