



Office of Developmental Primary Care

Improving outcomes for people with developmental disabilities

A Brief History of Developmental Disabilities in the United States

18th – Early 19th Century: The Enlightenment ideal that all people are capable of reasoning and that our sameness as people is more important than our differences paves the way for the opening of state schools for the education of individuals with disabilities. Schools intended to prepare students for employment, but community jobs are not developed.

Late 1800's – 1920's: Focus moves from education to custodial care. Younger children are placed in the care of state schools. The first residential institution for people with mental retardation is opened. Fires and infectious disease plague overcrowded institutions. Residents were sterilized for eugenics reasons.

The Great Depression & The Eugenics Movement: People with disabilities are viewed as financial burdens. Infants are now routinely left in the care of the state schools. Life expectancy in institutions falls to age 18. The eugenics movement gains momentum, preventing people with disabilities from moving to the United States, marrying, or having children.

1940's – 1950's: Disability rights organizations are established by self-advocates, parents, and returning war veterans. These groups champion issues such as ending job discrimination and deinstitutionalization.

1960's: President John F. Kennedy raises awareness of the status of people with developmental disabilities. He appoints a special President's Panel on Mental Retardation to improve and reform existing services and to develop new programs for people with mental retardation. The civil rights movement inspires growth of the disability rights movement. Ed Roberts, considered the father of the disability rights movement, is the first significantly disabled student admitted into UC Berkeley.

1970's: A series of newspaper articles and a televised exposé of the deplorable conditions at the Willowbrook State School of New York create enormous public outcry. The movement to deinstitutionalize people with developmental disabilities gains momentum. In 1972, the world's first Center for Independent Living is opened in Berkeley, California. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, addressing discrimination of people with disabilities, is passed. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) is passed, guaranteeing the right of children with disabilities to be educated in public schools with non-disabled peers. In 1977, with passage of the Lanterman Act, California becomes the first state to pass legislation entitling people with disabilities to services and supports that will allow them to live in the community.

1990's: In 1990, President George H. Bush signs the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law. The law protects the rights of individuals with disabilities in employment, transportation, telecommunications, public accommodations, and state and federal government services. The Olmstead Act, which requires that states eliminate segregation of people with disabilities by providing services in the most integrated settings, becomes law in 1992.

Today: With the closing of the institutions and advancements in modern medicine, 90% of people with developmental disabilities are living into adulthood. The life expectancy of most people with DD approaches that of the general population. The need for trained medical providers is paramount. The new emphasis is how we keep the community system robust.

For a detailed overview of the Disability Rights Movement see: <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/chronology/index.html>

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