



Dear Healthy Aging Readers,

In this newsletter, we are highlighting the contributions of one of our Island's Older Adults in improving the accessibility of our greatest natural assets, our beaches.

Sharing mutual concerns about barriers to accessibility at Martha's Vineyard beaches faced by individuals with physical disabilities and many in the aging community, Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard, Martha's Vineyard Community Services Disability Services, and the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities began meeting in early 2023 to discuss their concerns and ways to address them. Our commitment to plan and implement a way forward became an initiative called, "A Beach within Reach."

Stated simply, the purpose of "A Beach within Reach" is to make our Island beaches accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Over the past eighteen months, we've made progress working with the entities who manage the Island's beaches to create and begin executing a roadmap for improved accessibility, although there is much still to be done.

Today's newsletter focuses on the positive impact that one energetic, knowledgeable, "retired" Older Adult can make. It is a "good news" story that may lift us all up on a somber, grey November day. Read on to be inspired by Dick Cohen's lifelong commitment to social change. As our Associate County Commissioner of Disabilities, he has contributed his expertise, experience and collaborative spirit to the Beach with Reach Initiative and other accessibility challenges on the Island to promote inclusivity. This is one of his many accomplishments over his lifetime.

Here on Martha's Vineyard, we are so fortunate to have Dick and many other Older Adults who are making a vital difference to our community. So, let's take a moment to celebrate the contributions of Older Adults and say "thank you" at every opportunity, and maybe, just maybe, change some of the tiresome stereotypes that come with aging.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cindy Trish". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cindy Trish
Executive Director, Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard

A Voice for Change: Attorney and Disability Rights Advocate Richard Cohen's Journey

Written by Jamie Loschen, Associate Director, HAMV



In the late 1960s, a young law student began seeing the legal profession not just as a career path, but as a vehicle for social change. Today, that same spirit of advocacy drives Richard Cohen in his role as Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities, where he continues his lifelong work of creating systemic change and acting as an advocate for individuals with disabilities on Martha's Vineyard. It is a place that has felt like home since his first summer on the Island in 1949 when his father and uncle opened up an Army-Navy Surplus store in Oak Bluffs.

"I saw becoming a lawyer not so much as an end or role unto itself, Cohen reflects, but as a vehicle for social change." This perspective would shape a career spanning over 50 years of groundbreaking advocacy for civil and disability rights.

Early Victories for Human Rights

One of Cohen's first major cases as a managing attorney for New Hampshire Legal Assistance, just three years out of law school, came when a suit against New Hampshire's only state-wide prison was filed by an inmate. Cohen and his team turned it into a federal class action suit against the state of New Hampshire. "Involvement in that case began to give me an understanding of what institutional life can be like under awful conditions," Cohen recalls. After a ten-day trial, the judge issued a landmark ruling. It found that "the totality of conditions" in the prison constituted cruel and unusual punishment and ordered massive improvements.

This experience added to his equally important day-to-day representation of individuals in the community with low incomes, mental illness, and other disabilities, proved foundational. "I began to learn and understand how environments, in general, and segregated, congregate and institutional environments, in particular, can harm people," Cohen explains.

A Defining Moment

In 1976, shortly after the prison case, Cohen's commitment to disability rights crystallized when he visited the Laconia State School at the request of parents of some of the residents. The school was the sole state-operated institution for children and adults with developmental disabilities. The conditions he witnessed at this 700 resident institution set the course for his life's work.

"It was a life-changing event," Cohen recalls. "The conditions were heart-breaking, barbaric, and, in most respects, worse than the state prison, which the court had just found unconstitutional. It was so classic. It was in a rural area, forgotten. People never left there. They were there for their whole lives." They had not committed crimes. They were there because of lack of community support, including in educational, employment, and recreational opportunities afforded most other citizens. The lack, or more precisely, the denial, of what the rest of us took for granted, was due to pure prejudice and stereotyped views society historically held, reinforced and given a boost by the Eugenics movement of the early 20th century. Laconia State School, like its counterparts around the country, was isolated from public view and oversight and represented everything wrong with the segregated, institutional and congregate model of care.

What separated Cohen's approach from many of his contemporaries was his ability to see beyond institutional walls. As Cohen further reflected, "Whether due to my upbringing, the times in our country during my college and law school years, the evolving state of the law or a combination, I always saw the human quality in every person, seeing each person as an individual with individual strengths, needs and wants like anyone else. This was reinforced by the stories I heard from family members. Many of them chose institutionalizing their child as the last or only resort. I also interacted and developed relationships with individuals with disabilities both in and out of the institution. I learned about the growing successes of individuals with significant disabilities, young and old alike, who were supported in and part of their communities. These experiences, evident in many areas around the country and often documented in the professional literature, demonstrated that institutional, long term, segregated care was unnecessary and harmful." "Well run, more individualized and inclusive services and supports enabled individuals to develop and thrive."

