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# Using Disability History and the Disability Rights Movement as a Foundation for System Change

## The Importance of Disability History in System Change Advocacy

A strong knowledge in disability history is essential for effective system change advocacy. The disability rights movement is built on the tireless work of civil rights leaders who paved the way for greater accessibility. These leaders—often referred to as the mothers and fathers of the disability rights movement—have left a lasting legacy that continues to shape efforts today.

Many disabled youths may not initially recognize that their personal advocacy journey is part of a much larger movement. Understanding this connection can be empowering. When young advocates see that their work contributes to a broader legacy of change, they gain a deeper sense of purpose and motivation. Their leadership is not only for themselves but also for those who will follow in their footsteps.

## Learning from Movement Leaders

Studying past disability rights leaders helps youth advocates understand the meaning and impact of advocacy. These leaders used a variety of strategies, from direct action and legal battles to storytelling and coalition-building. It is important to recognize that advocacy does not have a single form—different needs require different approaches, and different advocates may find strength in various styles of leadership. Some may excel in policy advocacy, while others may be more effective in grassroots organizing or media activism. All approaches are valid and contribute to meaningful change. Talking about roles that changemakers have done and identifying what qualities matches to those roles, will help youth feel more empowered to know their role in changemaking. In turn, youth will understand what strengths they have and how to utilize these strengths effectively for themselves and their community, building a better sense of self.

## Studying the Disability Rights Movement

Before engaging in direct advocacy work, YETI encourages adult allies to explore the richness and nuances of disability history and the disability rights movement. A strong historical knowledge on current and previous leaders ensures that advocacy efforts build upon past successes, avoid previous pitfalls, and honor

the contributions of those who fought for disability rights before us. It also gives youth an understanding of disability history and current challenges disability advocacy leaders, especially if they weren't exposed to or taught this history.

For additional resources, please refer to the Disability History section on this site.

## Discussion Questions for Youth Leaders

To connect historical disability rights advocacy with current efforts, adult allies can facilitate discussions using the following questions:

1. **What similarities and differences exist between the disability rights movements of the mid-1900s and those of today?**
2. **How do the issues addressed in past disability rights movements compare to the issues we are currently advocating for?**
3. **What beliefs, advocacy styles, or messages from the early leaders of the disability rights movement do you want to incorporate into your own advocacy work?**

By reflecting on these questions, youth leaders can gain a stronger understanding of how their advocacy fits into a larger movement and how they can build upon past efforts to create meaningful, lasting change.

## Conclusion

By grounding and sustaining youth-led system change efforts in disability history, adult allies can help young advocates see themselves as part of a powerful and ongoing movement. This knowledge fosters confidence, strengthens advocacy skills, and ensures that the fight for disability rights continues in ways that are innovative, effective, and deeply connected to past struggles and victories.

