

Testimony of Joseph Shortt
Appropriations - Human Services Public Hearing
February 19, 2020

My name is Joseph Shortt and I'm a Southbury resident. I am here to testify on behalf of Connecticut's Independent Living Centers. I thank you for your continued support for this cost-effective program and request that you consider an increase in funding, so Independent Living Centers can meet the needs of its diverse communities.

I've been a wheelchair user for the last eighteen years due to a spinal cord injury. I was twenty-one at the time of my injury and had no idea what resources were available or what direction to turn for support. Thankfully, I received guidance from an Independent Living Center, so that I was able to regain my independence, learn to drive with adaptive equipment, live on my own, and go back to school to eventually earn a master's degree in Social Work, so I could give back to the community and help other individuals with disabilities.

I'm an Independent Living Advocate and Youth Transitional Counselor at Independence Northwest; which is one of the five Independent Living Centers in Connecticut. They offer essential services to children, adults, and elders with ALL disabilities and are the first place to go to get accurate, unbiased information on all aspects of life related to living with a disability. As an Independent Living Advocate for nearly ten years, I am able to pass on the knowledge that I have acquired to individuals who are in the position I was once in. Individuals who don't know where to turn for assistance, who need peer counseling, and in many cases need an advocate.

There are five core services that each Independent Living Center provides; these include advocacy, peer mentoring, information & referrals, independent living skills training, and transition of people with disabilities from nursing homes or other institutions to home and community-based living, as well as the transition of youth with disabilities to higher education or employment. This includes Diversion Services that assist those who are at risk of entering an institutional setting and that saves the state a tremendous amount of money.

Each Independent Living Center also offers unique services tailored to the needs of its community, such as: home modifications, equipment loans and repair, computer skills training, deaf & hard of hearing services, employment Services, youth services, and veterans' services. All of the services offered by Independent Living Centers are **crucial** for the well-being of individuals living with a disability. Over the past ten years I have witnessed the reduction of services and programs offered to individuals with disabilities due to previous years' budget cuts, which have never been restored. The reduction in services in other state funded programs has created increased numbers of referrals to Independent Living Centers and created waiting lists to keep up with the demand. I urge you to consider a modest funding increase of \$130K per Independent Living Center to allow Independent Living Centers to support an additional staff member to provide essential services for individuals with disabilities and to expand services for the deaf community.

Thank you for your valuable time, consideration and on-going support.

Sincerely,
Joseph Shortt