



(Lane Independent Living Alliance)

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Support for Oregon House Bill 3122

The following is respectfully submitted to be included in the Public Record as supplemental Public Comment to hearings held in March 2019 re HB 3122

March 19, 2019

The Oregon Legislature, House of Representatives
Committee of Human Services and Housing
Representative Alissa Keny-Guyer, Chair
900 Court St NE Room H-272
Salem, OR 97301

Honorable Chair Keny-Guyer and Committee Members:

First, I want to thank you for welcoming such a large group of us to the hearing yesterday and for ensuring all of us had access to the information, including those of us who are Deaf and hard of hearing. As you can see, HB 3122 is extremely important to thousands of us. It is reported that 600,000 individuals in Oregon experience disabilities. I am one of those individuals.

I grew up experiencing disabilities. There were very few resources in my small town of Dallas. Thankfully I had parents who were resourceful and who assisted me in navigating school and life with these disabilities. However, the journey would have been much smoother had there been resources, especially a from a peer who understood my disabilities and could be a mentor.

My experiences gave me a passion for providing resources and support for others who experience disabilities. I was accepted in to Western Oregon University's Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling Master's Program and joined the cohort that focused on Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing services. During the program I was in an automobile accident resulting in a traumatic brain injury, vestibular injuries, and multiple physical injuries. Although I had grown up with disabilities, these sudden onset disabilities were much different and navigating life with these changes was challenging.

I was unable to work for five years. Treatment required a year of bed rest, followed by years of therapy. When I was able to return to work five years later I needed a flexible schedule so I could continue therapy which would allow me to function at work. I was extremely disappointed when I learned that Vocational Rehabilitation would not offer this flexibility, even as an accommodation request, to new employees. This excluded me from being able to work in the job I had trained for.

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Thankfully I learned about a program that had recently started in Salem which focused on providing services for individuals experiencing disabilities. I had limited knowledge about Centers for Independent Living because Salem and the surrounding counties do not have a Center for Independent Living. Living Independently for Empowerment (LIFE) Program had been set up by Lane Independent Living Alliance – the Center for Independent Living in Eugene. Although their funding had to stay in Lane County, they identified that individuals experiencing disabilities who live in Salem have very few resources and decided to try to address some of the needs through contracts and services to specific agencies in the Salem area.

This position allowed me the flexibility needed to continue my treatment while still being a reliable worker. We have provided a wide variety of programs in the ten years I've coordinated the LIFE Program. Working with a team of professionals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, or who experience disabilities to provide services to individuals who are also Deaf, Deafblind, hard of hearing, Blind, or who experience disabilities has been a wonderful experience.

The impact we have had on the individuals we have served has been significant. Individuals who developed a disability have learned how to utilize accommodations and assistive technology to continue to live independently, participate in the community, and work successfully. Individuals who have been told they had too many disabilities and could not work have found occupations they are passionate about, identified accommodations and assistive technology that removed barriers and are working successfully, making great contributions to our community. Individuals who have been stuck in rehabilitation centers and nursing homes have been able to transition into community settings and become active members in the community again. Students who are Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing and who experience disabilities have identified their interests and strengths, researched careers, and graduated from high school with a plan for training and work. Community services and local employers have learned about how to be more inclusive and accessible. They have seen the benefits of hiring individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, Blind, or who experience disabilities.

All of these services have been done with a team of a few people in a small office with limited contracts. While the impact has been drastic, the need is so much greater. HB 3122 would provide the funding needed to provide full Center for Independent Living Services for Salem and the other Oregon communities not currently receiving services. These services will help provide Oregonians who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, Blind, and who experience disabilities access the community and become more independent. The result will be less reliance on state assistance programs, more money going into Oregon's economy, and more diverse and inclusive communities around our State.

Another important impact of HB 3122 will be to create parity of pay and benefits for Center for Independent Living Staff. Although the Rehabilitation Act calls for both Vocational

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Rehabilitation and Center for Independent Living services, the current funding is greatly disproportionate. As I stated earlier, I was not able to work for Vocational Rehabilitation because they would not accommodate my need for working extended hours four days per week to allow a partial day off one day a week to go to treatment. While I love the work that I do at the LIFE Program, it does not provide for livable wages, full-time hours, health insurance, and other benefits that staff at Vocational Rehabilitation receive. I have the same education and national certification as Vocational Rehabilitation staff, but do not earn enough money to cover my basic needs and medical costs.

We are not able to maintain stability in staffing due to the lack of full-time positions, non-livable wages, and lack of benefits. The LIFE Program staff typically work two-three years before moving on to other jobs. This greatly impacts services to the consumers and limits the growth of programs that could have significant positive impacts on our community.

The fact that Centers for Independent Living are mandated to be created by, governed by, and run by individuals who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, Blind, or who experience disabilities, but are not funded at a level to allow livable wages and benefits while Vocational Rehabilitation is funded at a much higher level allowing for livable wages and benefits, but is not flexible to allow some individuals who experience disabilities to be employed is a civil rights issue that desperately needs to be addressed.

I have seen firsthand, both as an individual experiencing disabilities who has received services and as a peer providing services to consumers that peer based services are highly preferred, highly effective, and less costly. I believe that Centers for Independent Living are the best way to provide greatly needed services to Oregonians who are Deaf, DeafBlind, hard of hearing, Blind, and who experience disabilities. I fully support HB 3122 and ask you to do the same. Thank you for your time, consideration, and support.

Respectfully,



Rebecca I Emmert, MS, CRC, CI