Understanding the Independent Living Network at the State Level

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Recent efforts, such as the Rehabilitation Services Administration's Disability Innovation Fund "Pathways to Partnerships" model demonstration projects (84.421E), have brought renewed attention to the vital role of Centers for Independent Living (CILs). Long referred to as one of the country's best-kept secrets, such work illuminates ways in which CILs can and should function as integral parts of state and local disability service systems. Across states and territories in the U.S., the independent living (IL) network continues to play an important role in advancing the rights, autonomy, and opportunities of people with disabilities. This brief provides an overview of the IL network and offers recommendations for professionals seeking to expand and strengthen collaboration at the state and local levels.

What Is the Independent Living Network?

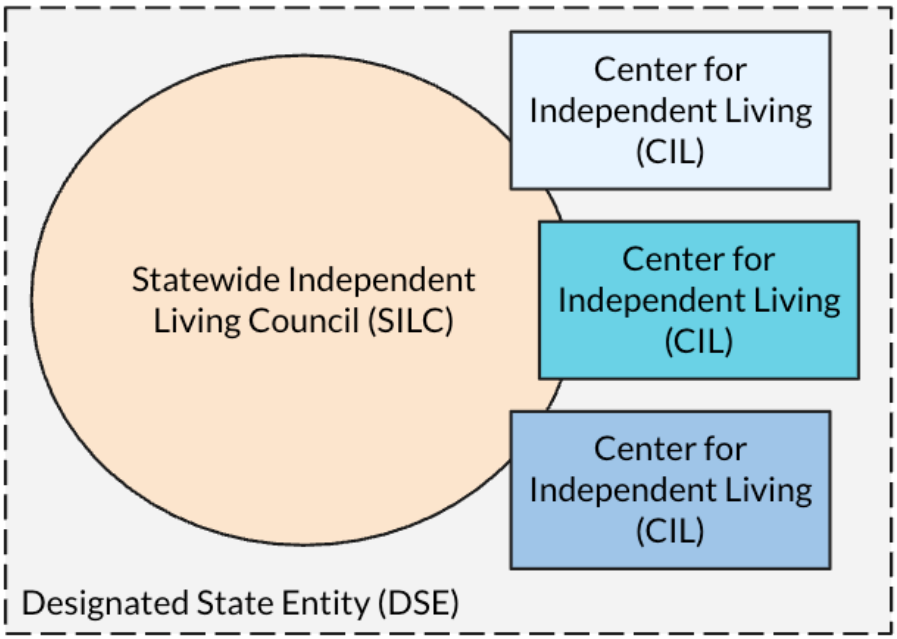
The Independent Living Movement (ILM) of the 1970s was driven by disabled advocates who openly rejected medicalized, deficit-based views of disability. The ILM affirmed self-determination, community integration, consumer control, and mutual aid (DeJong, 1979). From the ILM came CILs and what we now know as the IL network. In the simplest sense, the IL network is the structure that ensures CILs have what they need to fulfill their individual and system-level functions at the state and local levels. As described below and depicted in the image on the next page, there are three core parts of the IL network in every state and U.S. territory in which one operates: a Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), a Designated State Entity (DSE), and one or more CIL.

1. The **SILC** is a body that:
   - Is appointed by a state's governor or other appointing authority with a majority membership of people with disabilities (for more on SILC makeup and the appointment process, see 29 U.S. Code § 796d),
   - Advocates for independent living at the state level,
   - Collaborates with agencies across the state,
   - Identifies service gaps and access barriers across the state,
   - Leads the development, implementation, and evaluation of the **State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL)** in partnership with CILs, and
   - Ensures that people with disabilities have a voice in shaping statewide policies and services.

2. The **DSE** is an oversight body that is responsible for:
   - Receiving and administering federal IL funds,
   - Monitoring compliance with program regulations,
   - Providing oversight of SPIL implementation, and
   - Ensuring SILCs and CILs operate efficiently and maintain accountability.

3. **CILs** are consumer-controlled, nonprofit organizations that:
   - Provide community-based independent living support,
   - Respond to the established needs of the disability community in their service area,
   - Offer peer support, information and referral, advocacy, and transition services,
   - Are governed and staffed primarily by people with disabilities, and
   - Engage in systems advocacy to advance disability rights and inclusion.

