

HISTORY NOTE: MinnesotaCare resulted from work by capitol's 'Gang of Seven'

by [Access Press Staff](#) // March 9th, 2018

China had its "Gang of Four." Members who were Communist Party leaders rose to prominence in that country's Cultural Revolution of the 1970s, but were later charged with treasonous crimes.

Minnesota had its "Gang of Seven." Members who were Independent Republicans (IR) and Democrat-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party members in the Minnesota Legislature rose to prominence for their work to ensure health care for all and to establish MinnesotaCare. As that program is eyed for change this session, it's worth a look back.

Representatives Lee Greenfield (DFL-Minneapolis), David Gruenes (R-St. Cloud), Brad Stanius (IR-White Bear Lake) and Paul Ogren (DFL-Aitkin) were the gang's House faction. They were joined by Senators Linda Berglin (DFL-Minneapolis), Duane Benson (IR-Lanesboro) and Pat Piper (DFL-Austin). Many of the legislators are remembered for their work with the state's disability community and on legislation protecting seniors.

The group drew from varied backgrounds. Some were legislative veterans and others were relative newcomers at the time they created MinnesotaCare.

Benson had played 11 seasons in the NFL and was a rancher when he was elected to the Senate. Berglin was a graphic designer. Piper worked in religious education and spent 22 years as a Franciscan Sister before getting involved in politics. Greenfield, who came from a science background, was a former civil rights and anti-war activist. Gruenes was a teacher and salesman. Ogren was a farmer and carpenter. Stanius was a pharmacist, former White Bear Lake mayor and City Council member, and competitive fisherman when he was first elected.

The "Gang of Seven" is remembered for its work to establish MinnesotaCare. That finally happened in 1992 but not with a lot of effort. All of the seven, when they left office, pointed to MinnesotaCare as a key achievement. But that took years. When he retired from office in 2000, Greenfield recalled that his first legislative campaign 22 years prior called for the state's health care system to take care of all Minnesotans.

The legislators worked with then-Gov. Arne Carlson to pass the legislation that expanded the state's health coverage of the uninsured from children to all residents who did not have access to employer supported coverage. Tenacity earned the legislators the "Gang of Seven" nickname. They took on resistance from the insurance and health care industries as they worked to ensure health care for all. But they pressed on, encouraged by people who needed their help. When he left office, Stanius recalled helping a constituent family whose young daughter needed a kidney transplant, and how they battled an unwilling insurance company.

Of the seven, Berglin was the last to leave the capitol. She resigned from the Senate in 2011 to work for Hennepin County.

Stanius died in 2014 and Piper in 2016. Benson went on to lead the Minnesota Business Partnership. Gruenes served as Department of Commerce Commissioner. Greenfield worked in health care and public policy. Ogren moved to California where he has owned and operated businesses.

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 disability topics, 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 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.