

# Legal Aid celebrates 100 years of community service

by [Access Press Staff](#) // July 10th, 2013

In 2013 Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid, which provides access to legal assistance to residents of 20 counties in central Minnesota, marks its 100th year of advocacy. The agency has a long tradition of representing the legal rights of people with disabilities, senior citizens and low-income Minnesotans.



“The work of our staff does make a real difference in the lives of our clients,” said Cathy Haukedahl, executive director of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid. “As state support for our program has dwindled, the need for our services has expanded. From 2000 – 2010, the number of people in poverty in the area we serve increased by 48 percent. Through these challenging times, our staff has remained strongly committed to securing justice for our clients.”

Legal Aid opened its doors on April 15, 1913, starting as a single paid attorney in Minneapolis. That attorney was John Benson. Benson had clerked at the Minneapolis law firm of Cobb & Wheelwright. He rejoined the firm in 1914. It later became Faegre and Benson and is now Faegre Baker Daniels.

Benson was well-known for his concern for those less fortunate. Although his name was dropped in a 2012 law firm merger, it lives on in the firm’s intranet service and in its John Benson Pro Bono Award for attorneys who provide outstanding free service to those in need.

In 1931, the organization’s name was changed to the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis. The organization’s services grew and expanded.

What is now the Minnesota Disability Law Center got its start in the 1970s. In 1972, Legal Aid was involved in the Welsch versus Likins case, to secure appropriate treatment for people with developmental disabilities in large institutions. The next year Legal Aid joined a federal pilot program to provide legal services for people with disabilities. In 1975, a national protection and advocacy system was created for people with disabilities, and Legal Aid was designated to provide services. Legal Aid’s Disability Law Center continues to be the protection and advocacy system for Minnesotans with disabilities.

In 1974, Legal Aid expanded its service area to include the St. Cloud area and in 1979 added the Willmar area. It now serves 20 counties in central Minnesota from the South Dakota to the

Wisconsin border, providing free civil legal services to people and families with low incomes and/or disabilities.

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid took on its current name in 2012 following mergers with its St. Cloud and Willmar-area affiliates. Today the organization has 60 attorneys in offices in Minneapolis, St. Cloud and Willmar. Each year it serves many families and individuals.

At its centennial event and Law Day Dinner in May, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice provided the keynote address. The event highlighted the contributions of the staff of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid who have long provided legal help to Minnesotans unable to afford representation elsewhere.

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid is supported by contributions from fellow lawyers, law firms, corporations, individuals, the local, state and federal governments, the United Way, and foundations. More than 85 percent of the support received goes directly to providing services to clients.

### **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 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](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)*