

SILC & GILN's
INDEPENDENT
LIVING IN GEORGIA
REACHING STATEWIDE...



CULTIVATING A
CULTURE *OF* **INCLUSION**

ANNUAL REPORT
2023-2024

Executive Summary: Creating a Culture of Inclusion

The older I become, the faster the years go by! It's hard to believe another year has passed in the IL world. Seems we just got started now were preparing for year-end reports. What can be said is, the IL community had a pretty good year! From significant new funding for statewide Information and Referral coverage, to pay increases for caregivers, to the signing of the Safe at Home Act, HB 404. And to the development and approval of Georgia's State Plan for Independent Living! This past year various agencies, entities and individuals came together, worked together to make a difference. As we enter a new fiscal year with a new set of state plan goals, our emphasis for the next three years is – Cultivating a Culture of Inclusion.

We are excited about the opportunities that await us. We are anticipating policies and rules changing, laws changing that will positively educate, empower, promote and include everyone in every aspect of living in Georgia! I see it happening! Now is the time to be assertive and progressive in our intent to provide equitable footing for individuals with disabilities.

As you will see and read in this report, we have positioned ourselves to further a philosophy that everyone can grasp. Continuing our collaboration with various organizations will benefit us meeting our goals expeditiously.

I would like to thank the SILCGA staff for your hard work and commitment, to the Centers for Independent Living for all the

sacrifices the directors & staff make for their consumers.

Thanks to all the agencies, organizations and partners for your participation and guidance. Please continue to support, participate and educate yourselves on the IL Network's goals & endeavors as we continue to grow and serve during this quest to Cultivate a Culture of Inclusion!

Shelly Simmons, Executive Director



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CIL CORE SERVICES



INFORMATION & REFERRAL

We provide information on any subject related to living independently with all disabilities. We also refer individuals to other agencies in our network to assist in gaining independence.



PEER MENTORSHIP

We facilitate partnerships with Peer Mentors. Peer Mentors with disabilities serve as role models and provide moral support and creative solutions for life issues.



IL SKILLS BUILDING

We provide access to trained staff who help consumers build necessary skills that facilitate greater autonomy, empowerment, and independence. These skills include budgeting, resume writing, application assistance, and employment readiness.



ADVOCACY

We work with individuals on self-advocacy and assertiveness to promote personal empowerment. We also provide advocacy activities in partnership with individuals and community members to affect attitudinal and environmental change. Regional consultants are available for all titles of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).



TRANSITION

We help those with significant disabilities who are at risk of institutionalization or need assistance transitioning from nursing homes and other institutions. Our goal is to help people live and remain at home or in community-based residences with the requisite supports and services whenever possible.



ADDITIONAL SERVICES

We provide a variety of other services and forms of support for consumers, including communication services, assistive technology, and help with any other unique needs a person with a disability encounters.

WHAT WE DO

Our Mission Statement

All of us in the State of Georgia want to contribute to our communities.
We all want to go to work, provide for our families, contribute to society, and pay into the system.

However, sometimes our public buildings, living spaces, workplaces, policies and societal attitudes contain barriers preventing some from fully participating and contributing in a meaningful way. These obstacles to participation can frequently be addressed and removed.

The mission of SILCGA is to facilitate equal participation of people with disabilities within their communities.

What Is Independent Living?

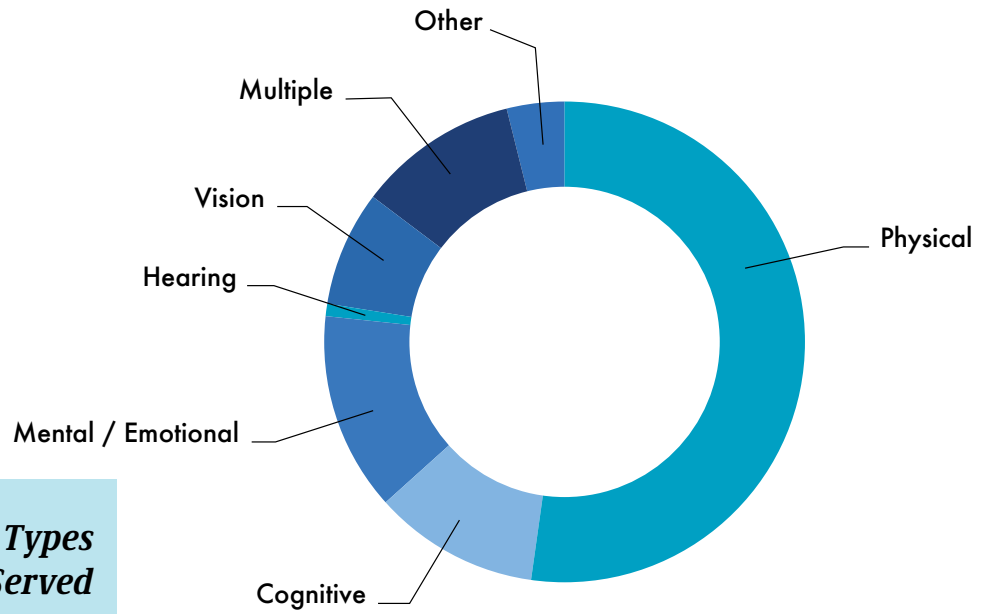
Independent Living is about changing policies and practices that under-estimate, segregate, or oppress people with disabilities.

