

Testimony of Kassey N. Gustafson  
Appropriations Sub-Committee Public Hearing  
February 22, 2013

**Restore Funding to Connecticut's Independent Living Centers**

My name is Kassey Gustafson and I am a West Hartford resident. I am here to testify on behalf of the Connecticut Independent living centers, in opposition of the proposed budget that will cut all state funding for the five Independent Living Centers here in Connecticut. Independent Living Centers offer essential services to children, adults, and elders with disabilities. I have been working at Independence Northwest for 7 months as Independent Living Advocate and Deaf Services; which is one of the five independent living centers that will have its entire state funding cut. This state funding is crucial to the Connecticut Independent Living Centers; without it, some may be forced to close and others would be forced to drastically reduce cost effective services for individuals with physical and mental health disabilities.

I was born hearing. At approximately 6 months old, I was very ill with bad ear infections and I continuously getting ear infections and the doctor had to put tubes in my ears so many times. At last, as I lost my hearing they found out that it was the nerve damage that caused my hearing loss. I was just before a year old when I became profound deaf. I am only one who is deaf in my whole family. Through my childhood, it was very challenging being in a hearing world and being around hearing relatives, friends, and people. I started going to school when I was 3 years old to learn how to communicate using American Sign Language. As I grew up, I always go to deaf camps to socialize with other deaf kids during the summer. During school year, I go to mainstreaming school with other hearing students and there were no deaf students there. I had an interpreter at school interpreting for me at every class. When I went to college, I was very independent and did well in college, but had no jobs. It was very difficult for me to find a job to work to be able to support myself and live in an apartment. I had no idea about any agencies that could help me with getting benefits, apartments, jobs, getting through college, obtain an interpreter(s), be able to receive visual equipment for housing and more until later. I have struggled so much through college years. I did have several jobs but I had no interpreters there for my interview, but had to depend on my friends or my mother to interpret. Finally, I got a place, which was Section 8 and was on rental assistance when I lived on my own with my 2 kids. I began to learn about things like Section 8, subsidized apartments, understood some about Medicaid/Medicare, and more. Meanwhile, I got where I actually get to live independently without having to depend on my parents so much. As a deaf woman, I have learned how to be independent on my own along with my family and friends' supports. I have never had any help from any kind of agency.

When I moved here in Connecticut from Texas, I went to BRS and asked them for help to find me a job. My BRS counselor helped and found me a job. I am very fortunate to be hired at Independence Northwest. It was a welcoming environment for me because they

are an agency comprised mainly of individuals with disabilities, serving people within the community who have disabilities as well. As an Independent Living Advocate, I am given an opportunity to help and pass on the knowledge that I have acquired, to individuals who are in the same position as 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. The services offered by Independent Living Centers are crucial for the well being of those individuals living with a disability. I go out and spread the words to the deaf community to let them know that there are many varies of assistances that they can receive including Independent Living Centers.

Independent living centers provide four core services to anyone with a disability. The core services include: information & referrals, advocacy, peer mentoring, and independent living skills training. They are the first place to go to get accurate, unbiased information on all aspects of life related to aging or living with a disability. Last year alone, the Connecticut Independent Living Centers provided information and referrals to over 4,500 people and helped over one thousand people with advocacy, independent living skills training, peer counseling, youth & educational services, and other vital support services.

There are numerous services and/or programs that Independent living centers offer beyond their four core services, such as the Money Follows the Person program. Money Follows the Person allows people living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, who are elderly or disabled, to move into their own homes, and receive the service and supports they need to live independently. The Money Follows the Person program saves the state a tremendous amount of money by getting people who can live independently back into the community and out of costly nursing homes. Last year, Connecticut Independent Living Centers transitioned 164 people with disabilities from nursing homes back into community living, saving the state approximately \$4.4M.

All of the services offered by the five Connecticut Independent Living Centers will be impacted tremendously, possibly even being completely eliminated if this budget is passed, so I urge you to please reconsider the proposed budget cut, so that we can continue serving the elderly and disabled community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

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