

February 6, 2019

**Testimony to the Joint Legislative Education Budget Hearing
on the 2019-20 Executive Budget proposal and the**

NEED FOR INCREASED FUNDING FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTERS

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the New York Association on Independent Living (NYAIL). NYAIL is a statewide membership organization of Independent Living Centers across New York State. ILCs are cross-disability, locally administered not-for-profit organizations, run by and for people with disabilities.

The Independent Living community is seeking the Legislature's support of our request for an increase to funding for Independent Living Centers (ILCs) to \$18 million in the 2019-20 State budget, as recommended by the State Education Department and the Board of Regents. The proposed Executive Budget maintains level funding at \$13.361 million. This much needed increase of only \$5 million is long overdue and essential to sustaining IL services statewide.

ILCs have been woefully underfunded for the past decade and have been losing ground. The centers funding was cut twice back in 2008, reducing the funding line over \$1M to \$12.3M, where it remained for seven years. Thanks to the legislature, ILCs finally received a much-needed increase of \$1 million in the 2016-17 SFY. While this amount doesn't come close to making up for a decade with no cost of living adjustment given the rising cost of doing business - including the costs associated with general operating expenses, health insurance, workers compensation insurance, disability insurance, etc. - it was a start. However, a significant portion of these funds were used to create two new state-funded centers. As a result, the increase did not provide the much-needed cost of living increase it was intended to, and the center network is still funded at less than it was in 2008, but now with more centers.

The State established ILCs to ensure that New Yorkers with disabilities had a fighting chance at participating in community living and that they have assistance in removing communication, structural and attitudinal barriers in all parts of New York State. In 2019, 29 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, federal civil rights law that protects New Yorkers with Disabilities, and 20 years after the Supreme Court's *Olmstead* decision which articulates the right of people with disabilities to live in the most integrated setting, the legacy of past discrimination still marks our communities. It appears as barriers, physical, communications-related, or attitudinal barriers that have yet to be removed. Because of these barriers, people with disabilities experience gross inequalities that include lower educational attainment, lower levels of employment and

wages as well as segregation in certain industries and positions, worse health outcomes, greater social isolation and significantly higher levels of long-term poverty. The role of New York's Independent Living Centers is as critical now as it was 30 years ago, as evidenced by the ever-increasing numbers of people with disabilities, their family members and others seeking IL services on an annual basis.

In 2017/2018, the state's network of ILCs served nearly 110,000 people with disabilities, family members and others; an increase of more than 30,000 in just five years. This demonstrates the pressing need for IL services in communities, and the number served would likely be higher had the IL funding kept up with the capacity needs of centers.

ILCs provide a wide-range of critical services based on the local needs, all of which are aimed at addressing the social determinants of health: education, employment, housing, social skills. Services include, as examples, independent living skills training, peer counseling, individual systems advocacy, information and referral, assistance with housing services, benefits advisement, transitioning from or avoiding unnecessary institutionalization, youth education transition services, transportation assistance, and many more. ILCs also assist ACCES-VR meet their mission by providing consumer-driven and community-based wrap around services that complement the Vocational Rehabilitation services provided by ACCES-VR, acting as a dedicated referral source and valuable resource to counselors.

Independent Living Centers take a peer approach, and as such, routinely hire employees with a variety of disabilities. As employers, ILCs offer meaningful job opportunities in a competitive, integrated work environment. However, with such woefully inadequate funding, ILCs are being forced to let staff go —many of whom are people with disabilities because people with disabilities make up the vast majority of our workforce. This is at a time when Governor Cuomo has recently created the Employment First Commission, per Executive Order 136, tasked with creating an Employment First policy for New York, which makes competitive, integrated employment the first option when considering supports and services for people with disabilities. Adequate funding to Independent Living Centers around New York State will allow ILCs to continue providing meaningful job opportunities, to people with disabilities in a competitive, integrated work environment.

An additional \$5 million would not only enable centers to maintain their current staff and services, but expand the services their center provides as well. Centers use a disability-led planning process to identify the most pressing needs in their communities which inform the services these centers provide. Through these planning processes, centers have identified pressing needs that they do not currently have the funding to offer. For each center the needs of the community may vary, but all of the communities have unmet needs which the State's network of Independent Living Centers could address with additional funding.

Furthermore, adequate funding of ILCs is essential to ensuring successful *Olmstead* implementation in New York and would result in additional Medicaid savings to the State. Data from the New York State Education Department, ACCES-VR, show that the work of

ILCs to transition and divert people with disabilities from costly institutional placements saved the State more than \$2.5 billion since 2001 as a result of avoided institutional care. ILC transition and diversion activities save the State more than \$9 in institutionalization costs for every state dollar invested in ILCs.

Increasing IL funding by a mere \$5 million in the 2019-20 budget will help ensure the Independent Living Centers across New York State have the resources to continue their crucial work in assisting individuals with disabilities to live independent, fully integrated lives in the community.

Thank you.

Lindsay Miller
Executive Director