



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 the 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 and provide information on the experiences of individuals with disabilities in Washington State.

In April 2019, WASILC hosted a public forum in Bellingham, WA. The purpose of the forum was to obtain information and perspective from the disability community, service providers, and the public to identify gaps, barriers and systems that are working in their areas. The forum began with a panel discussion that consisted of three individuals who have experiences as consumers and/or service providers, followed by an open discussion with the Council and the general public. The Council will summarize the discussion and share the information with those who participated and locally elected officials. You can find this summary on the following pages.

Connecting with Community:

Inclusion is a powerful thing and it drives understanding. The panelists appreciated the services that were available in their communities, specifically, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and other state services. Having a community that encourages and supports independent living and soft skills is important. It is critical to have the ability to improve your life inside and outside of work in the way you want to. Those with disabilities prefer to not be viewed as disabled or impaired or with a “loss” but as a community of individuals trying to make it through life like everyone else.

Access to Community Resources & Services:

Within each community, there are barriers that prevent or inhibit people with disabilities that would like to live within the Independent Living philosophy. Specifically, in rural Whatcom County access to resources can be limited due to funding, location of services. These barriers also include limited transportation, access to housing, funding for education, and access to emergency services.

It is common knowledge within the disability community that Individuals with disabilities are less likely to get routine preventative medical care than people without disabilities. [Medical accessibility](#) is important for people with disabilities for many reasons, one being the detection and treatment of illnesses in their early states avoiding their progression and possibly life-threatening problems. Panelist Dino Christensen expressed frustration at the fact that within the deaf community many obstacles would be eliminated if medical providers provided interpreters.

Public Transportation:

Transportation provides a vital lifeline for people with disabilities to access employment, education, healthcare, and community life. These services allow individuals with disabilities to live independently within their communities and when transportation is restricted, it interferes with a person’s ability to be independent. Public transportation in Whatcom County does not have letter boards indicating the stop, so those who are deaf do not know when their stop is.

Correcting barriers would include eliminating obstacles in the built environment, such as inaccessible sidewalks or pathways; enabling access to public transportation, which can include curb-cuts and safe paths of travel; eliminating obstacles within public vehicles and making it easy to board and disembark utilizing lifts or other accessibility features; and making information and communication services suitable for use by all. The key is to integrate architectural, planning and transport measures throughout the entire mobility system.

Employment:

According to Administration on Community Living’s (ACL) [latest data](#) from the Employment Policy and Measurement Rehabilitation and Research Training Center, 33 percent of working-age people with disabilities participate in the labor force, compared to 77 percent of their peers without disabilities.

Panelists agree that seeking employment and communicating with employers and consumers was difficult. The law requires an employer to provide reasonable accommodation to an employee or job applicant with a disability, unless doing so would pose an undue hardship: significant difficulty or expense. Some examples of a Reasonable Accommodation are making the workplace accessible for a

wheelchair user or providing a screen-reader or interpreter for someone who is blind or hard of hearing.

More must be done to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities, ensure competitive pay, and offer support to businesses that hire and retain people with disabilities. It is essential for the community to work together to ensure people with disabilities have the support they need to succeed in the workforce.

Housing:

There are elements necessary to ensure that all people with disabilities have access to housing.

Accessibility – Homes built to accommodate people with limited mobility or other needs.

Affordability – A large number of people with disabilities live below the federal poverty level due to high rates of unemployment and the financial burden associated with having a disability.

Integration – People with disabilities live in the community, alongside people who do not have disabilities and have access to support services.

Discrimination remains a barrier to equal access to housing for too many individuals and families. Some landlords may discriminate against rental applicants on the basis of disability, and many individuals are denied a reasonable accommodation that would allow them equal access to housing.

Local Emergency Planning and Preparedness:

Up-to-date information can be crucial in emergencies, however all too often this information is not accessible to a person with disabilities nor is it provided on a timely basis.

Traditionally, when police or emergency services are called to respond to an emergency, disability is the last thing on their minds. Education and technology are getting better with response tools and now many communities have training services to help a first responder properly assist a person with a disability. Throughout the 39 counties in Washington State, Whatcom County has yet to get to the point where people with disabilities have equal access.

TTY technology continues to be a preferred method of communication used by emergency departments. Many emergency departments are moving to videophones and internet technology as it is easier to contact people and services. Problems arise in rural communities due to connectivity issues. Most call centers have a TTY available to talk to anybody who calls. Officers have a video related interpreting (VRI) app so if a person with a disability is feeling concerned, they can still reach the authorities through this tool.

If one technology fails or does not work for a specific population, a second technology would be available. A panelist suggested, for example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s weather alert notifications are over the radio. A panelist suggested that to disseminate more effective information, the County could acquire an automatic Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) system. This system could be localized to a area as an emergency warning system that could come through text or e-mail.

A member of the community who is deaf spoke of participating in an emergency preparedness exercise, afterward they asked him share his experience. The trainer of the exercise was talking to his interpreter instead of him, and the interpreter said, "do not talk to me. Talk to him. He is the one that had the experience." This community member thinks there is a need throughout the county, wherever we educate, to take a moment, to understand that there are numerous opportunities for people to truly listen to people with disabilities.

In any situation, it is important for individuals with a disability to be able to function and have their needs met. In an emergency, universal considerations should be created to support self-sufficiency and raise awareness.

All of the information presented here are concerns voiced by people that reside in Whatcom County; they have experienced these barriers and would like to see progress made in these areas to eliminate the gaps. They are passionate and dedicated individuals that would like to participate fully in their community and have access to opportunities that are afforded to those without disabilities.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Disability and Access to Health Care, August 27, 2018 <https://www.cdc.gov/features/disabilities-health-care-access/index.html>

Kessler National Employment Survey; nTIDE September 2017 Jobs Report: Economic Recovery Extends to 18 Month for American with Disabilities, October, 2017: <https://researchondisability.org/national-disability-employment-survey/kessler-natempsurv-news/2017/10/06/ntide-october-2017-jobs-report-economic-recovery-extends-to-18-months-for-americans-with-disabilities>