Historical Timeline of Disabilities

Before recorded history, around the world people with intellectual disabilities were integral parts of communities. The following is a select list of national and international milestones highlighting people, events and legislation that affect disability rights.

19th Century

- **1848:** The Perkins Institution, founded by Samuel Gridley Howe in Boston, Massachusetts, was the first residential institution for people with intellectual disabilities. Over the next century, hundreds of thousands of children and adults with intellectual disabilities were institutionalized, many for the rest of their lives.[6]

- **1883:** Americans embraced the eugenics, meaning "well born," movement by passing laws to prevent people with disabilities from moving to the U.S., marrying or having children. Eugenics laws led to the institutionalization and forced sterilization of adults and children with disabilities. By the 1970s, over 60,000 people with disabilities were sterilized without their consent.[6]

20th Century

- **1935:** The Social Security Act was passed. This established assistance to individuals with blindness and children with disabilities through federally funded old-age benefits and funds to states. The Act extended to existing vocational rehabilitation programs.[6]

- **1941:** President Kennedy's sister Rosemary was diagnosed with a disability and given a lobotomy at age 23, which left her incapacitated. She lived in an institution for people with intellectual disabilities in Wisconsin for many years.[5]

20th Century

- **1954:** Thorazine (a major tranquilizer) was introduced for psychiatric treatment. Miltown was also introduced as a minor tranquilizer. Thorazine and Miltown improved the lives of many individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, individuals were often over-medicated as a staff convenience or to compensate for a lack of staff.[1]

- **1956:** Individuals with intellectual disabilities at the Willowbrook State School in New York, were intentionally infected with hepatitis. This was done to study the progression of the virus and determine the effectiveness of gamma globulin. The study lasted approximately 14 years.[3]

20th Century

- **1963:** President Kennedy called for services to be provided in communities for people who were or might have been institutionalized. This resulted in deinstitutionalization and increased community services.[6]

- **1965:** The U.S. Congress established the Medicare and Medicaid programs that provide health care coverage to many people with disabilities and later became a cornerstone for community-based alternatives to institutional care.[6]

- The Autism Society of America was founded by parents of children of autism who questioned the "expert" opinion that autism is caused by poor parenting.[5]

20th Century

- **1970:** President Nixon signed the Developmental Disabilities Services and Facilities Construction Amendments to the 1963 Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Health Centers Construction Act. For people with intellectual disabilities, this law authorized state allotments for planning, services, and construction of facilities.[5]

- **1971:** The U.S. District Court ruled in Wyatt v. Stickney that individuals have a constitutional right "to receive such individual treatment as (would) give them a realistic opportunity to be cured or to improve his or her mental condition." People with disabilities were no longer to be locked away in custodial institutions without treatment or education.[6]

20th Century

- **1972:** Decisions by the Supreme Court and U.S. District Court struck down laws excluding children with disabilities from public schools.[6]

- Social Security Amendments of 1972 created the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. For families, the law relieved the financial responsibility of caring for their adult children with disabilities.[5]

- In New York ARC v. Rockefeller, parents of residents at the Willowbrook State School in New York filed suit to end the appalling conditions at that institution. A television broadcast from the facility outraged the general public. Eventually, thousands of people were moved into community-based living.[6]

20th Century

- **1973:** The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act incorporated the concept of "reasonable accommodation" in its prohibition on discrimination against people with disabilities.[6]

- **1974:** President Nixon issued executive order affirming the nation's goal of returning one-third of people in institutions back to the community. The term "developmental disability" was created to refer to "a disability attributable to mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or another neurological condition," and it was used for planning purposes and funding allocations.[5]

20th Century

- **1975:** The Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps was founded by special education professionals. For people with disabilities, this organization called for the end of aversive behavior modification and the closing of all residential institutions.[6]

- The Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act was passed requiring protection and advocacy programs as a condition to receive state grants, establishing the right to appropriate treatment and services, expanding definitions to include autism, and requiring plans for service delivery (Individualized Service Plans).[5]

- **1977:** The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was implemented after protests forced action when disability groups demonstrated at offices of the Department of Health Education and Welfare. The protests included the longest ever sit-in at a federal building.[6]

20th Century

- **1978:** Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1978 established the first federal funding for consumer-controlled independent living centers and created the National Council of the Handicapped under the U.S. Department of Education.[6]

- The Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act was amended to define intellectual disabilities in terms of functional limitations and to prioritize four service areas (case management services, child development services, alternative community living services, and non-vocational social-developmental services).[5]

- **1980:** The Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act authorized the U.S. Justice Department to file civil suits on behalf of residents of institutions whose rights were being violated.[6]

