

History Note: Inclusive employment is celebrated every October

by [Access Press Staff](#) // October 10th, 2017

Inclusion Drives Innovation is the message in October, as the United States marks National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Around the nation, Americans celebrate the need for inclusion in employment and the contribution of workers with disabilities.

The event has been marked for more than 70 years. It has undergone many changes during that time. In 1945, Congress declared the first week of October as “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” The return of service members with disabilities from World War II raised public interest in the contributions of people with disabilities in the workplace. On August 11, 1945, President Harry S. Truman approved the Congressional resolution declaring the commemorative week.

But the quest to find meaningful work for people with disabilities began long before 1945. A U.S. Department of Labor timeline provides insights into when employment efforts began.

In 1920, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Fess Act. Also known as the Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act, it established a program for people with disabilities. It was modeled on an earlier law that provided help for World War I veterans who had sustained disabling injuries. These actions were important but they only provided services for people with physical disabilities.

1936-8 was a key time in the quest for work, with three major steps taken. Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, the Randolph-Sheppard Act gave priority to people who are blind to operate vending facilities on federal property. That may sound small today but being able to stock and derive income from vending machines helped many people find work.

In 1938 the Wagner-O’Day Act was passed, requiring all federal agencies to purchase specified products made by people who are blind. In 1971, the Javits-Wagner O’Day Act expanded the program to include services as well as supplies and incorporate people with other significant disabilities. In 2006, the program was renamed AbilityOne.

Also in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act established a national minimum wage. However, it does not apply in work activity centers” which also known as sheltered workshops. That has had the unfortunate result of segregated work environments for many people with disabilities and keeping their pay unfairly low.

Many more changes have been made since 1945, with several key gains for vocational rehabilitation programs and law changes promoting the right to work. Social Security began. Changes have been made to the various vocational rehabilitation acts and to laws governing employment programs.

The annual October commemoration events continue today. In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. Over time, what had been a week of commemoration became a month, and the name changed to National Disability Employment Awareness Month. A new theme and poster are chosen each year.

The U.S. Department of Labor provides much useful information on this important month, including ways to recognize employment of people with disabilities and a history timeline. That information is available [here](#).

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities.