



### **The Problem**

**C**enters for Independent Living (CIL) play a vital role in helping people with all sorts of disabilities create and live the life they desire. In Colorado, there are 10 CILs that are federally and/or state certified by the Rehabilitation Services Administration or the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). All ten receive a mix of state and federal and private funding. The CILs face the following challenges in Colorado:

- Inadequate financial support with less than \$4 million total in funding
- Minimal meaningful oversight at the state level
- No representation in state level planning activities on disability issues
- No leadership to assist CILs in tracking service data consistently across the centers
- Lack of oversight and technical assistance to improve service delivery

While the State focuses efforts on persons with mental health needs and individuals with intellectual disabilities, individuals with other disabilities often do not receive proper supports and advocacy. Most of these individuals could live independently and work with the training, assistive technology, and benefits planning services that are offered by CILs. Persons miss out on the peer support that enables individuals with disabilities to see others who are working, having families and participating in the community. Without these opportunities, people with disabilities can remain trapped in poverty, believing they have little to no talents to contribute.

### **The Independence Center in Colorado Springs**

The Independence Center (The IC) is a Center for Independent Living located in Colorado Springs. The IC serves El Paso, Teller, Park, Lincoln, Cheyenne and Kit Carson counties. The IC started as a home health agency in 1987 by a woman who is a quadriplegic so that she could live in the community; it became a Center for Independence in 1994. The Center's mission: Working with people with disabilities, their families and the community, we create independence so that all may thrive. The CIL provided services to 633 people while Home Health/Home and Community Based Services program served 230 people in 2014.

### **What are Centers for Independent Living?**

CILs, are non-residential organizations that seek to empower others with disabilities through information, role modeling and an understanding of our civil rights. Working with our consumers and community partners, we tackle discrimination and lowered expectations wherever we find them. The goal is to make Colorado barrier free where all may receive an education, work, play, and participate in community activities together. Accessible, affordable housing, transportation, and personal assistance in the home have been the top advocacy issues. Additional advocacy is needed in education, effective communication access for the Deaf community, changing employers'

attitudes, and emergency planning efforts across the state.

Centers for Independent Living are required to provide five core services under Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act:

- 1. Information and Referral:** Access to information and referral services is essential for people with disabilities. Achieving independence often requires involvement of a variety of agencies and community organizations.
- 2. Advocacy:** Advocacy support to individual consumers is critically important. Key to this process is empowering consumers to act on their own behalf and resist accepted norms of dependency. In addition we work on systems change (e.g., lifts on buses and accessible buildings) together so that our community environment is accessible to people with disabilities.
- 3. Peer Counseling:** By virtue of their disability-related experience, people with disabilities are uniquely qualified to assist their own peers. A peer counselor, or peer advocate, who has achieved independence and community integration, shares knowledge and experiences.
- 4. Independent Living Skills Training:** Skills development is an important feature of achieving or enhancing an independent life. Learning to cook from a wheelchair, using the public transit system, finding and learning to use accessible technology are all examples of IL skills training.
- 5. Transition Services:** The newest core service requires CILs to work to transition people with disabilities that desire to live in the community out of institutions, work to keep people who are at risk out of institutions, and work with young adults to transition from school to work.

## ***Independent Living Philosophy***

The Independent Living Philosophy is the belief that people with disabilities are the best experts on their needs. Individuals must have the freedom to make choices and the ability to live and work in the community in a life of their design. Persons with disabilities are not clients who must be taken care of by professionals who advise what is best for them. Instead, they are consumers of services who make informed decisions on the goals they want to achieve. CILs help provide the disability community with the tools needed to achieve those goals. According to the philosophy, people with disabilities must take the initiative, individually and collectively, in designing and promoting better solutions and organizing themselves for creating change.

## ***History of the Center for Independent Living Movement***

The history of the Independent Living Movement is closely tied to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Both movements confronted the same essential issues - people who were different because of the color of their skin, their nationality, gender, or physical/mental disabilities were marginalized by bigotry, discrimination, poverty, isolation, dependency, and pity. For people with disabilities there was the added burden of lowered expectations and a “let us take care of you because you can’t” belief by society at large which was, and still is, a huge barrier to independence and respect.

In the late 1960’s Berkeley students with severe disabilities organized into a group known as The Rolling Quads. The residents developed a sense of unity and confidence as they lived in close, continuing contact with each other.

