

‘Ugly laws’ were a very ugly way to discriminate

by [Luther Granquist](#) // November 10th, 2009



In 1881, Chicago added the infamous “ugly law” to its Municipal Code:

“No person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other public places in this city, shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under a penalty of not less than one dollar nor more than fifty dollars for each offense.”

Other cities passed similar ordinances, often specifically making it illegal for such persons to beg in public. Apparently neither Minneapolis nor St. Paul enacted such a law. A search could turn up no such laws here. But both cities outlawed vagrancy and begging. An 1877 Minneapolis ordinance said that persons who had “no visible means of support” or who live “idly without lawful employment” and who could not give a judge a good account of themselves could be fined up to \$100 or spend 90 days in the workhouse. The City Council added persons “found begging” to the law in 1891. St. Paul’s ordinance tracked the amended Minneapolis law. These laws could be, and sometimes were, used to remove persons with visible disabilities from the streets.

Although “unsightliness” itself was not punished, some civic leaders of the day found persons with visible disabilities offensive. A committee chairperson speaking at the State Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1894 described “the children nobody wants” as “the defective, the unattractive, the unlovely.” The Minnesota State Board of Corrections and Charities, in its First Biennial Report in 1885, told of a woman who “could not for shame” have guests in her home for years until her child with severe disabilities was institutionalized. Judge M. A. Mott, a longtime trustee of the Minnesota Institute for Defectives, spoke in 1888 of persons in the “custodial classes” who blight their homes and demoralize “the family and the neighborhood.”

No “ugly law” would likely be passed today, although city ordinances outlawing solicitation, lurking, or disorderly conduct could still be used against persons with visible disabilities. Few public officials today would utter statements like those made more than a century ago. But the “ugly attitude” reflected in those statements still surfaces on occasion when persons with disabilities seek to live in ordinary neighborhoods, when persons using wheelchairs want to get around town, and when persons who need assistance eating go out to dinner.



The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com