Although structurally distinct, the three parts of the IL network function interdependently to advance a shared vision for independent living and community inclusion across each state or territory.



Why the IL Network Matters for Disability Service Professionals

While the core components of the IL network—SILCs, DSEs, and CILs—exist in every state and territory, their structure and scale vary widely. For example, Vermont has one CIL that serves a relatively compact population, while California hosts dozens of CILs across a diverse and large geographic area. There are some states with geographic areas that don't fit within the catchment areas of any CILs while other states are served in their entirety by one or more CILs. Similarly, the administrative roles of DSEs and the size or composition of SILCs may differ depending on state policies, resources, and historical context. Despite these variations, understanding the foundational structure of the IL network is essential, as it provides a framework for
coordinating services, driving policy change, and ensuring that people with disabilities have equitable access to both individual supports and opportunities.

Recognizing these variations is also critical when considering strategies to strengthen collaboration across the IL network. SILCs, DSEs, and CILs are interdependent, and their effectiveness is amplified when they coordinate planning, share resources, and communicate clearly. Stronger partnerships with the IL network can improve service delivery, promote consistency in advocacy efforts, and ultimately enhance outcomes for people with disabilities across states and territories. For example, in the context of transition-age youth with disabilities, CILs are well-positioned to support skill-building, advocacy, and connection to adult systems—a critical bridge between school-based services and adulthood (Allison et al., 2024; Walters & Allison, 2024; Walters & Plotner, 2023)

Operationalizing Collaboration with the IL Network

The following recommendations highlight practical steps for enhancing collaboration, communication, and resource sharing within the IL network. Disability service professionals often work at the intersection of education, vocational rehabilitation, workforce development, and community living. Some practical strategies include the following:

1. **Map the Landscape**
   - Use resources like the ILRU directory to identify CILs in your state and their service areas.
   - Contact the SILC in your state to obtain and review your state's **SPIL** to understand IL priorities and ongoing initiatives.
   - Use available data to make informed decisions and map resources (see Walters & Allison, 2024, for a step-by-step guide on community resource mapping with CILs).
   - Work together to define services, terminology, and goals,
   - Identify shared priorities and bridging gaps between agencies.

2. **Engage Early and Often**
   - Invite CIL and SILC representatives to state or regional planning meetings.
   - Include them as standing partners on state and local interagency teams focused on transition, employment, housing, or other cross-cutting issues.

3. **Co-Design Initiatives**
   - Develop collaborative agreements that leverage CIL strengths (e.g., peer mentoring, skills training) to complement agency services.
   - Explore opportunities to braid funding streams or coordinate outreach to shared populations.

4. **Invest in Capacity**
   - Recognize that CILs vary in their capacity to engage and collaborate.
   - Consider ways to support their participation—through shared training, planning support, or funding partnerships
   - Strengthen CILs' ability to deliver effective transition and independent living services by aligning and coordinating resources, initiatives, and partnerships that support youth with disabilities as they transition to adult roles, including employment and independent living.

5. **Evaluate and Share Impact**
   - Work with CILs to co-develop evaluation measures that reflect both quantitative outcomes (e.g., service reach, employment outcomes) and qualitative impact (e.g., self-determination, satisfaction).
   - Share findings across systems to demonstrate the value of collaboration.

Looking Ahead

The IL network represents a powerful but often underutilized infrastructure for advancing disability rights, access, and community inclusion. For disability service professionals, partnering with SILCs, DSEs, and CILs can unlock opportunities for deeper alignment, expanded capacity, and more equitable systems. As state and local agencies seek to strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration—particularly in areas like youth transition and employment—the IL network should not be an afterthought. It should be included at the table from the start.

Together, these entities advance the goals of the independent living movement—ensuring that people with disabilities can live, work, and participate fully in their communities. For disability service professionals, particularly those working in vocational rehabilitation, education, workforce development, and community-based services, understanding how this network is structured and how to engage with it can be an important lever for collaboration and systems change.

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