

HISTORY NOTE: Meaningful work was focus for New York City group



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The anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prompts a look back at earlier achievements of the disability rights movement.

One focus always has been on meaningful work. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided jobs for many people who otherwise would have sat idle. But the WPA in its first years wasn't accessible to all.

The WPA was part of the New Deal. The New Deal was a package of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933-36. The New Deal responded to needs for relief, reform and recovery from the Great Depression.

The New Deal had decidedly mixed results for people with disabilities. It provided needed therapy and specialized health services, education, training and other programs including the start of the supplemental income programs.

The WPA directed resources to services for people with disabilities, ranging from schools and housing facilities to education and job training programs.

But work relief actions were another matter and caused great frustration in some states.

How people were categorized for employment could sometimes become a barrier.

In 1935, a group called the League for the Physically Handicapped formed to protest discrimination by WPA officials in New York City.

A group of about 300 people, most living with the effects of polio and cerebral palsy, organized the league. All had been turned down for WPA jobs. The city's Home Relief Bureau stamped every single application "PH" for "physically handicapped." That effectively marked the applicants as unemployable.

League members staged sit-ins, at the Home Relief Bureau in May 1935 and later at the WPA headquarters. The movement began with six people staging an impromptu sit-in at the Home Relief Bureau, after the director refused to meet with them.

“What started it was finding out that jobs were available, that the government was handing out jobs . . . everybody was getting jobs . . . those of us who were militant just refused to accept the fact that we were the only people who were looked upon as not worthy, not capable of work,” one sit-in participant said in an interview.

The very next day, the protests expanded to a separate rally held by the Communist Party in Madison Square Garden. An appeal for help led to hundreds of protesters on the league’s behalf. Other groups joined the effort in solidarity with those seeking work. Newspapers and radio stations covered the growing protest.

Efforts to disperse the sit-in fell short. People with disabilities were joined by their allies as the days went on. Picketing continued outside. The sit-in and picketing lasted for days.

The efforts drew attention to the need for jobs for everyone. By 1936, about 1,500 jobs were created in New York City alone for people with disabilities. The league’s work drew attention to the need for similar jobs around the nation.

It was a significant gain at a time when discrimination was codified. The Social Security Act of August 1935 specifically defined disability as “inability to engage in substantial gainful work.” That precluded anyone receiving any disability insurance from easily gaining employment.

The league had disbanded by 1938, as efforts to find work improved.

Meaningful employment and a living wage continue to be key issues for many people with disabilities, as our civil rights movement continues.

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.
