

Access Press

Social Security program marks 85 years of helping the nation



Security was attained in the earlier days through the interdependence of members of families upon each other and of the families within a small community upon each other. The complexities of great communities and of organized industry make less real these simple means of security. Therefore, we are compelled to employ the active interest of the Nation as a whole through government in order to encourage a greater security for each individual who composes it . . . This seeking for a greater measure of welfare and happiness does not indicate a change in values. It is rather a return to values lost in the course of our economic development and expansion . . .

– Franklin D. Roosevelt: Message of the President to Congress, June 8, 1934

Happy birthday, Social Security! The program celebrates 85 years in 2020.

Social Security got its start in 1934. Then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a message to the Congress, announced his intention to provide a program for Social Security. Roosevelt created the Committee on Economic Security, which was composed of five

top cabinet-level officials. The committee was instructed to study the entire problem of economic insecurity and to make recommendations that would serve as the basis for legislative consideration by the Congress.

In January 1935, the committee made its report to Roosevelt. The proposal began making its way through Congress. The Social Security Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt on August 14, 1935. In addition to several provisions for general welfare, the new act created a social insurance program designed to pay retired workers age 65 or older a continuing income after retirement

The Social Security Act did not quite achieve all the aspirations its supporters had hoped by way of providing a “comprehensive package of protection” against the “hazards and vicissitudes of life.” Certain features of that package, notably disability coverage and medical benefits, would have to await future developments. But it did provide a wide range of programs to meet the nation’s needs. In addition to the program we now think of as Social Security, it included unemployment insurance, old-age assistance, aid to dependent children and grants to the states to provide various forms of medical care.

The significance of the new social insurance program was that it sought to address the long-range problem of economic security for the aged through a contributory system in which the workers themselves contributed to their own future retirement benefit by making regular payments into a joint fund. As Roosevelt conceived of the Act, Title I was to be a temporary “relief” program that would eventually disappear as more people were able to obtain retirement income through the contributory system. The new social insurance system was also a very moderate alternative to the radical calls to action that were so common in the America of the 1930s.

On August 1, 1956, then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the 1956 amendments to the Social Security Act that set up the Social Security Disability Insurance program. At first the program provided monthly benefits only to disabled workers between the ages of 50 and 65 who met certain requirements for insured status. Even though the program later significantly expanded its coverage, its implementation in 1956 represented the historic culmination of an effort by Social Security planners that began in the 1930s.

Excerpted from a history by the Social Security Administration

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the [Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities](#).