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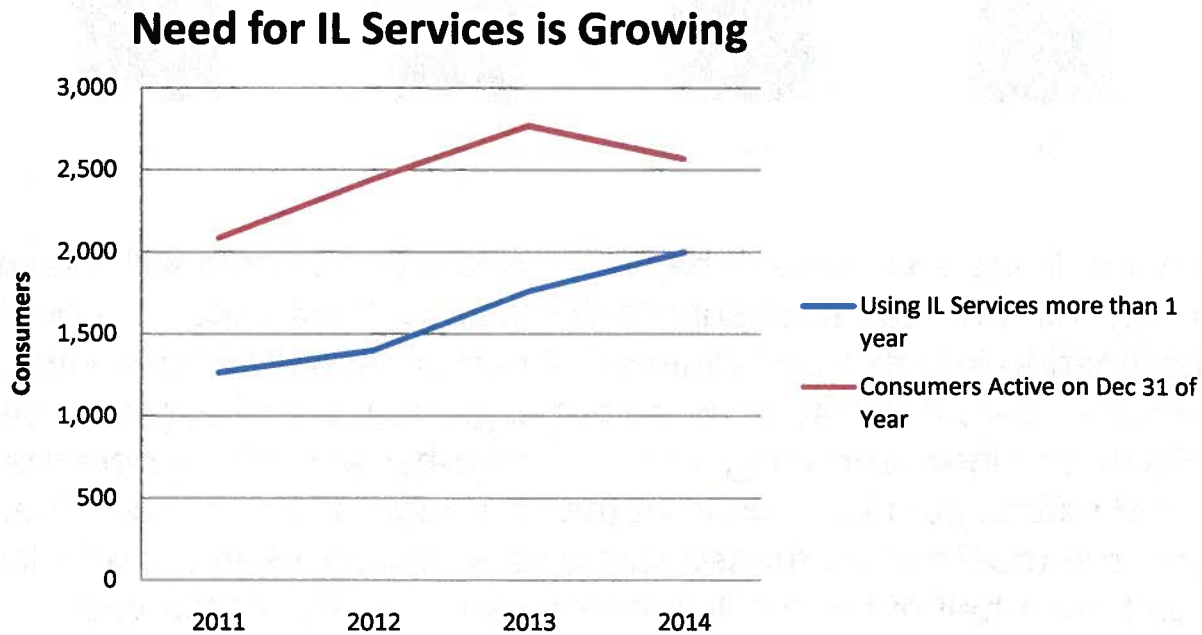
Testimony for the New York State Joint Committee on the Budget
Human Services Subcommittee
February 4, 2015

Good morning. My name is Todd Vaarwerk, and I am the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for *Western New York Independent Living, Incorporated* [WNYIL] located in Buffalo, New York. As an independent living center, we work to promote equality and full integration of people with disabilities within the communities of Western New York.

Funded within the Aid to Localities section of the Education budget, New York State invested \$12.36 million for the network of over 35 locations throughout the state, for which we returned (in deinstitutionalization and other savings) over **\$214.3 million** – a statewide return of 17 dollars for every dollar invested.

Yet despite our success, IL services stands at a crossroads, with the growing service base on one side and a State allocation that has remained level funded for over nine years.

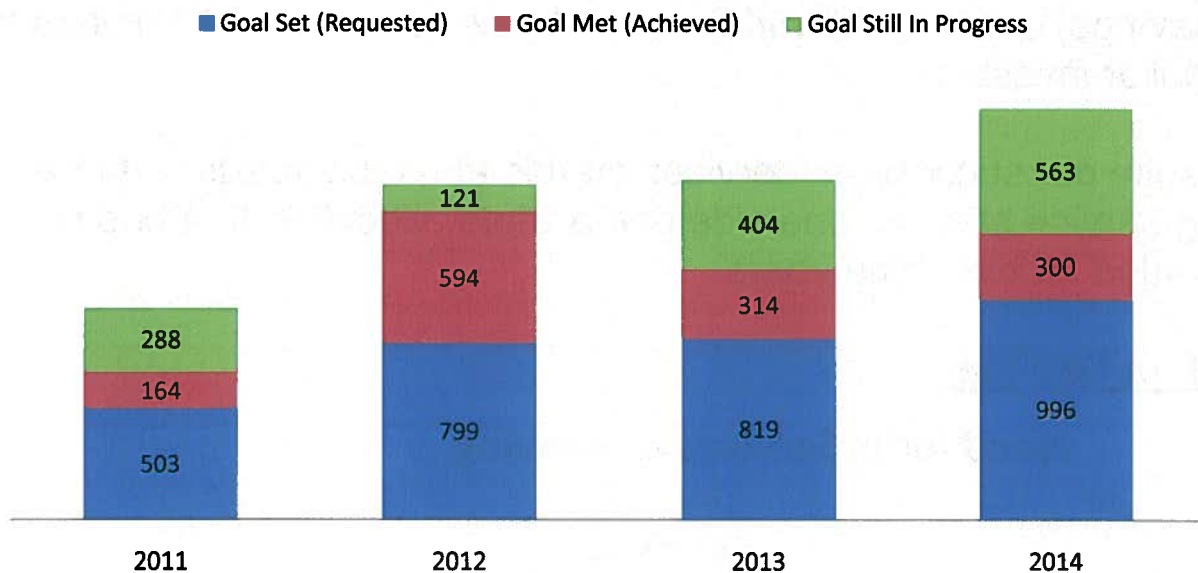
Growth in Services



As services for people with disabilities continue to become more restrictive, independent living remains an agency of last resort, serving any person with

