Testimony to Appropriations Committee regarding Human Service Agencies.

Re: Restoration of funding to Independent Living Centers

Senator Catherine Osten, Representative Toni Walker, co-chairs, and members of this committee. My name is Barbara J. Cassin. I retired from state service almost three and a half years ago. For twenty eight years I worked for the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) in the Norwich office. In my role of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor my primary responsibilities were to work with my Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deaf-Blind (D/HH/DB), and Hearing clients to secure and maintain substantial, gainful employment. Often, securing a job was less difficult than assisting my clients in maintaining their positions.

As we all know many things happen in our lives that can interfere with or impact our ability to focus on our work. Some of these personal issues may be financial, such as a difficulty with budgeting due to a history of limited financial resources, or due to a lack of understanding of governmental expectations and policies that result in losing much needed supports (SNAP, subsidized housing, and health insurance.) It was not uncommon that this misunderstanding was a direct result of a lack of appropriate communication access to the various government agencies and programs.

During my time in Norwich I became familiar with our local independent living center (ILC), Disability Network of Eastern CT (DNNEC.) They were known to provide support to people with disabilities but members of the D/HH/DB community did not see them as an accessible resource. Together, the American School for the Deaf and DNNEC applied for a BRS grant to provide an onsite office and a staff person fluent in American Sign Language. “If you build it they will come.” This is exactly what happened. Slowly the members of the D/HH/DB community saw DNNEC as an accessible resource and strong advocate. The first year was very successful prompting ASD and DNNEC to reapply for the grant for a second year. At this time DNNEC was able to establish a fee for service for some of their supports, such as job coaching and job placement. Due to the community’s experience with them and the many Independent Living Skills they were gaining, a longstanding confidence in and trust with DNNEC was forged, and continues to this day.

However, over the past 15-20 years we have watched as financial support for severely needed services for many of our most vulnerable citizens has been continually reduced. In addition, we have seen many programs and services trimmed and in some cases cut. For members of our D/HH/DB community we have lost the Commission on the Deaf, the Interpreting Unit at DORS, the support services at LifeBridge in Bridgeport, just to name a few. This has had a truly devastating impact on many members of our community. We cannot afford to continue with this trend.

I am here to ask that you please restore funding to all of our ILCs. The services they provide are life-supporting and life-affirming. I also believe DNNEC serves as an exemplary model in providing full communication access to those in D/HH/DB community who would like to utilize their services and I would encourage other ILCs to follow their lead.

Respectfully,

Barbara J. Cassin
bjcola@comcast.net
206 Taylor Rd
Colchester CT 06415
860-531-4963