

John Lancaster, Executive Director, National Council on Independent Living

National Council on Independent Living

Senate Veterans' Committee Hearing on VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Programs

February 5, 2008

Testimony of John Lancaster
Executive Director

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr and distinguished members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, thank you for this opportunity to comment on VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. My name is John Lancaster and I serve as the Executive Director of the National Council on Independent Living.

The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) is the oldest national cross-disability, grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. As a membership organization, we advance independent living and the rights of people with disabilities through consumer-driven advocacy.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) serve our nation in all but five Congressional Districts. These centers proudly serve veterans and more than 300,000 people with disabilities each year. They are serving an increasing number of newly injured and aging veterans. CILs are non-residential, cross-disability advocacy organizations offering core services of independent living skills training, peer support, individual and systems advocacy, and information and referral.

The core belief of Independent Living, which NCIL and all Centers for Independent Living subscribe to, is that all people have the right to decide how to live, work, and participate in their communities, and that consumer-directed and community-based services are essential to integration and full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society.

The reports of the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, as well as the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Taskforce, support this fundamental Independent Living principle and agree on the need to create more IL programs, which increase access to community-based services. Unfortunately, our government provides money for institutional services, but refuses to fund the same services in a community-based setting, even when the cost is significantly less.

NCIL has long worked to garner the supports and services that people with disabilities need to achieve community integration and economic self-sufficiency. In 2006, the NCIL Board of Directors adopted the proposal, *Being American: the Way out of Poverty* as our employment policy and we continue to work with the World Institute on Disability in seeking consumer and stakeholder input on this collaborative and progressive solution.

NCIL's Veterans' Taskforce recently conducted a survey on the relationship between Centers for Independent Living and the veterans they serve. Results showed Centers are indeed working with

Veterans to obtain housing, assisting in navigation of the VA system, and providing information and referral. Unfortunately, when Centers for Independent Living receive a referral from the VA, the consumer is typically in crisis mode, months or years after returning home. One clear conclusion that came as a direct result of the survey is the need for a formal connection between Centers for Independent Living and the Veterans' Administration.

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Taskforce Report questions the limited capacity for the Veterans' Administration to manage this heavy and unique task alone. Essential services for veterans provided by Centers include benefits counseling, which assists veterans in applying for and maintaining veteran benefits and SSDI, transition and reintegration into the workforce, and information on accessible housing and transportation.

The reports of the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission, the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, and the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service Taskforce all agree that improvement of these specific services for veterans is essential to integration and full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. Regrettably, veterans tell us they feel VA programs are woefully inadequate, and Centers report the inefficiency of some VA programs on local, state, and federal levels and an unwillingness to collaborate with Centers.

Fortunately, Centers for Independent Living welcome a formal relationship with the VA to assist veterans' and their families. However, CIL funding has been cut three consecutive years. With additional funding, Centers can use their expertise and existing services to help improve VA programs as well as expand capacity for providing veterans essential and timely services. Centers also request more funds be spent on consumer-directed, community-based services than for providing services in an institutional setting.

NCIL also encourages all Veteran Affairs programs to outreach to each and every local Center for Independent Living, and our Veterans' Task force welcomes the VA to discuss means of collaboration, concerns and ideas for improving communication and efficiency.

This partnership will benefit our veterans and our nation. Together we will create an atmosphere that honors and serves our nation's veterans.

Thank you for your time and attention to this critical issue.