

February 11, 2020

**Testimony to the Joint Legislative Education Budget Hearing
on the 2020-21 Executive Budget proposal and the**

FUNDING FREEZE IMPEDING THE WORK OF INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTERS

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the New York Association on Independent Living (NYAIL). NYAIL is a statewide membership organization of Independent Living Centers across New York State. ILCs are cross-disability, locally administered not-for-profit organizations, run by and for people with disabilities.

ILCs exist to ensure that people with disabilities have a chance at participating in community living and have assistance in removing communication, structural and attitudinal barriers in all parts of New York State. The New York State Education Department website describes Independent Living as, "...controlling and directing your own life. It means taking risks and being allowed to succeed and fail on your own terms. It means participating in community life and pursuing activities of your own choosing. Independent Living is knowing what choices are available, selecting what is right for you, and taking responsibility for your own actions." Our ILCs facilitate Independent Living, engaging in education every day to help people learn and grow as individuals, across the spectrums of disability and age.

We have services that touch all points in a person's life, and our centers do see people return as they need assistance with new challenges. For younger people with disabilities, we provide help to transition from school to employment, and this is now one of the core services provided to communities and that needs investment. Parents of a child with a disability will contact our centers overwhelmed when faced with the challenges presented to them by complicated systems that are not always designed to accommodate differences. We always do our best to help with addressing the root causes and connecting the right pieces, and with youth, time is crucial in addressing issues early to prevent devastating impacts down the line.

ILCs have been overwhelmed by the growing level of need from people with disabilities, their families, and friends. Our ILCs are fielding calls from people in dire circumstances seeking hope that there's someone that can help. We want to continue to be there for those that need us. We want to provide faster services for people facing deadlines while in crisis. People call us wanting an appointment as soon as possible because they are losing housing, being discharged from a hospital with a new disability, need help navigating the system to get accommodations for their child, or someone wants to change their life situation and try working while keeping a support system of benefits. ILC staff are experts at helping people navigating the vast systems that can shape their futures.

Connecting them to ILC services and coordinating plans with local non-profits, schools, county, state, and federal liaisons to deliver results for people that needed help yesterday but did not know where to turn. ILC staff and the people who have been through the process will tell you it is life changing.

ILCs currently provide a range of critical services, including independent living skills training, peer counseling, individual systems advocacy, information and referral, assistance with housing services, benefits advisement, transitioning from or avoiding unnecessary institutionalization, youth education transition services, transportation assistance, and more. ILCs also assist ACCES-VR meet their mission by providing consumer-driven and community-based wrap around services that complement the Vocational Rehabilitation services provided by ACCES-VR, acting as a dedicated referral source and valuable resource to counselors. The size and scope of these services are ultimately decided by available funding.

New York's Independent Living Centers are asking for the Legislature's support of our request for an increase of \$5 million in the 2020-21 State budget, which has been recommended for several years by both the State Education Department and the Board of Regents. The proposed Executive Budget reduces funding to \$13.361 million. A step backwards from a minor \$500,000 increase last year and continuing the ongoing trend of over a decade of near level funding. An \$18 million total allocation is long overdue and essential to sustaining independent living services statewide, while also delivering \$45 million in projected savings based on current data from the New York State Education Department, ACCES-VR, showing that the work of ILCs to transition and divert people with disabilities from costly institutional placements save the State more than \$9 in institutionalization costs for every state dollar invested in ILCs.

We know a \$5 million increase is warranted beyond potential savings to the state given the rising cost of doing business - including the costs associated with general operating expenses, health insurance, workers compensation insurance, basic adjustments caused by inflation, and the need to keep experienced and trained staff members. The center network is funded at less than it was in 2008, but now with more centers. An additional \$5 million would enable ILCs to maintain staff and expand services determined to be in the greatest need for each individual center. Centers use a disability-led planning process to identify the most pressing needs in their communities which inform the services these centers provide. Through these planning processes, centers have identified pressing needs that they do not currently have the funding to offer. For each center the needs of the community may vary, but all communities have unmet needs which the State's network of Independent Living Centers could address with additional funding.

In 2018/2019, the state's network of ILCs served nearly 114,000 people with disabilities, family members and others; an increase of more than 34,000 in just six years. We know that the number served would likely be higher had the IL funding kept up with the capacity needs of centers. If staff is not available as quickly, because of large caseloads, then people will not bother to seek services that could be life changing. In fact, with such

inadequate funding, ILCs are being forced to let staff go —many of whom are people with disabilities because people with disabilities make up the majority of our workforce.

Independent Living Centers take a peer approach and routinely hire employees with disabilities in many different areas within the organizations. As employers, ILCs offer meaningful job opportunities in a competitive and integrated work environment. A handful of ILC staff with disabilities have worked their way up into leading ILCs as Executive Directors. Adequate funding to Independent Living Centers will continue efforts to provide meaningful job opportunities to people with disabilities in a competitive work environment while providing vital services to communities across New York.

This year is the 30th anniversary of the passage of the American's with Disabilities Act, and it was a long struggle by advocates to get that law passed and it's a fight for us every day to ensure that the ADA's vision of inclusion in our society is brought to fruition. Increasing IL funding by a mere \$5 million in the 2020-21 budget will help Independent Living Centers across New York State have the resources to continue their crucial work so individuals with disabilities are able to live independent, fully integrated lives in the community.

Thank you.

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Executive Director