**Legislative and Policy Report – January 2018**

With the many legislative proposals and issues that potentially (negatively) impact the disability community (healthcare and taxes being the most obvious) to which we have needed to respond in 2017, we have become increasingly reminded of the need to, (1) effectively communicate with legislators, and (2) educate legislators regarding independent living (IL).

(1) “Of all the liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, the most underrated by far is the one that gives us the right to complain to our elected officials. Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly: all of these are far more widely known, legislated, and litigated than the right to—as the founders rather tactfully put it—“petition the Government for a redress of grievances,” says Kathryn Schultz in the New Yorker (March 2017), noting the increase in citizens contacting legislators since the inauguration of Donald J Trump.

The Georgia Legislative session begins on Monday, January 8, 2018, but communicating with Georgia Representatives and Senators does not need to occur only during the session:

* Information about representation at the Georgia Capitol is available at [www.openstates.org](http://www.openstates.org) (type in address) - not just names and contact information for Representatives and Senators, but voting history and bill sponsorship, etc.
* Legislators are typically very pleased to receive phone calls, emails, letters and visits from constituents, or have you participate in town hall meetings, etc. – legislators want to know what is on the mind of voters

The situation is a little different when communicating with Congressional Representatives and Senators, they are likely to have office staff in Washington DC and in local offices to assist with requests for meetings – Congressional representation is available (type in zip code) at [www.contactingcongress.org](http://www.contactingcongress.org):

* In person meetings with constituents are considered the most influential with legislators in DC, according to the 2014 report by The Congressional Management Foundation, there are crucial aspects for increasing success:
* Scheduling a meeting:
	+ Have a constituent make the appointment
	+ Keep the group small
	+ Request 2 to 4 weeks in advance if possible
	+ Include all the information the appointment scheduler needs – the topic, who is attending, etc.
	+ Being prepared to meet with a staffer – which can be just a beneficial and more likely to happen
* During the meeting:
	+ Be on time
	+ Stay on topic
	+ Keep politics out of it
	+ Provide a document with a brief summary
* Following the meeting:
	+ Answer questions
	+ Follow up with the staffer
	+ Attend events in the district
	+ Keep in touch

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| (2) In person meetings might be the most persuasive with legislators, but they are not the only way to help our elected officials learn more about the issues and barriers of living with a disability, building relationships with elected representatives begins with one call or email. One of the tenants of the independent living movement is *we are the experts in our lives*, therefore it is imperative to share that expertise with legislators. Independent Living can be described in many ways:* Living in freedom
* Making our own decisions
* Having choices and options
* Full community participation
* Experiencing dignity and respect
* “Nothing about us without us”
* Knowing, “You are not the boss of me!”

All these descriptions are relevant and valid, and reflect the individuality of the members of the independent living community, but they are not the whole picture. Misunderstandings abound with regards to the words “independent living.” Adolf Ratzka makes it clear in this quote from the Independent Living Institute in 2003, “*Independent Living does not mean that we want to do everything by ourselves and do not need anybody or that we want to live in isolation*. Independent Living means that we demand the same choices and control in our every-day lives that our non-disabled brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends take for granted. We want to grow up in our families, go to the neighborhood school, use the same bus as our neighbors, work in jobs that are in line with our education and interests, and start families of our own. Since we are the best experts on our needs, we need to show the solutions we want, need to be in charge of our lives, think and speak for ourselves - just as everybody else. To this end we must support and learn from each other, organize ourselves and work for political changes that lead to the legal protection of our human and civil rights.”Sharing experiences, visiting legislators, inviting legislators to the local Center for Independent Living are all essential - examples of information to share with legislators include:* how CILs and other services such as Medicaid, Vocational Rehabilitation, etc., support people with disabilities to live fully, including being tax paying and contributing members of the community

      cost savings when people with disabilities live in the community, rather than in nursing facilities and other institutions      the arguments to support Social Security reform to support career building for people with disabilities      reasons for eliminating Medicaid’s institutional bias      ways to develop, support and deliver, consumer-controlled, recovery models in mental health services      legislative efforts to improve opportunities for safe, accessible, affordable and integrated housing      recognition that transportation is the lifeblood of any community and needs to be fully accessible      and many other issues that impact the disability community…funding for Independent Living, civil rights, funding for healthcare and long-term services and supports, education, veterans issues, voting rights, accessible technology, crime, women’s issues, etc., etc. |  |
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| People with all types of disabilities number one in five, or about 20%, of the population, the impact is greater if you add family, friends, colleagues, etc., but the issues we address every day are apparently not well understood by our legislators and it is up to the disability community, and in particular the independent living community, to change this state of affairs! People with disabilities are, first and foremost, citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else, because this is not yet accepted as a universal truth, people with disabilities are working together to proclaim our civil rights and address the infrastructural, institutional and attitudinal barriers that prevent a level playing field. |  |  |

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