



A Family History Of MOPD – PART ONE

BY WARREN SHAW

Now that Victor Calise has moved on, for the first time in nearly a decade the Commissioner spot in the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (or MOPD) is open.

Mayor Eric Adams is taking community input into selecting Victor's successor, and a series of public meetings on the history and future of the office recently concluded. So now is an appropriate time to take a look at the origins and formation of MOPD, the nation's first permanent public body focused on issues faced by people with disabilities.

I have a unique insight into this story, because my parents, Julie and Mollie Shaw, were among the first to describe and push for what became MOPD, and my father served as its second Director. For me, the story of MOPD is family history – and it is a story that takes us back to the very beginnings of the modern movement, in the early 1960s.

That's when the pioneers of the New York City Disability Rights Movement first banded together. They dubbed themselves the Handicapped Drivers Association and began lobbying for an exemption from having to pay parking meter fees. That may sound rather random, but just consider the vital importance of the automobile for people with disabilities in those days, when public transit was utterly out of the question for most of them.

new proposal for controlling traffic congestion in midtown.

The City was going to prohibit all parking between 34th and 66th Streets, and was going to tow away all illegally parked cars. This was the start of that infamous New York City practice. Despite objections from disability groups, among others, there were to be no exceptions – not for doctors, not for diplomats and not for cars driven by people with disabilities.



World Journal Tribune Photo by Jack O'Brien
The handicapped, some on crutches and in wheelchairs, picket City Hall protesting the towaway drive

The crucial new fact was this – the new policy was going to start “tomorrow morning.”

A delegation of the Handicapped Drivers Association hurried down to City Hall to try to buttonhole policy makers, but the effort went nowhere. My parents were members of the Association, and our home phone rang until about two in morning, as people tried to come to grips with what awaited them the next day.

What should they do? How could they get to work or even leave their homes? The upshot, as Julie put it, was “since we can't get to work, let's all head downtown to 'meet the Mayor.'” And so they did.

The towaway program attracted plenty of protest from doctors and diplomats, of course. But to the surprise of both the public and politicians, the biggest protest came from disabled drivers. The government and the press were just amazed by the sight of people picketing City Hall using crutches and wheelchairs.

The protesters got heavy news coverage in the papers, radio and TV. As the Daily News put it, “the tiger slipped out of Mayor Lindsay's tank yesterday, firmly affixed hizzoner to its tail and dragged him bumping all over the mid-Manhattan towaway zone as the biggest eruption of protests in his short-term administration hit City Hall. The loudest blast came from the handicapped, who use their cars for work in the tow-away zone.”

The consequences of the tow-away picket were far-reaching. Among other things, it led directly to the formation of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, the forerunner of today's MOPD.

My parents had been agitating for a City agency addressing disability issues even before the free-parking-at-meters bill was enacted. A series of letters on the subject passed between them and City Hall. To its credit, the Lindsay administration responded receptively, but nothing concrete had happened.

The tow-away fiasco, though – that was proof of the need for a City agency focused on disability issues. Julie and Mollie quickly sent Lindsay a detailed seven-page document titled “Proposal for a New York City Agency to Deal with the Multi-Problems of the . . . Handicapped.”

The letters flowing out of our apartment noted that the numbers of people with disabilities were increasing (for a number of reasons, including improved health care that saved a lot of lives). But despite the growing career need for education, the surge of social legislation in the era of the Great Society and the rise of civil rights activism by the nation's Black citizens and all over the former colonial world, “no such movement exists for the handicapped except in the area of rehabilitation.”

The letters also made the point that “what is the social use of several billion dollars spent on rehabilitating disabled persons and training them for employment, if the structures where they might otherwise find work are . . . inaccessible?” And they observed, sadly, that as a result, “after rehabilitation comes frustration, failure and chaos – emotional chaos. For the hope that arose is crushed, and is not to rise again.”

It isn't easy to translate Mollie and Julie's proposal into modern terms because so much has changed since then, but it was something like a combination of a public agency and an independent living center, a body that would act as both policy advocate and central clearing house for information, with a single overarching goal – “to secure and protect for handicapped citizens their right to function as members of a democratic society.”

For further information about Warren Shaw's work in disability history, visit DisabilityHistoryNYC.com.

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PROPOSAL

for a

NEW YORK CITY AGENCY TO DEAL WITH THE MULTI-PROBLEMS OF THE
REHABILITATED PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

by Julius A. Shaw

The AGENCY is envisioned as a clearing house for the handicapped who have been physically rehabilitated but face the many problems of our industrial society such as:

- Employment and Advancement (p. 3)
- Education (p. 4)
- Architectural Barriers (p. 4)
- Recreation (p. 5)
- Transportation (p. 6)

In short, the major obstacles that prevent the rehabilitated handicapped from being fully functioning and socially recognized members of the community.

The emancipation of the physically handicapped has been a long and painful process. The unprecedented impetus given this movement by the Second World War and the huge numbers of disabled veterans who returned created in the minds of the public the fact that the disabled person was, nevertheless, a person.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt re-entered politics and became a national figure, he created the image of an individual who could overcome a severe disablement and rise to greatness.

The returning veterans created an image of many people overcoming their disability and functioning as socially useful citizens.

The Second World War itself, and the attendant labor shortage, created employment opportunities for thousands of handicapped citizens who had never been employed before.

The medical knowledge gained during the Second World War in rehabilitation has been further amplified and used on countless thousands of non-veterans who have subsequently been made capable of returning to the mainstream of American society.

The first page of Julie and Mollie Shaw's proposal for what became MOPD, sent to City Hall in February 1967, shortly after the tow-away picket.

How could you go to a movie, let alone work a day's shift somewhere, if the meter had to be replenished every hour or more often? So this was an important issue, and it seemed reasonably winnable given the relatively small number of New Yorkers who held handicapped parking permits. But the idea proved no easy lift.

Nearly half a dozen years of pushing and lobbying followed, without success. But instead of giving up or fading away, the Handicapped Drivers Association developed an outreach and networking campaign that included the then-new Democratic Reform Movement. It enlisted as many disability groups as it possibly could, including the Joint Handicapped Council, the Long Island Chapter of the National Paraplegia Foundation, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association, United Cerebral Palsy, the National Amputation Association and Federation of the Handicapped. This massive coalition of disability groups all pulled together for the first time, to support an effort at real, lasting, statutory change in our society.

And on Oct. 10, 1966, Mayor John Lindsay, then in his first year in office, signed into law the bill allowing disabled drivers to park free at meters throughout the City. It was the first law in New York State meant to protect a right special to people living with disabilities.

A few months later, on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 1967, the new movement took to the streets with the first protest by people with disabilities in more than 20 years. It all got started just the day before, during the afternoon of Jan. 23, when the disability community learned a crucial fact about a controversial