



Maryland Independent Living Legislative Advocacy Toolkit

I. Introduction to Toolkit

- A. Purpose and Goals
- B. How to get the most out of this toolkit

II. Talking Points

- A. General information on Maryland SILC and CILs

III. Advocacy Tools

- A. Sample letter/ email to legislators
- B. Sample Phone or meeting script

IV. Advocacy Tips

- A. How to find your legislators
- B. Maryland Legislative Process
- C. MyMGA info on signing up
- D. Storytelling Development
- E. How to develop a relationship with legislators including having effective meetings
- F. Information on Lobbying

I. Introduction to Toolkit

Purpose and Goals

The IL Legislative Committee created this toolkit for the purpose of expanding Maryland Statewide Independent Living Council (Maryland SILC) and Center for Independent Living (CIL) state legislative advocacy.

It is our goal that the toolkit becomes a guidebook that is simple and straightforward to support the Network to advocate for legislative changes that align with our public policy platform.

How to get the most out of this toolkit:

Public policy and laws affect how people with disabilities live. Legislative changes have the power to make healthy community living a possible option for people with disabilities. Direct advocacy for change is also done in partnership with our local legislators by our Independent Living (IL) Network through participation in meetings, committees, and work groups on policy issues. Whether you are a new disability or seasoned advocate or ally, please consider our mission and your role in creating a more welcoming world for people with disabilities. This toolkit aims to inform our audience on policies most important to the Maryland IL Network and provide tools for people with disabilities and their support network to engage in legislative advocacy. If you want to help Marylanders with disabilities improve our independence, then consider taking the following steps to engage in direct action to influence positive change for the disability community.

Systems Thinking - Steps Toward Legislative Change

1. Define the problem.

- Describe the big request guided by the Maryland Statewide Independent Living Council mission and goals (exact ask is TBD).

2. Understand elements of change.

- Read the Maryland IL Network Policy Platform and Toolkit.

3. Define and understand the stakeholder.

- Learn about Centers for Independent Living, Independent Living Movement, and Systems Advocacy.

4. Define and act on your solution.

- Attend the Maryland IL Network Policy Toolkit Virtual Workshop.
- Pick a policy priority to advocate for and use the “Seven Steps to Telling Your Story” Advocacy Template to describe your personalized policy platform.
- Contact your representative to advocate for policy change.

5. Monitor and evaluate progress.

- Create an account with Maryland General Assembly and track policy change progress online at <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite>

Systems thinking legislative change is a cyclical process. We will not solve all problems or address all barriers with any one law. However, without advocates change will not happen. We can engage in legislative advocacy and influence laws that could have the potential to strengthen community-based disability services, create economic opportunities, and prohibit practices that endanger the health and well-being of people with disabilities. By engaging in light research, practicing sharing our story, and connecting with peer mentors we can grow our advocacy skills and confidence to influence systems change.

II. Talking Points

General information on Maryland SILC and CILs Talking points:

- The Maryland SILC promotes consumer control, peer support, self-help, self-determination, equal access and individual and systems advocacy to ensure the integration and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the mainstream of society.
- The Maryland SILC monitors, reviews, and evaluates the implementation of the State Plan for Independent Living.
- Centers for Independent Living are community-based, cross-disability, non-profit organizations that are designed and operated by people with disabilities.
- CILs work to support community living and independence for people with disabilities across the nation.

Resources:

<https://www.marylandsilc.org/services/>

<https://ncil.org/about/aboutil/>

Maryland Independent Living 2023 Public Policy Platform document

III. Advocacy Tools

Sample Letter/Email:

Dear Delegate or Senator _____ :

My name is _____ and I work with your constituents with disabilities in _____ Counties.

I want to thank you and your staff for taking the time to meet with me in your office on (date)

I am writing to ask for your support on (Name and # of Bill).

This bill directly affects your constituents with disabilities.

