

Testimony of Sharon J. Heddle

Increase Funding for Independent Living Centers

My name is Sharon Heddle, I am from Groton, and I am the Executive Director of Disabilities Network of Eastern CT. We are one of the five Independent Living Centers.

The Governors proposed budget has the Independent Living Centers at \$553,000 split between the five centers. The breakdown of that is \$300,000 that was included in the budget two years ago and is specifically for providing Deaf Services and \$253,000 (\$50,600 each) for providing our CORE Services – Information and Referral, Individual and Systems Advocacy, Independent Living Skills Training, Peer Support, and Transition.

Each year we come to you and ask that you do not reduce our budget. I am here to ask that you increase the budget to the Independent Living Centers. With the reductions we have seen over the years we have had to make changes that have not been helpful to the community we serve. We have been unable to fill positions due to lack of funding. With fewer staff hours we have waiting lists for callers. We have been forced to make changes to the types of services we can provide to some parts of our catchment area, or how quickly we can provide services.

COVID has brought a group of people with disabilities to us that in the past have always worked and been completely independent. Many of these people have found themselves unemployed with little prospects of returning to work in the near future. For the first time they have been calling us for help. As our world returns to what many refer to as our “new normal”, we anticipate many in this group will continue needing the supports we provide. With inadequate funding I can’t imagine how we can help everyone timely – some people are going to slip through the cracks.

In 2016 the State Independent Living Council commissioned a study from Indiana School of Business. The study stated that the true cost to fully fund the five Independent Living Centers in CT is \$5.5 million with a minimum base amount of \$550,000 per center. While it may seem crazy to come here and ask for such large amounts of funding, it is a goal to work towards adequately funding our Independent Living Centers and providing our community of people with disabilities the services they need to be independent in the their community.

I am asking you to increase the funding for the Independent Living Centers – keeping the minimum base amount of \$550,000 per center as the minimum goal.