

TESTIMONY OF SHARON HEDDLE
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE 2/19/20
INCREASE FUNDING FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTERS

My name is Sharon Heddle. I live in Groton. I am the Executive Director of Disabilities Network of Eastern CT, one of the five Independent Living Centers. Our current budget provides \$612,000 for the five centers, which includes the \$300,000 that was committed last year for us to provide deaf services at each of the five Independent Living Centers. This allowed each of the five centers to hire a part-time, ASL fluent staff person to provide services for the deaf and hard of hearing community. I would like to thank the committee for the additional funding that allowed us to provide deaf services throughout CT.

Last year our Independent Living Centers responded to 12,800 information and referral calls and provided core services to 919 people with disabilities. Each year the number of requests for service goes up while our ability to provide those services in a timely manner goes down. Budget cuts over the past several years and increases to our everyday expenses has left us in a position of limiting our services areas, having waiting lists, reducing our staff, and hiring part-time staff rather than full-time staff.

I am here asking you to increase our budget by an additional \$650,000 – this is \$130,000 per Independent Living Center. This increase would allow us to change our part-time deaf services advocate into a full-time position that includes benefits. It would also allow us to hire an additional full-time general advocate to work on eliminating the waiting lists, getting back out to the limited service areas and help with a variety of needs that we just don't have enough staff to help with. Things like finding accessible housing, finding transportation, locating a food pantry, completing paperwork for all different types of benefits, opening a bank account, and learning how to discuss accessibility needs with your landlord or employer are just a few of the things we get calls about. Telling these people, we will call them back next week, or next month, is heartbreaking. They need help or guidance now, not when their name comes up on the list.

There are approximately 347,000 individuals living in CT with disabilities. Increasing the Independent Living Centers budget by \$650,000 will make a huge difference in the lives of so many of these people in CT.

Thank You

Sharon J. Heddle, Executive Director, Disabilities Network of Eastern CT, Inc.
576E Shennecossett Rd
Groton, CT 06340
860-514-4543