



# Policy and Advocacy

## Introduction

Policy and advocacy are the building blocks for change and progress of issues related to disability. Many of the advances in our society over the last 50 years about disability have been accomplished through policy and advocacy. It is crucial to understand the history of disability policy and advocacy and how to advocate for policies that matters to you.

This fact sheet will explain:

1. What is policy and why is it important?
2. What is advocacy and why is it important?
3. How can you advocate?

## What is Policy and Why is it Important?

Policy is the rules, legislation, or regulations a government entity proposes or puts into action. Policy is important as it influences each area of our lives and frames what we can and cannot do both individually and collectively as a society. Policy is one of the few things which affects each of us on a daily basis.

When it comes to disability, policy influences how people with disabilities are able to live their lives and interact in communities. Before the disability rights movement starting in the 1960s, much of the policy passed on disability-related issues focused on the “old paradigm” of disability; referring to the idea that people with disabilities need to be fixed in order to participate in the greater community.<sup>2</sup> “Old paradigm” policies include the forced sterilization of individuals with disabilities, mass institutionalization, and no attention towards the accessibility of transportation or buildings.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that disability rights activists began to successfully bring disability-related civil rights issues into the spotlight and

change the narrative on what policies were being passed. This new way of considering disability-related issues is referred to as the “new paradigm”, which looks at disability as a “natural and normal part of the human experience”. The “new paradigm” focuses on “eliminating the attitudinal and institutional barriers that preclude persons with disabilities from participating fully in society’s mainstream.”<sup>2</sup> Examples of “new paradigm” policies include the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Olmstead Decision, and the Home and Community-Based Settings Rule. These policies support individuals with disabilities in living in and accessing the greater community, having equal opportunities for education and employment, and having greater choice in the way a person receives services related to their disability.

Progressive policy changes have helped improve the lives of many people with disabilities, but there is continued need for improvement in many areas within the disability community. It is important to keep up with the new and changing policies that may affect you or others in your community.

## What is Advocacy and Why is it Important?

Advocacy is speaking up, whether through talking, writing, or other means of communication, about the issues, policies, and/or changes that matter to you. Advocacy takes place through many different forms, such as writing a letter to your legislator, educating your friends, family, or community, or participating in demonstrations. It is important to advocate for the policies and issues that matter to you; without the people who have advocated, we would not have landmark legislation such as the 1973 Rehabilitation Act or the Americans with Disabilities Act. Although progressive steps have been taken to address the inequality and inequity many individuals with disabilities experience, there continues to be a need

for policy and advocacy to further breakdown barriers to employment, education, independent living, quality services, and much more.

## How Can You Advocate?

There are many ways you can advocate for policy that matters to you. Some popular ways include, (1) calling or writing a letter to your state and federal representatives; (2) sharing information with others in your communities through social media or a “Letter to the Editor” in your local newspaper; and (3) finding others who are passionate about the same topics you are and coordinating efforts to bring awareness to your issue. To find your state and federal representative, you can use the [Find Your Representative search tool](#).

## Conclusion

It is important to consider the history of disability policy and how it has evolved throughout the last 50 years. Current and future policy now aim to consider disability-related topics under the “new paradigm”, which seeks to provide progressive legislation and changes promoting access, equality, and inclusion. Advocacy is critical to advancing and improving these policies for years to come and it is up to all of us to raise awareness on the topics that matter to us.

## Contributors

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## References

1. Anti-Defamation League. (2018). *A brief history of the disability rights movement*. <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/disability-rights-movement>
2. Silverstein, R. (2000). Emerging disability policy framework: A guidepost for analyzing public policy. *Iowa Law Review*, Vol. 85, 1691-1796.

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