

Testimony of Bob Gorman

My name is Bob Gorman and I live in Torrington. In March of 1996 I was working in Hartford as a financial analyst when I started having blurred vision in one of my eyes. Within 30 days I was totally blind in both eyes as a result of complications from diabetes. Over the next several months I had several operations to try to regain some vision, all of which were unsuccessful. Faced with the reality that I would be blind for the rest of my life, I realized I had to move forward and find gainful employment to help support my family. I received some mobility training and technical assistance from the Board of Education Services for the Blind, however, it was through a friend that I contacted Independence Northwest, a Center for Independent Living,(ILC), located in Naugatuck, that advocates and provides direct services for all individuals who have a disability. I was looking for information on employment options for people who are blind.

I met with a counselor and the Executive Director and was hired as the Bookkeeper for the Center. I was responsible for processing payroll, paying invoices, remitting payment for state and federal taxes and producing monthly reports. After two years as the Bookkeeper, I was asked if I was interested in becoming an independent living advocate to work with people with disabilities and to assist them in obtaining and maintaining their independence. Over the past ten years this has been the most important and rewarding work I have ever done.

Through Independence Northwest I have assisted hundreds of people with disabilities to find safe, affordable and accessible housing, finding employment (i.e. conducting independent living skills, training on searching for jobs, preparing a resume, filling out applications and conducting mock interviews.) I have attended PPT conferences within the various school systems to advocate for the disabled students rights to receive a fair and equal education and to better prepare those students to transition to college or employment. I have assisted people with major problems and issues that most might think are trivial, but for a person with a disability, the obstacles and "trivial" issues threaten a person's ability to live and work in the community. Independence Northwest provides limited financial assistance for accessibility modifications such as building wheelchair ramps, modifying bathrooms, stair glides, vehicle modifications and any other equipment that would help the consumer. Independence Northwest has successfully advocated for community and system changes such as installing an automatic door opener at a public library, installing an audible crosswalk signal at a busy intersection and advocating with a condominium association to allow a school bus to enter their property so that the mother of a six year old, who has multiple sclerosis, would not have to walk to the bus stop outside of the condo complex each morning.

In addition to Independence Northwest's advocacy services, we also provide peer counseling and peer mentoring. A majority of our counselors and advocates have disabilities which permit IN to relate positively with the consumers we serve because we have faced some of the same challenges they do. We have the day-to-day experience of living and working as people with

disabilities and have developed practical strategies that we share with others. This is a very important core service of an ILC.

The crucial services the ILCs provide cannot be done without the financial support from the State of Connecticut. We are grateful to the legislature for their commitment to independent living. Thank you for passing the budget in September 2009 that provided funding for ILCs although it did contain a 34% reduction from the prior year. Now Governor Rell has issued a Deficit Mitigation Plan that contains a 5% rescission and elimination of all state funding for ILCs, and the new midterm budget presented last week also eliminates all state funding for ILCs. I'm here today to ask the Appropriations Committee to restore full funding of \$665,927.00 to the ILCs so that services to an ever growing disabled population in Connecticut can continue and others can have the same success that I have had.

Thank you.