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**Testimony to the Assembly Ways & Means and the Senate Finance Committees
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing**

2017-2018 Executive Budget on Education

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 Legislators support of our request for an increase to funding for Independent Living Centers (ILCs) to \$18 million in the 2017-18 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 twelve years and have been losing ground. Thanks to the legislature, ILCs finally received a much needed increase of \$1 million in the 2015-16 SFY. After receiving level funding for eleven years, this \$1 million increase was intended to provide the existing 39 state funded ILCs with a \$25,641 increase. While this amount doesn't come close to making up for 11 years 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. Yet two months into the new contract year, after not receiving their advanced payments or contracts, ILCs were informed that there was a change prompted by the Office of State Comptroller to how this \$1 million will be distributed. Instead of splitting the \$1 million equally between the 39 state-funded ILCs, the funding was also used to create two new state-funded ILCs. This change results in a \$10,074 cut to existing centers budgets mid contract year.

In 2015/2016, the state's network of ILCs served 103,573 people with disabilities, family members and others; an increase of more than 20,000 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 critical services to people with disabilities all designed to assist them in navigating the ever-changing service system in order to live independent, fully integrated lives in the community. As the state continues to redesign health care in ways that are intended to increase quality and decrease costs, ILCs play a crucial role. ILCs provide a wide range

of services based on the local needs, all of which are aimed at addressing the social determinants of health: education, employment, housing, social skills.

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. Here are just a couple of examples of the expanded services that the centers commit to providing with the additional funding:

- Southern Tier Independence Center (STIC) located in Binghamton would create a Community Living Department for which they would hire three individuals, two fulltime and one part-time staff member. They would create the position of Community Living Navigator, who would primarily work with consumers ineligible for Medicaid Waivers or other similar programs who need assistance with navigating any barriers they face including benefits, housing, health care issues, etc. It would be very similar to a service coordinator/case manager type staff person, focused on assisting the person to live successfully in the community. Within this community living department, STIC would also hire a Transition Navigator to work with high school age students to learn about independent living and all of their options so that they can successfully transition to integrated living, education, or employment.
- The Resource Center for Independent Living (RCIL) would expand the number of bilingual advocates in their Utica and Amsterdam offices. This is crucial to ensure the center's ability to serve the large refugee population in Utica and the Spanish population in Amsterdam. In addition, they would expand services to the deaf. There is a significant need as there is a school for the deaf in Rome. Moreover, RCIL would like to hire an expert for each center to provide free consultation related to ADA modifications to small business and non-profits.

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 \$2.3 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. The State has an unprecedented opportunity to utilize New York's Independent Living Centers to assist in implementing Olmstead and the Medicaid Redesign Team's reforms impacting people with disabilities, including the transition to mandatory managed long term care and implementation of the Community First Choice Option (CFCO) and the Balancing Incentive Program. The State should invest savings from implementation of CFCO into ILCs over a number of years, ultimately bringing the State appropriation to \$25 million.

Increasing IL funding by a mere \$5 million in the 2017-18 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

