

THE PHILOSOPHY OF INDEPENDENT LIVING

There are 22 Centers for Independent Living in the State of Illinois. Through the centers, persons with disabilities in Illinois are empowered with the knowledge and skills to make their own life choices and pursue their own goals of self-sufficiency and full participation in their communities.

Independent Living is the right of all people, regardless of their capabilities, to control and direct their own lives and to participate fully and meaningfully as equal member of society. This philosophy is a response to the existing community barriers, low expectations, stigma, prejudice, discrimination and other social and political restrictions, which tend to limit persons with disabilities from fully participating in their communities. The greatest barrier faced is the attitudes of those thinking that people with disabilities are "less than whole" and, therefore, deserve fewer opportunities than mainstream Americans. Attitudinal barriers are so ingrained in society that only a sustained and high profile effort, reaching all constituencies simultaneously, can have any measure of success. Only then can people with disabilities begin to have a chance at equal participation. In no area in life is this more apparent than employment, with a startling statistic of more than 69% unemployment rate among vocationally aged people with disabilities.

Efforts are directed toward educating the community of persons without disabilities about the reality of persons with disabilities.... that they are people of equal value, with similar dreams, goals and ambitions, who deserve an equal opportunity to fulfill their potential. We want to remove the face of pity from the image of disability and replace it with one of positive capability. We are a resource to our member centers in assisting with their growth and development, and a resource to the community in providing the information and technical assistance they need in creating an open environment of equality for all citizens.

Finally, we are an advocate for the rights and full inclusion of persons with disabilities, and for the support of those services, which allow individuals with disabilities to achieve their goals.

The following information defines Centers for Independent Living and how they work to arm persons with disabilities with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence to achieve their goals and dreams.

A Center for Independent Living (CIL) is a non-residential, community based organization, which provides resource and advocacy services to persons with disabilities. **CIL's differ from traditional service agencies in many ways, the first being that they are staffed and governed primarily by persons with disabilities.** Federal and State laws, which define CIL's mandate that at least 51% of staff and board are persons with disabilities. This brings a positive perspective based on personal experience with disability and an understanding of issues and barriers faced, and the potential for success.

An equally important difference is a philosophy of consumer control. **CIL's do not direct their consumers, make decisions for them, or tell them what to do.** Instead, they serve as a resource and mentor, empowering consumers with the skill to direct their own lives, set their own goals, and plan the necessary steps to achieve those goals. They provide the information to allow consumers to make well-informed choices, with a full understanding of the potential consequences of their decisions.

Through peer support and role modeling, CIL staff teaches consumers that persons with disabilities have the right and the responsibility to pursue goals of self-determination and self-sufficiency. They provide training in skills that range from managing a budget, to writing a resume, to hiring and managing a personal assistant, if the consumer has a disability which restricts his or her ability to physically do everything needed in daily living.

CIL's work within their communities to bring about positive change in attitudes and accessibility, creating an open and welcoming environment for citizens with disabilities. By participating in community events, networking with other community agencies, conducting presentations and workshops on pertinent issues, **CIL's create an enlightened awareness of disability and reduce the apprehension some persons experience when encountering someone with a disability.**

Role modeling is an important part of community education. As CIL staff with disabilities participates in various groups, committees and boards, other members are exposed to individuals with disabilities serving in professional positions and taking part in addressing issues of importance to the whole community. This sends a different message than the one of helplessness and pity often attached to disability.

Advocacy is a vital component of the CIL picture. CIL's are the voice in their communities, which exposes those policies and practices which are discriminatory or detrimental to persons with disabilities, and demands change. That voice is backed up by an involved group of people who work with community leaders to bring about change. Consumers of CIL's are taught self-advocacy skills so they are prepared to deal with discrimination if it confronts them.

Overall, Centers for Independent Living provide persons with disabilities the tools to set and accomplish their own goals; and they provide their communities the information and knowledge needed to accept respect and accommodate their citizens with disabilities.

Peer Counseling

The foundation of CIL services is the peer relationship. Staff that has experience living with a disability and are achieving their personal goals assist others who have similar disabilities, serving as role models, mentors and advocates.

Advocacy

CILs offer two types of advocacy:

Individual advocacy focuses on the individual with a disability and services available within the community to assist them in living independently and to eventually become their own advocate.

Systemic advocacy involves working together to eliminate barriers and allow people with disabilities to fully participate in their community.



Northwestern Illinois Center for Independent Living (NICIL) supports the Independent Living Philosophy in all that we do to serve our consumers. We believe that it is an honor and privilege to serve people with disabilities in Northwestern Illinois and will continue our mission.

Adapted from our partners at Illinois Network of Centers for Independent Living (INCIL) and from PACE, CIL.