

From Injury to Employment: Independent Living Centers Vital Role

It has been 16 months since my return home from rehabilitation at Helen Hayes Hospital. I was injured in a result of a spinal cord injury on the shores of Delaware. To this day I can remember vividly the moment of the accident to being airlifted in the Medivac helicopter. I recall waking two days later, intubated, unable to move or speak and in a haze of exhaustion, pain, and nausea. The days, weeks, and months to follow would test my very will to survive and push me to my physical, mental, and emotional limits.

When the prospects of regaining further motor function began to dwindle and my recovery in physical therapy began to plateau the reality of moving on with life in a new body began to set in. My father and mother had long been making plans for accommodating me in our home. Our house would have to be modified in order for me to maneuver my wheelchair and be cared for. With the help of family and friends' fundraisers had gone underway to help fund construction that would accommodate a new wheel-in shower as well as an 8-foot lift to take me from the ground floor, up into my room.

Months earlier, unbeknownst to me at the time, my father had consulted the architectural barrier consultant from the Resource Center for Accessible Living (RCAL) on how exactly to begin modifying our house. RCAL was introduced to my father by a family friend who had received services prior to my injury. In addition to receiving consultation regarding housing modifications, my father inquired on how and where to acquire financial assistance for all the new changes that would have to be made. The Westchester Independent Living Center (WILC) was first introduced to us by the Helen Hayes social worker as a possible resource to look for assistance. There we stumbled across the Nursing Home Transition and Diversion (NHTD) Medicaid waiver program. The program was geared towards providing assistance to individuals with the goal of keeping them from being sent to nursing homes or institutionalized long-term living facilities.

Through the NHTD waiver program, environmental modifications and assistive technology could be evaluated for financial assistance. WILC then worked with RCAL's Medicaid Service Coordinators to develop and implement plans for the renovations of my home. Construction began January, one month before I would return home to stay with neighbors until my house was complete. The final product consisted of two lifts, one to take me into my room from the ground floor as I mentioned, and another smaller one to take me down into my living room and dining room/kitchen area. Additionally, I had a newly furnished wheel-in shower, sliding doors for my room and bathroom, and cut corners in my hallway to accommodate the turning radius of my wheelchair. All in all it was a remarkable transformation that has allowed me comfortable access to all portions of my house (except the laundry room, something I won't entirely miss).

Since moving into my own home I have been able to start online courses through Empire State College with the help of VESID (Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities), now known as ACCES-VR (Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation) and have most recently been employed by RCAL themselves as the system's advocate where I pursue issues related to the rights of individuals with disabilities in coordination with the Center for Disability Rights (CDR), and the New York Association on Independent Living (NYAIL). My life now has gone full circle, from an able-bodied athletic teenager, to an employed quadriplegic advocate. Proving again that giving disabled individuals the resources they need to become independent members of the community really works.

Written by Keith Gurgui