

**Testimony to the Assembly Ways and Means and the Senate Finance Committees
Joint Legislative Budget Committee**

Good morning. My name is Todd Vaarwerk, and I am the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for Western New York Independent Living, Inc. [WNYIL]. Our center provides independent living services for persons with disabilities in Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Wyoming, and Orleans Counties. It is my pleasure today to testify today regarding next year's education budget.

Let me begin by fully endorsing the submitted testimony from the New York Association on Independent Living [NYAIL], for whom I also have the pleasure of delivering testimony today.

Independent living centers are a little-known component not just of the education budget, but of the broader state budget as well. 41 independently operated locations provide services to promote the independence and full inclusion of people with disabilities. From getting people out of costly nursing homes in state institutions, to assisting with education and employment readiness, and advocating for increased access to public institutions and businesses, centers like mine at WNYIL provide critical services while saving the state, in the case of WNYIL, over 75 million dollars last year.

A core item of Independent living philosophy is that independent living services are cross-disability. This means advocates can assist any person with a disability, regardless of the funding source providing the services needed. In addition, these services are provided by people with disabilities themselves, who can provide solutions based on lived experience.

That having been said, this strong network of centers is at risk. Increased restrictions provided with funding are already deepening the silos that Medicaid redesign was supposed to remove. It becomes more critically important to have advocates available who can cross those silos, and assure that needed services are provided.

The request, therefore, to increase the independent living allocation to \$18 million is not just reinvesting in a cost-effective network. It becomes protecting the last line of defense in assuring that billions of Medicaid dollars authorized in redesign are not misspent.

Quite often, I am asked how our center would spend such monies if allocated. To be honest, the first priority would be to provide living wages and up-to-date support for our experienced advocates, in which much time and money have been spent on specialized training. Outside of that, our priority would be to provide additional advocates and supports for school-age children with disabilities, who are facing increasing difficulty in getting appropriate services through individualized education plans and reasonable accommodation, or so-called "504" plans. Centers like WNYIL can be an asset to local school districts in solving reasonable accommodation difficulties if given the opportunity to collaborate.

I thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions. Please feel free to contact me at 716-836-0822 extension 101, or email tvaarwerk@wnyil.org.