



A Brief History of Developmental Disability Services in NH

Late 1940s, early 1950s: Post World War II

Several national disability organizations, such as United Cerebral Palsy, the Epilepsy Foundation and the Association for Retarded Citizens, were established to advocate for people with these specific disabilities. These groups were made up of parents and professionals who provided services to children and adults with these disabilities. Options for families in NH were severely limited, either institutionalization at the state-funded Laconia School or keeping their children with developmental disabilities at home for life.

1960s, early 1970s: Movement for Disability Rights

Families began to band together to seek solutions for their children with special needs, meeting in church basements and at local libraries to provide programs and schooling for individuals living at home. Organized workshops began appearing in the early 1970s. In 1972 Monadnock Workshop (now Monadnock Worksource) opened as the first sheltered workshop in southwestern NH.

Mid 1970s: Special Education

In the mid-1970s, parents' efforts to provide rights for the education of their children regardless of ability paid off. In 1975 Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act - IDEA) was passed. This landmark legislation, developed with input from parents and professionals, opened the doors of the public school system to all children with disabilities.

1980s: From Deinstitutionalization to Community-Based Services

NH court ordered the closing of the Laconia State School over a period of 10 years, the result of the Garrity v. Gallen lawsuit. Action for Independence was the court-ordered plan for improving Laconia State School which had 500 residents and 1,000 staff at that time. The Area Agency system was formed in NH, with a dozen organizations like MDS charged with providing community-based services for those with developmental disabilities. Previously, the only public services were provided at the Laconia School. During this period, people served were largely in congregated/segregated settings – the 30-person sheltered workshop, the 8-person group home, the 5-person enclave, the 8-15 passenger van.

Laconia State School

In 1901 the New Hampshire Legislature passed legislation to establish a state school for "feebleminded" children. Sixty children living in almshouses throughout the state were admitted to school in Laconia in 1903.

By the early 1970s, 1,100 children and adults with disabilities resided at the institution, some living in sub-human conditions. Thousands of New Hampshire citizens were confined to a life with no meaning or hope for the future, often cut off from friends, family and their community.

In 1991, with the help of a federal class action law suit, the institution was closed and New Hampshire became the first state to have no institutions for people with developmental disabilities.

Where did more than 1,100 Laconia residents with autism, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy or Down Syndrome go? What has happened to them and their families?

They came home to towns like Peterborough, Keene, Alstead, Winchester, and thirty other communities in the Monadnock Region. They came home to live with families or share apartments with roommates; they came home to work in grocery stores, restaurants, and factories; and they came home to join churches, softball teams, and civic clubs.

There are still a number of people living here in the Monadnock region who were at Laconia. They have become part of the fabric of their communities. When prompted, they remember, mostly with sadness and anxiety, their time at Laconia, and are happier talking about their lives today.

The effect of deinstitutionalization was an opening up of human potential and capacity, resulting in new lives for people and new hope for families that their loved ones would have the opportunity to have a meaningful life.

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1990s: Self-Determination, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Individualization of Services

The landmark ADA bill was passed on July 26, 1990, prohibiting discrimination against people based on their disabilities. The last resident at Laconia State School was moved out in 1991, and that institution was permanently closed. In the mid-1990s the Monadnock Self-Determination Project, a pilot program at MDS funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, tested whether self-determination would increase quality of life and decrease per capita spending for people with developmental disabilities. Because of results in our region, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched the Self-Determination Project nationally. Movement ensued toward individualization of programs for people with developmental disabilities, rather than cookie-cutter services. Both individualized services and self-determination become the rule rather than the exception in NH, and NH led the way nationally in these changes. Sheltered workshops and group homes were being phased out.

2000s: Focus on Transition, Training and Employment, Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning, directed by the individual who receives supports, becomes the prevalent means for selecting and organizing the services and supports that an older adult or person with a disability might need to live in the community. Focus increases on helping youth with disabilities transition from school to post-secondary schooling or work, as well as on helping both adults and youth with disabilities prepare for and find meaningful employment. Project SEARCH is launched in Keene and six other NH cities. This comprehensive approach to sector-based job training and career advancement for individuals with developmental disabilities provides real world skills training through a series of internships and classroom learning, all designed to teach marketable skills that will transfer to a variety of employment settings.

2022: Workforce Crisis – System Redesign for NH Bureau of Developmental Services ((BDS)

In 2020, NH BDS was tasked with redesigning its services system in order to comply with federal requirements and to increase efficiency. This process is ongoing, and will have long-term implications for those receiving services. Meanwhile, staffing shortages resulting from low wages and no BDS rate increase for more than a dozen years, was exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. This workforce crisis presents serious concerns for the safety and well-being of people receiving services.



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