(List talking points that show how the bill affects their constituents)

I hope your constituents can count on your support for (Name and # of bill).

Please feel free to contact me for additional information.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Your name

Title

Pertinent address and contact info

*Tips on email: Send separate emails for additional pieces of legislation where you hope to get their support. After you send the email, follow up with a phone call to find out if the legislator supports your legislation.

Sample Phone or Meeting Script:

When speaking to legislators, it is important to speak meaningfully and concisely. Here is a sample formula:

1. Introduction:

- Name

- Organization and job title
- Brief description of what you do and who you serve
- Express gratitude for them taking the time to meet with you

2. Problem:

- Outline the gaps in services if it is a funding issue.
- Discuss the problem and why it matters if the issue is something else.
- In either case, employ tactics such as giving statistics and/or storytelling

3. Solution:

- Discuss the legislation you are asking them to support and describe how it will address the problem. Be direct about your ask for their support. (Note: This is lobbying)

4. Closing:

- Invite questions or comments and say that you will get back to them if anything is asked of which you are unsure
- Ask for contact information for follow-up and future contact
- Thank them for their time

IV. Advocacy Tips

How to find your legislators:

Go to: www.mdelect.net

Maryland Legislative Process:

General overview:

A bill often starts out with one or two legislators who are the sponsors or authors of the bill.

All bills are read on the full floor of the Senate or the House of Delegates, this is called the first reading.

Then the bills are assigned to a committee. Each Bill is assigned to a committee, every committee has a Chair and members. Most bills are given a hearing in the committee, you can find out the date of the bill hearing at

<https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Search/Legislation>

You can take action on bills by

- Submitting written testimony before the hearing
- Submitting verbal testimony at the hearing
- Attending the hearing

If you plan to attend the hearing, keep in mind that your bill is one of many and it will be read at some time over a three or more-hour period of time.

Before giving verbal testimony, contact the committee and inquire about how much time you will have to give your testimony. It is usually under 5 minutes.

After the first hearing, contact members of the committee and request that they become a bill sponsor and request that they vote for the bill. (Note: This is lobbying) It is important to contact the committee members because the bill must get support from the committee before it goes to step 2.

When a bill gets passed out of committee, it then goes to the floor of the house or senate for a vote.

When a bill passes the entire House or Senate, it must cross over to the other body.

When the bill crosses to the other body, it is again assigned to a committee and the process starts over again.

Resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtQHM5Uu1XQ>

<https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/07leg/html/proc.html>

<https://mdacc.org/wp-content/uploads/Legislative-Process.pdf>

<https://www.kennedykrieger.org/sites/default/files/library/documents/community/maryland-center-for-developmental-disabilities-mcdd/dissemination-of-information/additional-resources/mcdd-legislative-guide.pdf>

MyMGA info on signing up:

MyMGA is an online platform where citizens can track legislation they are interested in following, sign up to provide verbal testimony, and submit written testimony.

How to Create a MyMGA account <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9EHH388ib8>

- Visit the Maryland General Assembly website (<https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite>) and click the “MyMGA” button in the top right corner.
- Click “Register” on the left side to create an account.
- Complete the form to create your MyMGA account and click the “Register” button at the bottom of the page.
- Verify your email address to use your MyMGA account.
- Note: Ensure you have access to the email address you used to create your MyMGA account as this is where Zoom links and bill update notifications will be sent.

How to Sign up to provide testimony <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZh9sZJ3piQ>

- Sign in to your MyMGA account.
- Click “Witness Signup” on the left side.
- Find the committee and bill you want to provide testimony for. You can also click the “Committees” drop down menu above the list of bills to directly navigate to a committee.

