

Testimony of Sarah Rizzuto  
Appropriations Committee  
February 27, 2015  
Department of Rehabilitation Services Budget

My name is Sarah Rizzuto and I'm an East Haven resident who has lived on my own now for just over a year. Prior to moving into an apartment complex I lived in Cheshire with my parents. It was then that I was a member of the board of directors of Independence Northwest, one of the five Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in Connecticut. I was also a consumer of the center and am currently an active consumer of the Center for Disability Rights in West Haven. I write to share the utmost importance of these centers and to say that the proposed budget that will eliminate all state funding for all five centers leaves people with disabilities with little information and practically no route for becoming self-sufficient, productive individuals.

I, too, will have much less of a possibility of becoming as independent as possible without their services. This is despite the fact that I graduated from Southern Connecticut State University's English department with three degrees and earning a graduate certificate in Women's Studies. I am currently employed at Southern as an adjunct professor and have taught a Disability Studies course, which I designed and implemented through the Women's Studies Program.

Although my education sharpened my ability to compose this testimony, my education has its limits. When I graduated in 2011, I was uninformed about how to apply for housing, how to find personal assistants outside of Southern's community and unaware of how my disability benefits would be impacted once I started working. I was thirty and have been disabled since birth, but my parents raised me to believe that my Cerebral Palsy has no bearing on my success in life. Although this is idealistic, it is this mindset that motivates me to pursue all my goals, which include living in my own apartment as well as maintaining steady, fulfilling work and culling a pool of reliable assistants to employ. These assistants drive me to and from work, help me bathe, dress, make meals etc. Independence Northwest provided me with a database to work from. I meticulously went through hundreds of names in search of potential people.

Despite my parents' idealistic views, they, like my education, can only do so much, I passed on the information and resources I gathered from Independence Northwest to my parents. Thus, Independence Northwest has not only supported me during this transitional period, but my family. I am just one of many individuals, and, by extension, my family is one of numerous families that have benefitted from Independence Northwest's services and the employees who facilitate them. These services were free and, sometimes, when services are free consumers are short-changed. This is not the case with Independence Northwest. When necessary, I received one-on-one attention. I was given guidance that was not only cost-effective, but professional and unbiased. Also, most of the people who work at Independence Northwest and at the other four centers have disabilities. In turn, they are more knowledgeable than the typical professionals about living with a disability and accessing appropriate avenues for advocacy. Such assistance should remain available to all disabled people and those who care and respect their right to participate fully and meaningfully in their communities. The services offered by Independence Northwest as well as the other centers are anything but an extraneous budget item; they are at the core of what independent living is. Their services are not offered elsewhere and the work they

do is carried out with a seemingly tireless spirit. With a caseload that has not gotten any lighter, it would be no surprise if the employees at these centers had no compassion left. But this is far from reality.

It is on this note that I ask you to work on behalf people with disabilities. This summer, July 26<sup>th</sup> will be the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is a shame that an act which calls for the inclusion of people with disabilities is not being recognized and upheld by this decision to cut resources that so many find essential. I urge you to strongly reconsider the proposed state budget cut. All the centers will be at an unparalleled loss. Peoples' lives are not expendable and the funds effectively used to sustain them should not be either.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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