



What are Centers for Independent Living?

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are federally or state funded, non-profit organizations that are a free resource for mental health consumers that provide information and referral, skills training, peer support, and advocacy to facilitate independent living and community participation. CILs are consumer-run organizations, meaning that majority of their governing Boards and staff consist of people with disabilities. The goal of CILs is to help people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate fully in their communities. To learn more about the Independent Living Movement which CILs are a part of, visit the website of the National Council on Independent Living at www.ncil.org.

Who uses services at CILS?

Anyone who is willing to self-identify as a person with a disability is eligible to receive services at a CIL. In addition to physical and sensory disabilities, CILs also serve people living with developmental, cognitive, emotional, or mental disabilities. Some people receiving services at CILs may have more than one disability; for example, they might have both a physical disability and a mental health disability.

What are the core services that CILs offer?

All CILs offer the following four core services; many also offer additional services, including nursing home transition services, as requested by their communities.

Information and referral: CILs provide information on disability issues and services directly as well as helping consumers to identify and access community resources. For example, a CIL might provide a consumer with information on how to find volunteer opportunities in their community.

Independent living skills training: CILs offer group and individual classes and workshops to consumers with a focus on learning and practicing a variety of skills needed to live independently in the community. Examples of topics include financial responsibility, managing health and wellness, social skills training, and consumer rights.

Peer support: Group or individualized peer support services present consumers with the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge with peers. Talking with other people who experience similar challenges can help consumers to feel validated and empowered to engage in the community just like anyone else.

Advocacy: In keeping with the goals of the Independent Living Movement, CILs provide advocacy services on both the individual and systemic level which aim to give consumers the same living choices as non-disabled people. For instance, a CIL might help a consumer to receive legal aid to resolve a dispute with their landlord.

How might people with psychiatric disabilities benefit from using CILS?

The Temple University Collaborative recently conducted a study to better understand what CILs can offer people with a mental disability. Consumers were recruited from community mental health centers and referred to Liberty Resources, a CIL in Philadelphia, for supports. A few comments that consumers made about how they benefitted from CIL services are provided on the right. Consumers also reported receiving supports in these areas:

- Assistance in accessing programs to provide discounted transportation
- Resources and advocacy related to affordable housing
- Access to classes and support to increase education and life skills
- Encouragement and resources related to employment
- Events and information helping consumers to find meaningful activities for leisure time
- Peer support and opportunities to develop social skills

What is the process for referring clients to CILS?

Unlike many mental health centers, CILs do not require a referral to receive services. In keeping with their philosophy of autonomy and self-advocacy, CILs promote the ability of individuals to seek services on their own behalf. When referring consumers to CIL services, providers should note that accessing CIL services requires consumers to self-identify as a person with a disability, as some consumers may be uncomfortable identifying themselves as disabled.

How do you find CILs in your area?

You can search for a CIL in your area at the website of the Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU) program using their online directory at www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory.

Consumer experiences

Information and referral:

“They got me the info I needed to become a registered voter.”

Skills training:

“The literacy program...has drastically increased my comprehension.”

Peer support:

“I currently meet people similar to myself at [the CIL] and that has helped me with being more social.”

Advocacy:

“[They] made me realize I’m a human being just like everyone else.”