

History of the National Disability Rights Network

The Protection and Advocacy concept was triggered by a series of local television news broadcasts, which Geraldo Rivera did for the ABC News affiliate in New York City. Rivera's investigative reporting exposed abuse, neglect and lack of programming at Willowbrook, a state institution for people with developmental disabilities on Staten Island.

These broadcasts galvanized the state's senior senator, Jacob Javitts, to action, incorporating a P&A System in the renewal of federal developmental disabilities legislation enacted in 1975. While their mandate was drawn more broadly in the statute, P&A Systems were originally intended to protect people housed in facilities for individuals with developmental disabilities from abuse and neglect.

The National Disability Rights Network – previously the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems (NAPAS) – was first established in 1980 after the leadership of state P&As saw the need for representation in Washington on behalf of their programs.

In 1984, NDRN worked successfully to expand the P&A System with the addition of the Client Assistance Program (CAP) mandated in all states. CAP provides advocacy services to clients of state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies.

That same year, Congress again renewed the developmental disabilities statute, strengthening P&A authority to intercede in matters of inappropriate institutional care.

Two years later, Congress designated P&A Systems to provide a full range of advocacy services to people with mental illness (PAIMI). In the course of only ten years, federal support for advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities expanded from a narrow initial focus on the institutional care provided to people in facilities serving individuals with developmental disabilities to include advocacy services for people with mental illnesses and clients of vocational rehabilitation agencies. In a number of states, this federally funded program attracted additional state, local, and private support to extend its services to all people with disabilities regardless of the nature or severity of those disabilities. Over the decade, NDRN has become a force for positive change in the national disability community.

Continuing to use the subsequent reauthorizations of its programs, NDRN found new opportunities to expand the eligibility and resources of the P&A program. In the 1993 reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act, the Protection and Advocacy System for Individual Rights (PAIR) was authorized.

Also, in 1994, Congress authorized the Protection & Advocacy for Assistive Technology (PAAT) program. The PAAT program provides legally based advocacy services to individuals with disabilities on assistive technology issues.

In 1999, an effort was launched by the disability community to pass the Ticket to Work and Work Incentive Implementation Act (TWWIIA), which assists beneficiaries of Social Security. This legislation authorized the Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS) program, which assists individuals who received SSDI or SSI benefits and wish to work.

Two important additions to the P&A System were included in the Children's Health Act of 2000. First the PAIMI program was expanded to cover individuals with mental illness in the community. Secondly, Congress authorized a new P&A program for people with traumatic brain injury (PATBI).

Most recently, the Protection & Advocacy for Voting Access (PAVA) program was created in 2002 when Congress enacted the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). PAVA enables P&As to secure election access for a wide range of individuals with disabilities – including, but not limited to, individuals with mental, sensory, and physical disabilities.