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STATE OF NEW YORK  
DIVISION OF THE BUDGET

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Thank you for this opportunity to present comment in anticipation of Governor Spitzer's 2008-2009 Budget spending

Hello. My name is Charles Reichardt. I would like to begin by thanking you for allowing me an opportunity to address you.

First, I would like to tell you a little bit about myself. I am a Systems Advocate at the Catskill Center for Independence. We are one of thirty-seven independent living centers in NYS. We serve people with disabilities who live primarily in Otsego, Delaware and Schoharie Counties.

I consider myself to be quite successful. I worked for fifteen years as a Systems and Procedures Analyst for IBM. I have partnered in a small business selling and servicing commercial and hobbyist communication equipment.

Currently I am working on a Master's Degree from Empire State College that focuses on policy studies. My first graduate and undergraduate degrees emphasized business and management studies.

I am married, own my own home, enjoy being an amateur ham radio operator, and have been involved in community service as a member of the Lions Club for more than twenty years. I am also a member of the Rotary Club in my hometown where I am currently a recent past President. In addition, I am on the board and an active member of the Unadilla Historical Association

And, oh yes, I am blind.

I am presenting this testimony to try to express what independent living means to New Yorkers with disabilities and what it means to me. I would like to ask that you:

- Provide additional funds to address the increased operational costs of running an independent living center that have been realized over the past several years. Costs that would otherwise have to be absorbed.
- And to ask that you please make any increase a "recurring aid" so that it becomes a permanent part of the appropriation in years to come.

The failure of independent living in obtaining an increase to the state appropriation will result in a cut to each independent living center in NYS.

This will have a serious impact on center operations across the state. Each center will be forced to reduce staff and decrease and/or eliminate some services.

Since independent living centers are consumer controlled organizations, the staffs of these centers are comprised primarily of people with disabilities.

The people whose jobs may be eliminated are the same people that have the most trouble getting hired. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is approximately 70%. These same people would most likely require benefits such as Social Security Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), Medicaid, and Medicare thus generating a greater expenditure for New York State in the long run.

I know because I am one of those people. I have faced the possible elimination of my job due to budget considerations.

Even more importantly, under funded independent living would significantly affect the number of people with disabilities that my center can serve.

I believe that independent living is not a place...but a state of mind. It is a philosophy and a movement of people with disabling conditions who strive for self-determination, equal opportunities and self-respect. The independent living philosophy is built on the premise that one wants to gain control over his or her life.

I know that's what it means to me. To live independently does not mean that I want to do everything by myself, that I need no one or that I want to live in isolation.

What it does mean though is that I have the right to demand the same choices and control in my everyday life that my non-disabled family, my neighbors, my friends and even my political leaders take for granted.

What I want is the opportunity to fully participate in day-to-day life. I wanted to grow up in my family unit, I wanted to go to the neighborhood school, I want to use the same bus as my neighbors, and have the opportunity to work in jobs that are in line with my education and abilities. And just like you I need to be in charge of my life, to think and speak for myself.

Independent living and independent living centers have helped me achieve these goals.

Independent living then is a matter of having choice in all aspects of life.

We seek a society where people with disabilities make choices for themselves. Our goal is equal access for everyone in their community's economic, educational, social, health care, and recreational opportunities.

As someone who has been totally blind since birth, I am intimately familiar with what it is like to live with a disabling condition. For me, the heart and soul of independent living has always meant that I have the freedom to make the decisions that direct and shape my life.

It is not to have my life controlled by professionals, family, or anyone else.

Living this philosophy has resulted in my being blessed with a full and enriched life. I believe my experiences have provided me with a rather unique opportunity to observe first hand the profound and life-changing effects independent living centers have.

I was a board member of an independent living center for twelve years. I helped establish financial and administrative policies that could best meet the needs of the people served by the independent living center. It became clear to me that the number of people with disabilities we could serve and the quality of service they received was directly related to the adequacy of the center's budget.

As I have already said I have been a consumer of independent living services. As a consumer I have gained a tremendous wealth of knowledge, have learned to network, have learned to advocate for myself, and have been supported by the services and programs provided by my independent living center.

Finally, as an employee of an independent living center, a Systems Advocate, I have experienced first hand how systemic change can have a direct impact on the lives and well being of the people with disabilities we serve. I continue to marvel as I observe other advocates at my center presenting our consumers with information and networking and support services that result in them making choices that have profoundly changed their lives.

For example:

- Did you know that only five years ago more than 90% of the polling sites in the area my center serves weren't accessible to people with physical disabilities?
- Did you know that my independent living center was directly responsible for ensuring that the polling sites were either made accessible or moved to an accessible location?
- Did you know that we are working on ensuring that all polling sites in NYS will be physically accessible to people with disabilities?
- Did you know that they currently aren't? Can you imagine?
- Did you know that we are working on ensuring that all polling sites have at least one voting machine that allows people who are blind to vote independently? Something I'll bet each one of you has taken for granted your entire life.

I am fifty-six years old and I have only recently been able to cast a truly private ballot. I would like for all of us to be able to do that at our local polling site.

I believe that my life is a testament to proving that someone with a significant disability can live a life that is productive and rewarding, can fully participate in matters of family, employment, community and be fully involved in all other aspects of life. I

believe that my life is a testimony to the intrinsic value independent living centers have had in the success and value of my life and in the lives of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers with disabilities across the state.

So again I ask you to please continue legislative aid to the independent living state appropriation and provide additional funds to address increased operational costs so we can continue to help New Yorkers with disabilities live productive, worthwhile lives in your community and in mine.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on these most important issues and for allowing me a few minutes to share with you a little bit about myself.