

Meeting Comments from Ms. Teresa Torres

This statement was jointly prepared with our board of directors, staff, and attorneys.

Everybody Counts has a proud and diverse history of many accomplishments. Our relationships with the disability community - at the local and national level - have been extremely positive and productive. Unfortunately, that has not been the case in our own state.

Our definition of advocacy, and our role as community activists, has always been very different from the other Centers in this state. We've always maintained a very strong systemic advocacy agenda, and although we've paid a very high price for doing so, neither I nor any of our board members, staff or volunteers would have it any other way.

Some of you are very much aware of why no one from Everybody Counts has been at this table for such a long time. Others have simply chosen to take other people's word about the reasons for that absence, not questioning what they were told.

And that's unfortunate. Because we can assure you that, as evidenced by an overwhelming number of documents and video tapes, you have been misinformed.

The evidence is irrefutable.

We have garnered the interest and support of our Congressman, and several legislators, and we have a team of attorneys who are finalizing a legal notice of intent.

BRS staff recently visited both of our centers. They indicated intent to re-visit the issue of state support. They also indicated a willingness to sit down to discuss our concerns.

And while this is probably not the best forum, a detailed discussion needs to happen- and soon- because ultimately, as members of this council, you have certain legal responsibilities and liabilities.

In the meantime, there are a few things that you need to know.

In 1992, Everybody Counts became the third federally funded Center for Independent Living in the state of Indiana. In 1996, we were awarded federal funds to establish the fifth Center for Independent Living in the state of Indiana.

According to federal law and specific directives, both of these centers were supposed to be included in the state network of centers for independent living.

Not only has the state refused to acknowledge the existence of second center, they have denied funding to both for many years.

As the result of purposeful and illegal actions by individuals with clear conflicts of interests, we - and the people of Northwest Indiana - have been illegally denied more than \$7 million dollars in funds that were diverted elsewhere.

Each of our centers has been receiving less than 50% of the funding to which they were entitled when they opened the doors, while other centers were operating at twice and three times the amount of money to which they should have been entitled.

We know who did what, and how it was done. Those individuals know what they did, and how they did it, and very soon, through litigation currently being prepared by a team of attorneys, those actions are going to become public.

The evidence is irrefutable.

It is our preference to work with you as partners, as opposed to adversaries, but we are also prepared to do whatever needs to be done in order to ensure that our Centers are treated – and funded – equally.

For many years, along with many others, we have fought for a strong, empowered and truly independent statewide council on independent living - an organization which empowers and truly fights for people with disabilities across the state.

But there are those who have profited from keeping council members in the dark, promising funding to those who support the status quo....rewarding people with treats and retreats... while denying them access to the power that comes from knowledge.

Historically, some very bad things happened to anyone who dared to question these actions.

Those who took their responsibilities seriously enough to educate themselves about applicable laws and regulations..... who tried to do the right thing were run off. To name just a few: Lee Rahmoeller. Emma Sullivan. Mark Bair. Dick Crandall. Jodi James. Ramona Harvey. Joanna Witulski. Teresa Torres.

We strongly encourage each and every one of the current and future council members to make quite sure that they know and understand, all of the laws, and all of the facts.

Here are just a few examples.

The 'funding formula' referenced in your current state plan is not only significantly flawed, it was illegally developed and illegally passed, with the purposeful intent to deny sufficient funds for the people of Northwest Indiana.

The legislative allocation of millions of dollars was not equally divided among the network of centers.... as defined by federal law. Instead, those funds went only to those centers whose directors illegally made up the majority of council members.

The evidence is irrefutable.

Some of you have been promised things that cannot happen if you follow federal law. The problem is, you have relied

on other people to tell you what the law says, and what your responsibilities are.

I would remind those whose mantra has been that ‘the feds know that we’re out of compliance and they don’t care’ that those particular feds are no longer going to be in charge.

There are soon going to be some significant changes in the way that the national independent living program is operated, and you have the opportunity take the steps necessary to make things right here in Indiana.

We believe that you are up to the challenge.

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