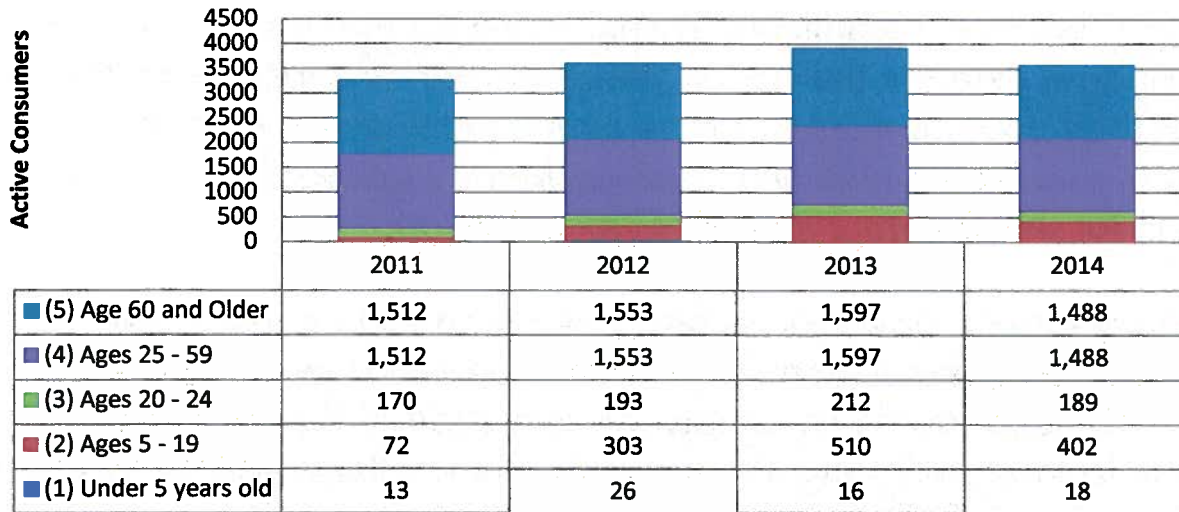
a disability who requests services. The above graph shows the trend of growth in services. Of particular concern is the growth in the number of consumers who need services for more than one year to achieve their goals. In order to receive continued support from separate silos of funding, a well trained, diverse and flexible staff is necessary. The staff must be aware of the various processes in order to access the appropriate resources needed by their consumers. Remember, these citizens are persons with disabilities who are either returning to the community from a nursing home, psychiatric center, or other high-cost placement, or they are individuals trying to prevent institutionalism.

Activity in "Self Care"



Independent living services are based on goals that people with disabilities individually set with staff to ensure their success. "Self Care" is a goal based plan designed to improve and maintain a consumer's autonomy with respect to activities of daily living such as personal grooming and hygiene, meal preparation, nutrition, shopping, eating, and other aspects of personal health and safety. Just by looking at the chart above, we can see that staff members are receiving increased requests to help consumers with these goals, with over half of them still in progress at the end of the year.

Breakdown of Consumers By Age



While independent living focuses on consumers of working age, the above table and graph shows both our commitment to seniors and a 558 percent increase in services for children and youth in transition. With resurgence in assuring that children with disabilities get the best education to promote their independence and opportunity in adulthood, IL services are more than just short-term assistance – they represent a needed long term commitment to families.

Increase in Costs of Operation

At the same time that services are rising, so are costs for operation for Independent Living Centers like WNYIL.

Over the same 2011-2014 period, required operational costs (such as disability, unemployment, and health insurance) have increased as much as thirty-five percent. The increases for 2014 alone cost more than 50 percent of the state allocation for the center (approximately \$311,000).

Like other disability service systems, these costs force centers to keep wages undervalued, which increases turnover and training costs. These factors can only get worse if costs aren't brought to match proposed state increases to the minimum wage.

Recommendations

New York State has made significant steps to ensure that the Governors Opportunity Budget extends the opportunities for persons with disabilities to integrate with their communities, such as continued work on the State Olmstead Plan, and major initiatives such as *Money follows the Person* and the application for the *Community First Choice Option*.

Much of this investment, however, is temporary and limited to a small subset of the disability population. New York must act now in order to assure that the Independent Living network can support the initiatives currently being funded by Balancing Incentive Plan dollars, and be available to anyone, regardless of disability, that can remain integrated and independent within the community.

We are requesting legislative assistance for an increase in the Independent Living Allocation to 18 Million Dollars, (a 5.64 million dollar increase) and setting this as baseline funding in the following fiscal year.

ⁱ All graphs are data provided by WNYIL to the United States Department of Education – Rehabilitation Services Administration (2011-2013) and the United States Department of Health and Human Services – Administration on Community Living (2014) in our required annual report [704 Report]