



WASHINGTON State Independent Living Council

The Washington State Independent Living Council (WASILC) is a Governor-appointed, statewide council that represent a broad range of individuals with disabilities from diverse backgrounds that are knowledgeable about independent living services. The majority of the council members are individuals with disabilities. WASILC promotes a statewide network supporting the Independent Living (IL) Philosophy for people with disabilities through advocacy, education, and collaboration. The Council is cross-disability and values self-determination, self-sufficiency, consumer control, and independence.

The Independent Living Philosophy emphasizes consumer control, the idea that people with disabilities are the best experts on their own needs. They have crucial and valuable perspectives to contribute and deserve equal opportunities to decide how to live, work, and take part in their communities, particularly in reference to services that powerfully effect their day-to-day lives and access to independence.

WASILC is responsible for collaborating with the Designated State Entity and Centers for Independent Living to create a State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) every three years. The SPIL is a strategic plan that includes IL goals and objectives, and outreach plans. To determine the goals of the SPIL, the Council holds public hearings for consumers, and other interested parties, to comment on and provide information on the experiences of individuals with disabilities in Washington State.

In October of 2017, WASILC hosted a public forum in Vancouver, WA. The purpose of this meeting was to gather information and advice from the disability community, service providers, and the public to identify what is working in Southwest Washington, as well as to identify gaps and barriers. The public forum began with a panel discussion that consisted of six individuals that have experiences as consumers and/or service providers, followed by an open forum, and concluded with the meeting attendees deliberating how to remove the barriers in their community, based on what had been discussed. The Council offered to summarize their concerns and share the information with their locally elected officials.

Key Issues:

It was commonly addressed that issues facing the disability community are not being considered with a holistic approach. The largest barriers that citizens of Southwest Washington face are lack of accessible and affordable housing, accessible and affordable transportation, and employment opportunities. These barriers are connected and must be considered related issues when addressing possible outcomes.

Housing:

Washington State is one of the fastest growing states in the U.S. and Vancouver is seeing a majority of that growth. Due to the increase in population, the housing demand has increased and the cost of living is skyrocketing. The average rent in Vancouver and the SW Washington region is \$1,230 monthly, which is a 7% increase in one year. The rental market currently has an estimated vacancy rate of only 2.5% (HUD'S PD&R Comprehensive Housing Market Analysis, 2016). The increase in demand for rental units puts individuals with disabilities living on fixed incomes at a disadvantage.

It is common for people with disabilities to be living on a monthly income of Social Security, at \$735 for an individual. Low-income housing is limited and most are now resorting to waitlists that are open for a limited amount of time and have very specific requirements.

Background and credit checks can be another barrier to housing for individuals with disabilities. Medical bills are considered when performing a credit check, and even individuals who do not have disabilities are increasingly more likely to have medical debt and collections reported to their credit. The increase in demand for housing allows property owners to be particular about who they approve for their rental units and people with questionable credit scores are immediately disqualified. Rent control does not exist in Southwest Washington either, which allows property owners to increase rent at an exponential rate, forcing individuals and families out of units and unable to find other affordable housing. If a person with a disability manages to find housing on a fixed income, they then face the problem of inaccessible housing.

Due to the increase in population, the housing market is also expanding. Home accessibility and visitability are barriers most individuals who use wheelchairs or walkers face, as well as numerous others who have trouble with steps. Visitability has three requirements: one zero-step entrance, doors with 32 inches of clear passage space, and one bathroom on the main floor you can get into in a wheelchair. Visitability is a national trend that should be a requirement for new construction. This requirement would allow people with disabilities and the older, aging populations a wider variety of housing options that meet their needs, which would benefit all communities. Warehousing accessible homes is detrimental to self-determination, and every individual has the right to choose where and how they live their lives.

Transportation:

Related to the issues of accessible and affordable housing is transportation. If someone finds housing that meets their needs, they then must consider access to transportation. It is known that public transportation is widely available within the city (although not always accessible), however this is not the case in rural communities where housing tends to be more affordable. Often times, there is no public or accessible transportation available in rural communities. It is also less likely that sidewalks are available and that those sidewalks have curb cuts outside of the city. Making a transit stop safely accessible should be considered an issue that is as important as access to the transportation. These are barriers people with disabilities face in the community every day and they are issues of safety and public health.

There is an increase in lawsuits against companies that do not offer ADA accessible transportation. Private companies that provide transportation should be required to provide accessible, ADA accommodating transportation at no additional fee. This would include Uber, Lyft, taxi services, shuttles, etc. This is important for issues of discrimination, but also because people with disabilities have the right to accessible transportation options, especially when considering the barriers to public transportation options.

Employment:

People with disabilities want to work and have the right to a livable wage (not a subminimum wage). Washingtonians with disabilities experience a high poverty rate compared to people without disabilities. In Washington, 43% of people with disabilities have an income that is below 200% of poverty level, compared to 23% of Washingtonians without disabilities (WA State DVR, 2017).

Sheltered workshops are slowly being phased out in the community and people with disabilities are interested in competitive integrated employment. People with disabilities are more likely to be employed part-time and the most common barriers to employment are lack of transportation and the need for job accommodations. It is a concern that accommodations are a barrier to employment that individuals with disabilities are facing considering the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination based on disability. This fact makes it clear that discrimination based on disability is still occurring in workplace.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is currently in the process of Order of Selection due to limited funding. This means that not all individuals with disabilities that require employment services have access to these services, only those with the most significant disabilities will receive services through DVR. People with disabilities are unemployed at a rate that is double

than those without disabilities, but this is not due to their lack of desire to work; it is the lack of positions for these individuals. When positions are created specifically for a person with a disability, it is common that during times of financial distress, these are the first positions cut. It was suggested that there should be more initiatives to challenge companies to hire individuals with disabilities and education within these companies on how to retain employees with disabilities.

Another barrier to employment is transportation. It is not possible to make it to work if there is no accessible transportation, and buying a personal vehicle requires an income and decent credit. If a person lives in a rural community with no access to public transportation and an accessible shuttle/taxi is not obtainable, then this person would have no means to report to their place of work. This does not allow for independence or freedom of choice.

As stated previously, all of these issues are connected and must be addressed holistically to create equity for individuals with disabilities. All of the information presented here are concerns from people that reside in Southwest Washington, have experienced these barriers, and would like to see progress made in these areas to eliminate these gaps.

Following the WASILC meeting, a majority of the public forum attendees agreed to share their contact information with the group to continue these discussions. They will work together from the grassroots level to effect systems change and advocacy. They are passionate and dedicated individuals that would like to see individuals with disabilities participate fully in the community and have access to opportunities that are afford to those without disabilities.

United States, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research. (2016, May 1). Retrieved October 25, 2017, from <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/pdf/PortlandOR-comp-16.pdf>

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