

Disability Rights Timeline

Disability Rights History

During the last half of the 20th century, people with disabilities and their families had to use legal action, media campaigns and other strategies to begin to gain funding and legal protections to support equal rights to live in the community, go to public school, work and have access to communication services and public accommodations. Here is a list of some key dates of disability rights history, the move toward more accessible communication and the fight for inclusion and disability rights. This is not a complete listing of important events and dates. Related resources and history are also provided in the Include! lessons The Power to Make Change, Voting Rights and Wrongs, and Coming Home.

1817

- The American School for the Deaf is founded in Hartford, Conn. This is the first school for children with disabilities anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

1832

- The Perkins School for the Blind in Boston admits its first students, sisters Sophia and Abbey Carter.

1841

- Dorothea Dix begins her work on behalf of people with disabilities incarcerated in jails and poor houses.

1848

- The first residential institution for people with intellectual disabilities is founded by Samuel Gridley Howe at the Perkins Institution in Boston. During the next century hundreds of thousands of developmentally disabled children and adults will be institutionalized, many for their entire lives.

1860

- Dr. Simon Pollak demonstrates the use of braille at the Missouri School for the Blind.

1862

- Veterans Reserve Corps is formed by the U.S. Army. After the war many of its members join the Freedman's Bureau, providing assistance to recently emancipated slaves.

1864

- President Abraham Lincoln signs an act authorizing the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind to confer college degrees, making it the first college in the world expressly established for people with disabilities. A year later the school became a school serving only Deaf and hard of hearing students and would later be renamed Gallaudet University.

1962

- Ed Roberts is the first person with disabilities to attend the University of California at Berkeley. In 1968, Ed Roberts and others organize the "Rolling Quads" to advocate for accessibility on campus and in Berkeley.

1970

- Disabled in Action is started in New York City by Judy Heumann and allies. Heumann sues and wins a lawsuit after a NYC school system refuses to let her teach because she uses a wheelchair. This opens the door for other people with disabilities to be hired as teachers in NYC schools.

1971

- In Mills v. Board of Education, parents and other disability advocates win an important court case for integrated educational opportunities when a U.S. district court decides school districts must offer children with disabilities a free public education.
- Ed Roberts and others start the first Independent Living Center to fight for equal rights and life outside of institutions.

1972

- Section 504 of the new Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against people because of disability by any program or services that receive federal funds. President Nixon refuses to sign the law. Disability advocates hold candlelight vigils across the country.

1973

- The Rehabilitation Act is signed but federal officials refuse to draft regulations to enforce the law, leading to major protests and sit-ins in cities across the country.

1975

- Public Law 94-142 is passed, affirming the right of children with disabilities to a free public education

1977

- On April 5, protesters take over the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office in San Francisco to protest the five-year delay in publishing regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Activists from other movements (including gay and lesbian activists and black organizers) help bring in food, get messages out and support the sit-in.
- On April 27, Section 504 regulations are published.

1988

- Deaf students take over the Gallaudet campus for seven days, calling for the college to hire a Deaf president. Finally, I. King Jordan is appointed. Greg Hilbok, one of four student organizers of the Gallaudet protest, is named “Person of the Week” by ABC News. The civil rights focus of the earlier Rehabilitation Act protests and the 1988 Gallaudet “Deaf President Now” campaign capture the attention of the national press and the American people, ushering in a new awareness of the disability rights movement as a civil rights movement and preparing the way for the ADA.

1990

- The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, communication, and by state and local government. Congress passes the ADA after state and national protests and testimony (organized by disability advocate Justin Dart).
- President George H. Bush signs the ADA on July 26, 1990.

Resources

Disability History

The events in this short disability timeline were collected from a variety of sources. In particular, the earlier events are excerpts from the “ABC-CLIO Companion to The Disability Rights Movement,” by Fred Pelka (Santa Barbara, 1997).

Here are some helpful disability history websites:

A three-minute film of the signing of the ADA is available on C-SPAN as part of their White House series. See it at: [President/George-H-W-Bush-Signs-ADA](#).

Temple University Disability Timeline:

<http://isc.temple.edu/neighbor/ds/disabilityrightstimeline.htm>

Lives Worth Living:

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/lives-worth-living/disability-rights-timeline.html>

(With graphics)

University of California at Berkeley:

<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/drilm/resources/timeline.html>

(This timeline is easier to read than some but it only goes to 1996, leaving out later legislation and actions.)

Gallaudet University has a history exhibit, “Through Deaf Eyes.” It can be found at: http://www.gallaudet.edu/history_through_deaf_eyes.html

Mental Health History: <http://studymore.org.uk/mhhtim.htm>

Other useful online disability history museums and websites:

Images and artifacts from disability rights history:

<http://everybody.si.edu/citizens/civil-rights-disability-rights>

Disability History Museum: <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/>

Museum of Disability History: <http://museumofdisability.org/>

Lives Worth Living trailer: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/lives-worth-living/film.html> (2:36 minutes) The recent film presents the civil rights advocacy of people with disabilities and their allies which led to the passage of both the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.