20th Century

- **1980 cont.:** Social Security Amendments, Section 1619, was passed to address work disincentives within the Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income programs. Hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities had their benefits terminated.[6]

- **1981:** The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act authorized the home and community-based waiver program that allowed for Medicaid funding of in-home and community-based services as an alternative to institutional care.[5]

- The International Year of Disabled Persons began. During the year, governments were encouraged to sponsor programs bringing people with disabilities into the mainstream of their societies.[6]

20th Century

- **1983:** The National Council on the Handicapped called for Congress to include persons with disabilities in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other civil and voting rights legislation and regulations.[6]

- **1984:** Ted Kennedy, Jr., spoke from the platform of the Democratic National Convention on disability rights.[6]

- The Social Security Disability Reform Act was passed in response to the complaints of hundreds of thousands of people whose social security disability benefits were terminated. The law required that payment of benefits and health insurance coverage continue for terminated recipients until they exhausted their appeals.[6]

20th Century

- **1984 cont.:** The Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act was amended to include employment as a priority area and to promote achieving one's maximum potential through increased independence, productivity, and integration.[5]

- **1985:** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center that localities cannot use zoning laws to prohibit group homes for people with intellectual disabilities from opening in a residential area solely because its residents are disabled.[6]

- **1986:** The Employment Opportunities for Disabled Americans Act was passed allowing recipients of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance to retain benefits, particularly medical coverage, after they obtained work. The act was intended to remove the disincentives that kept people with disabilities unemployed.[5]

20th Century

- **1988:** The Technology-Related Assistance Act for Individuals with Disabilities was passed authorizing federal funding to state projects designed to facilitate access to assistive technology.[6]

- The Fair Housing Act amendments prohibited housing discrimination against people with disabilities. It also provided for architectural accessibility of certain new housing units, renovation of existing units and accessibility modifications at the renter's expense.[6]

- **1990:** The Americans with Disabilities Act passed and was signed by President George H.W. Bush. The Act provided comprehensive civil rights protection for people with disabilities.[5]

20th Century

- **1993:** Robert Williams was appointed Commissioner of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities. He was the first person with intellectual disabilities to be named the Commissioner.[6]

- Holland v. Sacramento City Unified School District affirmed the right of children with disabilities to attend public school classes with children who were not disabled.[6]

- **1996:** Congress passed legislation eliminating more than 150,000 children with disabilities from Social Security rolls.[6]

20th Century

- **1996 cont.:** Sandra Jensen, a member of People First, became the first person with Down syndrome to receive a heart-lung transplant after disability rights activists pressure Stanford University School of Medicine administrators to reverse their original decision of denying the procedure because she had Down syndrome. [7]

- **1999:** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Olmstead v. L.C. and E.W., individuals with disabilities must be offered services in the most integrated setting.[6]

- **2001:** The Commonwealth of Virginia House of Delegates approved a resolution expressing regret for its eugenics practices between 1924 and 1979.[6]

21st Century

- **2002:** Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber apologized for the forced sterilization of individuals residing in state institutions under the eugenics policy between 1917 and 1983.[5]

- **2004:** A coalition of disability rights advocates and organizations held the first Disability Pride Parade. Organizers expected 500–600 people to attend the event, which was designed to "change the way people think about and define disability, to break down and end the internalized shame among people with disabilities, and to promote the belief in society that disability is a natural and beautiful part of life." Almost 2,000 people attended.[2]

21st Century

- **2006:** Largely due to the efforts of 20 young people with disabilities from the state of West Virginia, the first bill requiring that students in a K–12 public school system be taught the history of the disability rights movement was passed.[2]

- **2009:** President Obama signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It was the first human rights convention of the 21st century. Its eight guiding principles are as follows:

21st Century

1. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons.
2. Non-discrimination.
3. Full and effective participation and inclusion in society.
4. Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity.
5. Equality of opportunity.
6. Accessibility.
7. Equality between men and women.
8. Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.[5]

21st Century

- **2010:** The Department of Justice published revised regulations for Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in the Federal Register on September 15, 2010. The 2010 Standards set minimum requirements for newly designed and constructed or altered State and local government facilities, public accommodations, and commercial facilities to be readily accessible to, and usable by, individuals with disabilities.[4]

- The U.S. Congress passed Rosa's law to replace references to "mental retardation" with "intellectual disability" in federal law.[4]

Conclusion

- There is still room for growth and change in the way people with disabilities are treated. However, the past 100+ years, and the milestones throughout, have made a significant difference. These laws, organizations and events were key in generating progress in public knowledge and understanding to get to where we are today.

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