

Hello, my name is Kimberly Smith. I am a registered voter in Bozrah and I am an advocate at the Disabilities Network of Eastern Connecticut. DNEC is one of five Independent Living Centers in Connecticut. We serve all of New London and Windham counties as well as part of Tolland county. At DNEC, I help people with disabilities of all ages remain independent within our community.

In the six months that I have worked at DNEC, I have assisted 42 of the many people who have come to DNEC for help. Some of the people I have assisted needed help looking for housing, some needed stair lifts and ramps, and some needed help applying for benefits. There have been consumers that have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic who are now struggling to pay their bills and buy basic necessities. In fact, DNEC has seen an increase in consumers due to the pandemic. The following is a brief success story that shows how integral DNEC is to individuals with disabilities in our community.

It was the day before Thanksgiving, our office was preparing to close in a few hours. DNEC received a phone call from a consumer who desperately needed food. In their cupboard was just 2 cans of Chef Boyardee. This consumer was completely isolated due to being at a high risk for COVID-19. They had no help from friends or family and are unable to drive due to their disability. This person's phone barely worked, had to be plugged in at all times and got very hot when in use for any amount of time. Their computer was very old and stopped working making it impossible for them to get food on their own. It was suggested that I would order groceries for the consumer and have the groceries delivered to them. Unfortunately, delivery service is unavailable in their area. There was no same day curbside pick up available either. I made the decision that I would call the consumer, make a grocery list and do their shopping myself using Cares Act funds. I would then deliver the groceries to the consumer. There was enough food that I then had time to do more in depth research to find a long term solution for the consumer. The consumer has remained independent while being completely isolated.

This is just one example of many and I fear it is just going to get worse. When compared to surrounding states, Connecticut has one of the lowest amounts of funding available for our Independent Living Centers. Our centers are understaffed which causes Advocates to become burnt out. If the Independent Living Centers are allocated more funds, the center would be able to hire more staff and would be able to help even more people. Please increase our funding so that we can help those in our community who have the greatest risk of losing their independence. Thank you.

