Good evening, Representative Walker, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Osten and other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Brynn Hickey. I work as the Outreach Coordinator at the independent living center in Norwich. All the centers work tirelessly to ensure that consumers of any age and disability have access to the community that they choose. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee about the governor’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2020 and 2021 as it impacts the five independent living centers in CT. We are grateful to see that the Governor did appropriate money to the independent living center which is a line item in the DORS budget.

We are here today to highlight the services that are provided by the centers. Most of the centers are working with few advocacy staff. The independent living centers were funded at $529,000 for all five centers to provide full service to each of the catchment areas. In 2015 our funding was cut and many of the centers had to lay off staff. The decrease in funding forced us to change the way we could provide services to people with disabilities.

I want to highlight one area of disability services that are lacking. Once upon a time there were several counselors for the deaf and over 60 interpreters. CDHI was placed under DORS in 2015. In 2016 the entire interpreting unit was laid off. Most recently in 2018 Lifebridge, a nonprofit that has a deaf services unit with a case load of 120, closed their Deaf Services
Department, leaving DNEC and Sue Shatney, (the remaining staff of CDHI) to provide deaf services across the state. There is no other state agency providing advocacy and life skills training to deaf adults. DORS only provides employment services to the deaf and DNEC is the only CRP with signing staff who are being asked to provide these employment services to a larger catchment area than originally contracted for. The other community providers realize it is difficult to find interpreters to cover the meetings and trainings with consumers. The center have a system in place that have statewide reach. The deaf community has specialized communication needs which require staff fluent in ASL. With increased funding we can provide statewide advocacy services to all disability group. I strongly believe that the centers can fill gaps in service if properly funded.

I’m asking for help for the Independent Living Centers, but more importantly for the deaf community. DNEC is one of the last agencies in the state that provides a variety of deaf services. With a restoration of our funding each center could hire a staff person fluent in ASL so the Independent Living Centers could provide statewide services to the deaf community, with the goal of being independent, employed tax paying citizens of CT.