They became more aware that control over their lives had been taken over by medical and rehabilitation professionals. Students drew on their own experience to develop a philosophy of independent living. The students believed that they didn't need to change; rather the environment and the attitudes toward persons with disabilities needed to change. They exerted pressure on the university to become more accessible and to provide funding for a student organization to work for removal of barriers and support services, including Personal Attendant Services on campus. This self-help movement would go on to radicalize how people with disabilities perceived themselves.

After establishing the campus organization, the same group of students realized the need for an off campus, community-based organization. In 1972, with minimal funding, the Berkeley CIL was started. The core values of the Berkeley CIL, dignity, peer support, consumer control, civil rights, integration, equal access, and advocacy, remain at the heart of the independent living and disability rights movements.

The creation of the Berkeley Center started a national movement. In 1978 the federal Rehabilitation Act was amended to include Title VII, which for the first time provided federal funding for the development of a national network of Centers for Independent Living. A series of landmark court decisions, along with sustained advocacy by people with disabilities have further supported civil rights including:

- The Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975
- The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990
- The Supreme Court's Olmstead decision in 1999

CILs also believe in the right to risk taking and the right to fail as part of the learning process. Through peer support, people learn from each other how to problem solve and live more independently.

The Independent Living model sees people with disabilities as the solution. Through peer support, advocacy, skills training, information and referral, and transition services, more than 600 CILs across the country now provide services to hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities each year.

The Disability Rights and Independent Living Movements have transformed American society. We must be vigilant to continue education and outreach and to inform policy makers to expand supports to persons with disabilities for independence and opportunity. Living and working in the community means a higher quality of life, cost savings and tax payments. Institutionalization and relying on Social Security payments is costly to the taxpayer and keeps individuals trapped in poverty.

### ***Relationship Between Centers for Independent Living and Vocational Programs***

For many people, including people with disabilities, having a job is key to self-sufficiency, social connection, and other opportunities. Once employed, workers with disabilities strengthen the economy. **However, the employment rate for Colorado residents with disabilities is 43.5 percent compared with a rate of 83.5 percent for residents without disabilities.** Disability and unemployment have been linked historically. People with all kinds of disabilities can succeed in the workplace if they have appropriate education, training, technology, access, and necessary accommodations.

The CILs and DVR share the same goal - assisting the individual to become more independent including working. The two organizations must effectively work together with the consumer to achieve his/her goals. While DVR provides the employment-related services, the Centers for Independent Living provide the supports such as finding housing, learning transit, and peer support that people need to have in place before going to work. Each system offers individuals different knowledge, perspective and skills, which work together so that the consumer can successfully live independently and work. Finally, staff members working at CILs are role models; most are persons with disabilities who are working, living, and socializing in the community. They demonstrate the possibilities that exist for persons with disabilities.

## **A CALL TO ACTION**

Services provided by Colorado's ten Centers for Independent Living help ensure the rights of people with disabilities and create a substantial return on public investment. Given the critical role played by the CILs, we are calling for a stronger IL system in Colorado through:

- Increased funding
- A location in state government that can lead us forward as a system toward improved services and consistent data on outcomes
- Leadership who can adequately represent the CILs in state planning efforts

This will take an investment of state funds to strengthen this natural, community-based resource for persons with disabilities. Failure to embark on strengthening the CIL system in Colorado will leave a large number of people with disabilities stranded in front of their mailbox, waiting for a government check, and believing they have no talents to offer.

## **A Real Success Story**

A young woman was referred to The IC in September 2014 and we began by interviewing her to determine work experience, desired career path, work ethic, and goals. We updated her resume and provided classes on how to dress and conduct herself in an interview. She visited The IC weekly to monitor job postings. The IC received a call from a plumbing company about an opening and our staff immediately set up an interview for her. The IC staff contacted DVR to set up a "paid work experience." She was eventually hired as a permanent employee and The IC continues to provide the support she needs to maintain her position. This young woman has a paycheck, independence, and a pride in her accomplishments that would not have been possible without the relationship between DVR and The IC.

*The Independence Center is one of the ten ILCs in Colorado and is located in Colorado Springs. The IC serves El Paso, Teller, Park, Lincoln, Cheyenne and Kit Carson counties. In addition to providing Independent Living Services in the community, The Independence Center also operates a Home Health program, funded by Medicaid that allows us to pay for personal services in the home to prevent institutionalization.*

People with disabilities  
building community

**THE INDEPENDENCE CENTER**

