

HISTORY NOTE: Smith-Sears Act helped open the door to work for disabled veterans

by [Access Press Staff](#) // October 8th, 2018

National Disability Employment Awareness Month was declared in 1988 by the United States Congress for October to raise awareness of the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities.

The theme for this year's observance is "America's Workforce: Empowering All." Various ways are used to celebrate the contributions of workers with disabilities and educate the public about the value of a workforce inclusive of their skills and talents. Some employers honor workers. Others hold open houses or celebrations to recognize the many contributions workers with disabilities make.

National Disability Employment Awareness Month dates back to 1945, when Congress declared the first week in October as "National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week." That tied into a national awareness of the need to find employment for injured veterans returning from World War II.

It was World War I, which ended 100 years ago, that initially sparked efforts to help soldiers with disabilities to find work. In 1918 the Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act became law. It provided for the promotion of vocational rehabilitation and return to civil employment of disabled persons discharged from the U.S. military.

Smith-Sears was preceded by other federal legislation, but it was one of the first major bills to call out the need for concerted efforts for people with disabilities who wished to return to work.

Also known as the Soldiers (Veterans) Rehabilitation Act, it provided for "vocational rehabilitation and return to civil employment of disabled persons discharged from the military and naval forces of the United States" according to one history. It appropriated \$1.8 million for buildings, equipment, training and salaries of instructors and supervisors, tuition, travel expenses, and placement and supervision of people who completed rehabilitation programs.

The Smith-Sears Act was a contrast to the federal government's response to previous wars. Soldiers from the Civil War and Spanish-American War who'd returned home with disabling injuries were given modest pensions, if anything. There were no efforts to help these veterans return to the workforce.

The two legislators who championed the Smith-Sears Act are largely forgotten today. Sen. M. Hoke Smith was a Georgia attorney, state governor and one-time owner of the Atlanta Journal newspaper. A Democrat, he was in office from 1911-1921. In the late 19th century Smith was Secretary of the Interior under President Grover Cleveland.

Smith began practicing law in 1873, with a focus on helping injured railroad workers. He was a man of great contradictions, compassionate to one group while discriminatory to others. While he was a champion of laws helping people with disabilities, Smith also pushed for “Jim Crow” laws that greatly disenfranchised African-Americans. Smith died in 1931.

Rep. William Joseph Sears was from Florida. He, too, was an attorney, with a practice in the community of Kissimmee. He served as the city’s mayor for a time and was superintendent of schools for Osceola County until being elected to Congress in 1915.

Sears served until 1929, after losing the nomination for his seat. He went back to practicing law until regaining the Congressional seat in 1933. He wasn’t renominated in 1936, and then became an associate member of the Board of Veterans’ Appeals of the Veterans’ Administration in Washington, D.C., from 1937 until retiring in 1942. He returned to Florida and died in 1944.

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.