

Testimony of Joseph Shortt
Appropriations - Human Services Public Hearing
March 3, 2021

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 funding each of the 5 Independent Living Centers at \$550K each, so they can continue to meet the needs of their diverse communities.

I have been a wheelchair user since 2002 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. Because of the Independent Living Centers, I am now able to give back to the community and help other individuals with disabilities.

I am currently employed as 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. They 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 over 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, which 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. Connecticut Independent Living Centers now receive the lowest amount of state funding compared to adjacent states and are operating well below their true cost. Throughout the pandemic Independent Living Centers have remained open and have had a 51% increase in requests for services. I urge you to consider funding each of the 5 Independent Living Centers at \$550k each, so they can continue to meet the needs of Connecticut's most vulnerable population.

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

Sincerely,
Joseph Shortt