

Disability Rights Movement in California: Then and Now

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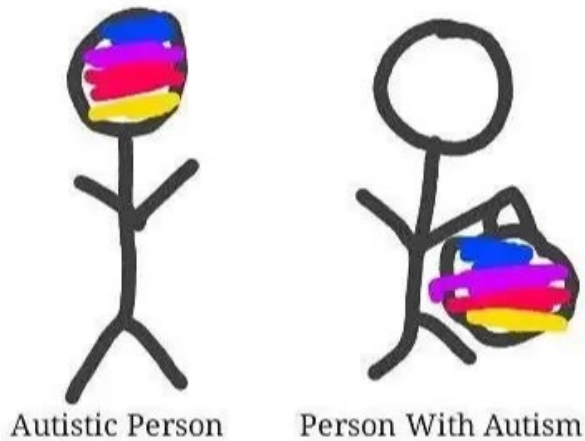
History of Independent Living Movement

- There have been different disability rights movements throughout history
- Influences of the current Independent Living Movement:
 - Self-Help movement
 - The Civil Rights movement of the 60s and 70s
 - Started in California

Impact of the Independent Living Movement

- Changed the way people thought about disability
 - People not thought of only in terms of their diagnosis that needed to be cured
 - People are people first and deserve to have an active role in all parts of their lives
 - People can make CHOICES about:
 - Where they live
 - Who they have relationships with
 - Access all the benefits that a non-disabled person can
 - People are able to choose how, when and who they ask for help from
 - Shift towards “self-determination”
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The Importance of Language



- Person first vs. identity first
- A person chooses the language that works for them
- Both ways of communicating have their Pros
- I prefer person first language because people have often only seen my disability

Important early milestones in the Independent Living Movement

- In 1967, a group of 12 severely disabled students enrolled at UC Berkeley, forming the "Rolling Quads" to advocate for campus and city accessibility
- In 1972, disabled activists established the first Center for Independent Living (TheCIL) in Berkeley, offering peer counseling, housing assistance, and wheelchair repair.
- Passage of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act including Section 504



Occupation of HEW Offices in San Francisco



- On April 5, 1977 activists started what would become the longest nonviolent occupation of a federal building in U.S. history
- **Why?** Frustrations about delays in enforcing Section 504
- **Key Players:** Judy Heumann, Kitty Cone, and Mary Jane Owen
- **Location:** 50 United Nations Plaza in San Francisco
- **Barriers:** Participants were blockaded and had their communication cut off
- **How did it work?** Had an intersectional support network before cellphones and social media
- **The Helpers:** The Black Panther Party provided daily hot meals, while local LBGTQ+ and labor groups offered supplies and support.
- **Outcome:** After 25 days of protesting, the regulations were signed without weakening amendments.

The Advocacy Continues with the Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

In, 1990, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, extending civil rights protections across employment, public transit, and accommodations. Many of the Californians with disabilities who were pioneers in the disability rights movement both worked within the government, and protested year after year (including crawling on the US Capitol stairs) , to get it passed and signed.



The Push for Community Living

- For the first half of the 20th century, large institutions were how people with developmental disabilities received supports.
- Public-funded community services were limited
- Advocates lobbied of California lawmakers to pass the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act in 1969.
- Possible because family members, civil rights attorneys, and disability rights advocates worked together.
- Established that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities had a right to community-based services

In the 1950s and 60s parents and advocates used grassroots organizing to rebel against institutionalizing people with disabilities.

Hiding Disability in Institutions

When?

Growth the growth happened be between the 1920s and 1940s

Why?

social, political, and economic views and policies

What is Eugenics?

Eugenics is the discredited belief and practice of using selective breeding to improve the genetic quality of the human population.

After World War II, the concept of eugenics fell out of popularity, still health-care and public-policy makers in the United States continued to support the concept.



Sonoma Developmental Center

The Power of Organizing



In the 1950's, families of children with what was then known as mental retardation began to organize and create their own community support and service systems as an alternative in institutional care.

- Aid for Retarded Citizens in San Francisco
- Exceptional Children's Foundation in Los Angeles

Accomplished: established private schools, activity centers, and sheltered workshops for their sons and daughters who were denied access to public education and vocational services.

National Attention on Issue Grows



- **When:** 1960
- **Influences:** the civil rights movement and the election of President John F. Kennedy
- **Outcome:** allocation of federal dollars toward ways to provide community services for people with intellectual disability.

Concerns Over Treatment In Centers

- In 1964, there were over 13,000 people with developmental disabilities residing in four overcrowded institutions in California (Now called developmental centers), and another 3,000 on waiting lists.
- Vivian Walter, along with other parents urged the California Legislature to do something
- The California Legislature at the urging of Assemblymember Frank Lanterman, appointed a subcommittee to investigate concerns.
- The investigation revealed serious problems with the existing state hospitals and that building additional large institutions would be very costly.
- In 1966, funds were appropriated to establish two pilot regional centers, one in northern and one in southern California. The centers' primary focus was to provide community-based services to support individuals at risk of being placed in state hospitals.
- During the first year of operation, the pilot centers served 559 persons.

Success Leads to Statewide System



The Legislature set out to design a statewide system.

In 1969, the Lanterman Mental Retardation Act established the regional center system

Today there are 21 regional centers in California
Despite this legislative win: the work wasn't over and thousands remained in developmental centers.

The Use of the Courts to Push for Change

- Disability rights advocates and attorneys filed a class-action lawsuit, *Coffelt v. Department of Developmental Services* on behalf of 950 people who were institutionalized
- The historic 1993 settlement mandated that the state facilitate the move of thousands of individuals from institutions to community living arrangements, enforcing the spirit of the Lanterman Act.

The Power of the People First Movement

- **National Birthplace:** Salem Oregon in 1974.
- **State Birthplace:** officially incorporated as a nonprofit in Chico, CA in July 1991
- **Core philosophy:** People with disabilities are people first and their disability comes second
- Local self-advocacy groups (such as Capitol People First in Sacramento) started forming in the early 1980s to combat stigmatization and advocate for alternatives to institutional living.
- Founding Board included Barbara and Jim Picaso, (former SCDD Councilmember) Rosie Ryan, Cary Sofye, and David Moshier.
- In June 1996, PFCA co-sponsored its first statewide convention in Sacramento with the Supported Life Institute with the theme of “The Dream is Golden” with over 1,300 attendees

The Future of Advocacy is Bright

- Most developmental centers are closed
- Public sentiment has shifted
- While not perfect: things are vastly more accessible
- We need to continue to advocate, tell our stories, and remind elected officials that we are not going backwards....without a fight.
- We should be proud of this outcome, but the fight is not over
- Nothing About Us Without Us means that our movement must be led by self-advocates, with support of family advocates and other allies.
- California needs all of us to advance the disability rights movement.

