

Gerald Walsh led The Arc in major change of course

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

In the 1950s and 1960s the Minnesota Association for Retarded Children, led by Gerald Walsh, prepared most and instigated all of the studies and reports used by the legislature and the governor to formulate state policy regarding persons with developmental disabilities. In multiple studies The Arc documented the need for new buildings at Faribault and Cambridge State Hospitals, the need to build Brainerd State Hospital, and the need for increased staff at all three institutions.

Walsh died last month at age 88.

On a trip to England and Scandinavia in 1966, Walsh observed persons with disabilities living in smaller settings. He reported that in five weeks there “I saw no barefooted, naked, cut or bruised patients.” He came back convinced that living in large institutions with large dormitories and day rooms harmed both children and adults. In a film, “To Bridge the Gap,” he contrasted “herd care” at Faribault State Hospital with the smaller programs he observed abroad. He brought Scandinavian leaders here to tour our institutions and programs and to present to state leaders a better way of providing for persons with disabilities. Armed with this information, Walsh and other The Arc leaders persuaded the Department of Public Welfare to forego building large buildings at large institutions.

For the next four years, Walsh and The Arc leaders proposed that any additions to the state institutions be smaller buildings for no more than 16 to 20 persons. But other work that Walsh and The Arc had done in the 1950s and 1960s to expand special education programs and to provide community-based day programs for persons with developmental disabilities demonstrated that the state should not expand the institutions in any way. On April 15, 1970, Walsh and The Arc withdrew support for construction of any new buildings at Cambridge State Hospital. The Arc President Molly Woehrlin and William McFad-zean, President of the Minnesota Association for Mental Health, presented Gov. Harold LeVander with a joint statement calling state hospitals “an anachronism in today’s concept of proper care for mentally retarded and mentally ill people.” Walsh emphasized to The Arc members, not all of whom supported the joint statement, which this action resulted from their “years of study of the present system of services.” That day marked the beginning of the end of Minnesota’s institutional system for persons with developmental disabilities.

The film “To Bridge the Gap” may be seen on the Minnesota Developmental Disabilities website. <http://www.mnddc.org/parallels2/one/video/video18-bridge.html> Several of Gerald Walsh’s written reports are available on With an Eye to the Past on that website.