

TESTIMONY OF JENNIFER ERIKSSON BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS SUB COMMITTEE
Department of Rehabilitative Services Budget (DORS)
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, FEBRUARY 27, 2015

Good evening, members of the committee. My name is Jennifer Eriksson; I am from Manchester Connecticut. I am a person with multiple disabilities, including learning difficulties and I am the Clinical Mental Health Counselor at Independence Unlimited, Inc. Independence Unlimited is a non-residential, non-profit independent living center that serves a diverse population of people with disabilities in Hartford county. Independence Unlimited and the other ILCs work hard every day to assist consumers with needs related to housing, assistive technology, health care and, transportation as well as many other services. I am asking that you restore funding for Independent Living Center (ILC's) in the state budget for core services that include advocacy, peer counseling, skills training and information and referral services, for people with disabilities and their family members.

Independence Unlimited is open and affirming and welcomes all people regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, physical or mental disability. This creates a supportive environment for consumers and employees alike and allows everyone to reach their fullest potential. In addition to the thousands of Connecticut residents that the ILC's assisted with things like information and referral services, peer counseling, and housing, the ILC's also helped an additional 340 consumers obtain or maintain employment. I know this personally because, I was one of them.

In my unique journey at Independence Unlimited, I have had an opportunity to view the positive work conducted by the agency from many perspectives; beginning as a consumer, working as an intern while pursuing my Master's Degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and now as an employee, using my skills to assist members of the disability community; a population that can have complex mental health needs and, at the same time, face many difficulties in accessing the services necessary to assist them in maintaining psychological health and well-being.

As a consumer, I was given peer counseling and pre-employment skills training that were invaluable to me as I went to work and school, attempting to advance in my career field. As an intern at IU, I was treated with respect. And, rather than being looked down upon for having a disability, which is something I have often experienced in past places of employment, my disability was viewed as an asset. This allowed me to use my knowledge base from my schooling to grow into a competent professional, without fear of judgment or criticism of my abilities. Now, as an employee, I am able to utilize what I've learned as both a consumer and an intern, as well as my experience as a peer and professional, to assist people with disabilities in Connecticut in receiving services that are vital to maintaining their independence and preventing institutionalization.

I am asking you to please restore funding to the Independent Living Centers in the 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 budget so that, not only can people with disabilities in Connecticut continue to have access to critically important resources but, so that I can continue to achieve what every person with a disability strives for; a purposeful life and career that allow me to contribute socially, professionally, and financially to the well-being of our State. Thank you very much for your time.