Pioneering Legal Reform

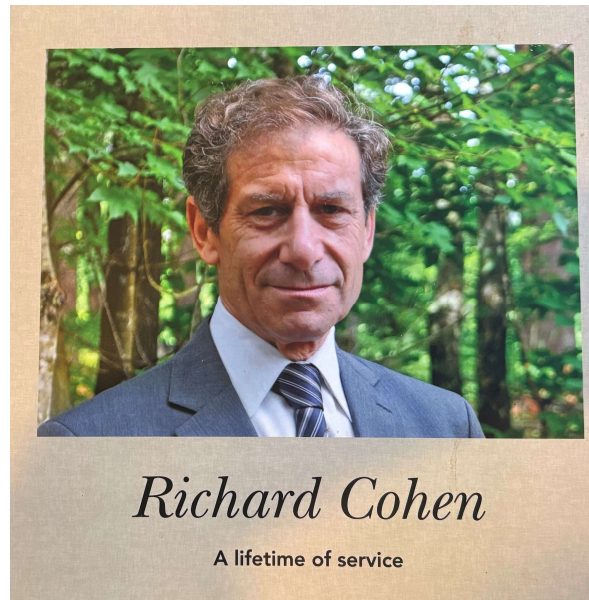
This perspective led Cohen to file a groundbreaking federal class action lawsuit in 1978. *Garrity vs. Gallen* fundamentally changed how New Hampshire served people with developmental disabilities. Rather than simply seeking to improve institutional conditions, as most previous cases had done, Cohen and his team pursued what seemed, to many, revolutionary. As Cohen noted it "was actually supported by civil rights cases and congressional laws and, he noted, "the growth of the community-based services movement."

"The major thrust of our case was to develop a community-based infrastructure," Cohen explains. "The only reason why most people were at that place was because parents didn't have any help and there weren't community services." The lawsuit became just the second case nationwide to seek a community-based system of services to replace

the institutional model of care. The court issued a sweeping order in 1981 after a ten-week trial. As Cohen put it, "The effect of the order and the subsequent acceptance and endorsement of the goal of the lawsuit by the State, led to the closure of Laconia State School in 1991. New Hampshire was the first state in the union to have a completely community based system of services."

A Career of Impact

Richard Cohen's colleagues made a book of all of his accomplishments when he retired



Cohen's influence on disability rights extended far beyond New Hampshire. As a federal court monitor in Minnesota, he oversaw the implementation of similar reforms across seven state institutions. In Boston, as a state court appointee, he monitored the Boston Public School's compliance with court orders and special education laws across all of the district's schools. Later, as head of Investigations for the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services, he led a team of 35 in investigating abuse and neglect in both institutional and community settings around the Commonwealth. He was also called upon to conduct evaluations in other states, focusing on the effectiveness of their quality assurance and investigations systems.

His career culminated in his role as Executive Director of the Disabilities Rights Center in New Hampshire, where he continued his advocacy work until his retirement in 2015. Under his leadership, a team of attorneys worked to protect and expand the rights of people with disabilities through both individual representation and systemic change.

"While trained as a lawyer, I always looked at my work well beyond a strictly legalistic point of view," Cohen notes. "Some people look at their place of work as a job, some people look at it as a career, and other people look at it as a calling. I think I fell into the latter category and still feel that way."

The Legacy Continues

Today, Cohen brings his wealth of experience and strategic approach to Martha's Vineyard, where he and his wife retired after decades of summering on the island. "My idea was to retire to the Vineyard because that always sort of felt like home," he says. Here, he continues to advocate for accessibility and inclusion, bringing the same strategic thinking, passion, and commitment to systemic change that characterized his legal career, to his role as Associate County Commissioner of Disabilities.

This commitment is exemplified in his work with the Beach Within Reach initiative, where he applies his proven principles of strategic advocacy to improve beach accessibility on the island. "The value-added by having true inclusion and integration, where people with disabilities work, live, and play, with and not apart from the rest of the community, is that you learn to value each as individuals," Cohen added. His approach balances collaboration with accountability, giving stakeholders "both leeway and cooperation" while maintaining clear expectations and timelines for improvement.

The initiative reflects a fundamental truth Cohen has observed throughout his career. Access to community spaces isn't just about physical accommodations, it's about human dignity and the right to fully participate in community life.

For Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard, Cohen's work reminds us that meaningful change often starts with individuals who recognize injustice and commit themselves to addressing it. Whether through legal action, policy reform, or community initiatives, the path to positive change begins with amplifying the voices of those who have been overlooked and ensuring their right to full participation in community life.



Richard Cohen stays active in retirement! Here he is cycling around the vineyard. He has also participated in Ironman competitions!