



The Washington State Independent Living Council (WASILC) is a Governor-appointed, statewide council that represents 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, collaboration, and planning. 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 affect their day-to-day lives and access to independence.

WASILC is responsible for collaborating with Centers for Independent Living to create a State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) every three years. To determine the goals of the SPIL, the Council holds public hearings for consumers and stakeholders, to comment on and provide information on the experiences of individuals with disabilities in Washington State.

In July of 2019, WASILC hosted a public forum in Vancouver, WA. The purpose of this meeting is to listen to and gather information and advice from the disability community, service providers, and the public to hear what is working in Vancouver and surrounding communities, as well as to identify gaps and barriers. The public forum began with a panel made up of people with disabilities and services providers. Consumers and service providers could address specific issues and engage in a community dialogue on issues that people with disabilities experience. This document is the summary of the conversation and will be shared with locally elected officials, community members, and the State Plan for Independent Living Committee.

### **Key Issue Discussed: Emergency Management**

Panelists and community members emphasized the importance of emergency planning. The conversation can be broken down into two main points: strategic, disability-conscious planning; and collaborative planning.

#### **1. Disability-Conscious Planning**

Adhering to the IL philosophy, which is, that no one knows the specific experiences and needs of someone with a disability more than the individuals themselves, it is critical to include people with disabilities on planning teams. Integrate people who are blind, hard of hearing, use a wheelchair, etc. in



simulated training exercises conducted by all facets of emergency responders. Examples of specific needs to be considered for emergency management are: communication, mobility, medical, and behavioral/mental health. Emergency response coordinators and managers are encouraged to include members of the disability community in their planning meetings. Doing so would enhance knowledge for emergency responders and planners. It would identify oversights and gaps in accessible services and resources.

Panelists drew attention to the importance of making emergency responders aware of mobility and communication needs. Collaborate with neighbors, schools, and businesses, to put in place emergency drills so that co-workers, neighbors, etc. know exactly how to help the individuals with a disability.

## **2. Collaborative Planning**

Partnerships between various emergency management organizations and agencies to move toward a common goal of improving access to emergency communication and resources. These areas can include: transportation, medical needs, notifications on devices, and training opportunities. Shelters should have access and knowledge on how to acquire ASL interpreters. All communication forms need to be accessible to individuals who are blind and/or deaf. Emergency management organizations need to budget to pay for ASL interpreters.

We often use the term “disability community”, but as one panelist pointed out, not all individuals with a disability feel like they are connected to a community. Their disability makes them feel excluded from many activities and resources. Perhaps they are unaware of local support groups which could provide a sense of community. People thrive when they have a strong network of friends, family, and neighbors. These natural supports play an integral role in connecting individuals with disabilities because they have an established rapport. When we receive information (in this case, emergency preparedness training) from someone we know and trust, we are much more likely to listen and take action. Emergency management teams could collaborate directly with individuals with disabilities living independently, and with caregivers who have first-hand knowledge of specific needs.

Finally, finding ways to connect and maintain connection between the disability community and emergency responses teams is important. Jim House, the Disability Integration Manager for the Coalition on Inclusive Emergency Planning (CIEP), emphasized that individuals with a disability who are able to do so, need to be proactive, get connected, and advocate for your own needs.