

# Blind Minnesotans have been well-served for a century

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Great change took place in the Minnesota of the 1910s and 1920s. Many households marked firsts – a telephone, electricity, a motor vehicle, even a radio to listen to. But for people who lived with blindness and visual disabilities, isolation was all too common.

Denied basic opportunities for education, housing and participation in the community, they lived in poverty. Braille was coming into its own as a means of communication but all too often people lacked resources to learn the language and have access to documents.

That began to change as of May 27th, 1920. The first convention of the Minnesota State Organization of the Blind was held. The organization dropped the word "State" from its name in 1954, and in 1972 became the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota.

Members have worked for a century to help Minnesotans with blindness and visual disabilities to lead their best lives. In October 1929, to address the problems constituents were having being accepted into housing, the organization established the Home and Industrial Center for the Blind in St. Paul's St. Anthony Park neighborhood. The building was for many years the organization's heart. It provided housing, space for businesses and job training, and an organizational headquarters.

For many years, fundraising events and entertainment functions took place weekly. Its beautiful picnic grounds were extensively used. When people came to the Twin Cities to look for work, they could always find a place to stay at the Home, be it for one night or for one year. Rent, which was as low as \$5 per month, included meals and laundry service.

As society changed over the years, fewer people lived at the home. Community inclusion and independent living became more important. The property was sold in the early 1980s.

Organization members have long been active in issues at the state and national levels. They began publishing the statewide newsletter *Minnesota Bulletin*, which is still produced today.

In the early years, legislation was passed to help people obtain pensions, find training and meaningful work, freely use public transportation, and protect the rights and safety of those using white canes and guide dogs. Important human rights gains followed. Work in the areas of employment, education, and equal access to facilities continues today.

Younger members became active in an array of issues, through the Minnesota Association of Blind Students.

Among the many, many accomplishments of the federation is that of founding BLIND Incorporated, which has taught thousands of blind people to advocate for themselves, travel with a white cane, read Braille, use computers, and the other skills they need to live independently and obtain successful employment.

Members have also worked hard over the years to support and protect State Services for the Blind from budget cuts and organizational changes.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota from hosting an anniversary event, but the group is planning a

centennial conference in the fall. Members have compiled a history, which is available on the organization's website. Material from that history was excerpted for this article. An audio version of the celebration will be posted soon. Go to [www.nfbmn.org](http://www.nfbmn.org).

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