- Note: You will see bills listed on the Witness Signup page only if you are accessing it between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. or whenever a committee designates time to submit testimony. You will not see any bills listed on the Witness Signup page if you are accessing it outside of the designated time to submit testimony.
- Click the “Position” drop down menu and select a choice to indicate your position on the bill. Click the “Testimony” drop down menu and select a choice to indicate what kind of testimony you’re providing.
- Note: You can also type in the “Organization” box which organization you’re submitting testimony on behalf of, but this is optional.
- If you are submitting written testimony, the file must be saved as a PDF. Click “Upload Files” to select a file, click “Choose Files” to select files from your computer and click “OK” to save your selection.
- Click the “Save” button at the top of the page after you are finished signing up for testimony and submitting documents.
- Click “Signed Up Items” at the top of the page to confirm that you have successfully signed up to submit testimony.

Storytelling Development:

Why should I tell my story?

Personal stories make policies and funding real. Personal stories make people want to act.

Elected officials listen to the problems that everyday people have and make rules or laws to solve problems. These rules and laws are called policies. Elected officials need to think about what policies people want and help make those policies. If they don’t, they won’t get elected again.

But making policies takes a lot of work. Elected officials must think about a lot of different problems. They must choose which problems to work on, so they need to learn how a problem affects people in real life.

When someone shares their story, it can make a big difference. Hearing a real person talk about a problem is important because it gives elected officials a name and face to remember.

They will think of that person when they think of the problem, which can make the elected official want to fix the problem.

Use the seven steps to telling your story tool below to tell write your story.

The goal of the story tool is to help get all the pieces of information that are important to telling a personal story. The seven sections could be rearranged in many ways that still tell a succinct story. Please know that this is a guide and people may choose to rearrange the sections in another order.

Seven Steps to Telling Your Story

(Adapted from NAMI)

The following seven steps will help you craft a clear and powerful advocacy story.

** Independent Living Consumers may want to set a goal on their Independent Living Plan to write or practice their story or testimony.

My Introduction
Include your name (first name only is fine), city or organization (if applicable). Describe who you are, what you do and a little bit about yourself, including your disability.
My name is Julie and I live in Rockville. I am a consumer of Independence Now, I graduated from the Youth Leadership Forum in 2015 where I learned about advocacy and stayed on a college campus for the first time. I have learning disabilities and when I was in school I had extra help in my classes.
What happened?
Aim for 3-6 sentences. Briefly describe the most important and compelling thing(s) about your situation. Why did you call a CIL?
I was living with my Dad who adopted me when I was 14 and my step mom but they felt it was time for me to live on my own, we didn't get along very well any more. I stayed in touch with Independence Now after the Youth Leadership Forum, and I always went to their events and some of the youth programs. I asked the staff about housing, and they helped me get on a waiting list. I tried staying with friends and sort of bounced around from place to place and eventually ended up in a homeless shelter. Soon after Independence Now let me know there was an apartment available through a county program, so they helped me fill out the paperwork and get all the stuff together that was needed. I waited and waited and finally I was approved, and the apartment was ready. I signed my lease, got my keys and moved in.
What helped?
Aim for 1-5 sentences. Briefly describe what helped in your situation. Aim for a hopeful tone that shows the value of services and supports you received.
Independence Now was really helpful with the paperwork to get into the apartment, before that they had also helped with me getting a place in the homeless shelter. The staff also gave me support in accessing Social Security and in signing up for low cost internet and energy assistance. They even helped me get furniture for my new place and work with my Dad to get some of my old furniture moved in. The staff still help me in budgeting my money to pay the bills and learning other independent living skills like cooking.

How you are different today?

Aim for 1-3 sentences. Share what is going right in your life or how you are more independent.

I am a new person, I have a safe place of my own to live. I take care of my place on my own and I call Independence Now if I need help in understanding something at the apartment. I am thinking about what is next for me.

What is the need or problem?

Aim for 1-2 sentences. Transition to the challenge(s) faced by people living with disabilities that you want to address.

Finding affordable housing for people with disabilities is hard. I needed help in getting on the waiting lists and in putting together all the documents needed to apply for the apartment. It was like I had to be homeless before I made it to the top of the waiting list. All the other things that are new when it's your first time living on your own are not easy, I needed support to make sure I was doing the right thing.

What will help others?

Aim for 1-2 sentences. Talk about what will help. Let your listener know what will address the need or problem you described.

Having more low rent housing options would help people with disabilities to not become homeless and to be independent. Also having help from a place like Independence Now to guide people along and make sure they understand everything they need to do.

Make your ask.

Aim for 1-2 sentences. Thank your listener for listening to you. Then, ask your listener for a commitment. Be specific.

Please consider setting aside more apartments for people with disabilities who have a low income and giving people supports to get into the apartments and be successful.

How to develop a relationship with legislators including having effective meetings:

Call your legislator's office to set up an appointment. You will probably be speaking with a staff person; staff people are very significant. The staff person will give you a time and date for your appointment. It is very important to establish a relationship with staff for many reasons:

- Staff people are the eyes and ears of the legislator.
- It is most likely that you will be meeting with staff and not the legislator, which is a good thing. Hopefully you will get to speak with the staff person who focuses on disability issues. Sharing info with the staff person is just as good if not better than speaking with the legislator because the staff people are much more available to have conversations with us.

The Day of your Appointment

- ****It's a good idea to rehearse what you are going to say in a meeting or testifying.**
- Have your materials and remarks ready in advance.
- Introduce yourself. Let the staff know if you are a constituent of the legislator or if you work with their constituents.
- Let them know how your services can benefit their constituents and let them know you would be happy to be a resource for the legislator or their constituents. Make sure to leave them with a brochure and business card so they can make contact.
- If making remarks on specific legislation, prepare and share specific talking points to support your view.
- Legislators want to know personal stories of constituents so get to know the staff people. They are your 'foot in the door' to successful outcomes with the legislators.
- Inquire about the legislator's view of the legislation, are they in agreement? If not, why not? It's very possible that the legislator cannot commit to supporting your legislation so you must follow up. (Note: This is lobbying)
- Be familiar with the legislator's work and express appreciation for that work.
- Take a picture with your legislator or the staff person.

Write a follow up letter. Send your legislator a thank you note with the picture you took in their office. The note should thank them and their staff for taking the time to meet with you. Remind them how you can help their constituents. Also remind them of the legislation you discussed in their office and include talking points (See sample letter). The above note and picture will help you develop a relationship with the legislator and staff and there is a good chance they will remember you and this can help gain their support.

Information on Lobbying:

According to the National Council on Non-Profits, lobbying is “Communicating with decision makers (elected officials and staff; voters on ballot measures), about existing or potential legislation, and urging a vote for or against. All three components of this definition are required: decision makers, actual legislation, AND asking for a vote.” In other words, if members of the Maryland SILC or CIL staff are talking with elected officials about current legislative bills or something that may become a bill and they are asking them to support or oppose the bill that is lobbying. If you are only sharing best practices or personal stories, that is advocacy, it’s when you shift to speaking about specific legislation and asking them to vote a certain way that it shifts to lobbying.

CILs doing advocacy work, for example on the funding effort, will need to understand that the time spent working on it cannot be recorded or paid by federal IL dollars because it is lobbying. We do not necessarily need to be registered lobbyists to do this work, as it is unlikely to be considered substantial within most CIL Directors or other lead staff. “Churches and other organizations exempt under Section 501(c)(3) are allowed to lobby, but their lobbying is limited. The general rule is that lobbying may not be more than an insubstantial part of their overall activities.” It’s all very vague on what that means – you can do some lobbying but not too much lobbying and keep your 501c3. One of the links below helps to see what is considered substantial depending on the budget size of the organization.

Resources:

<https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living>

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/advocacy-vs-lobbying>

<https://research2policy.org/advocacyvlobbying/>

<https://njnonprofits.org/npscanlobby/>