Independent Living promotes the idea that people with disabilities have the same rights and responsibilities and the same control over life choices as those without disabilities.

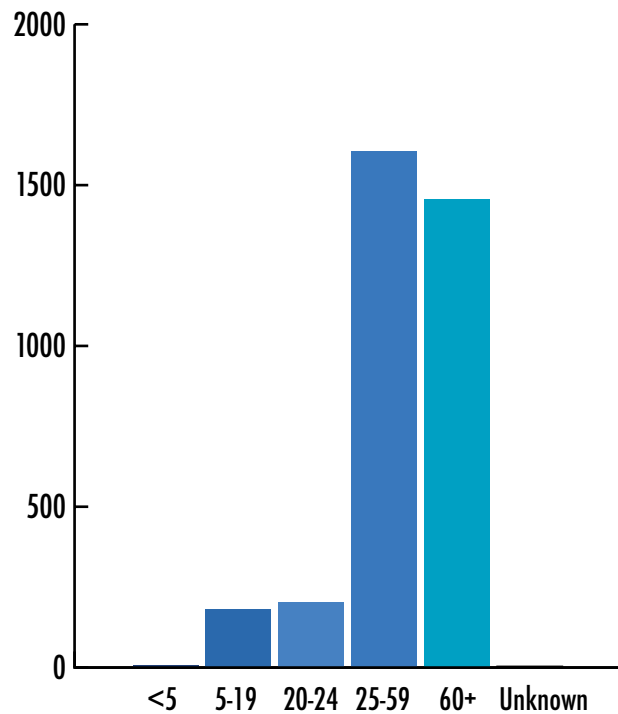
We, therefore, work to change societal attitudes by moving away from segregation, paternalism, and pity, opting instead for empowerment and independence. «

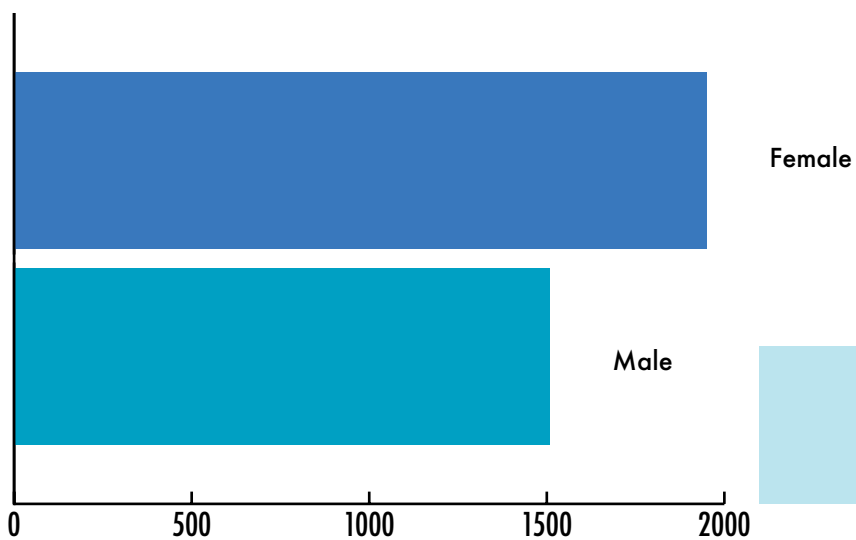
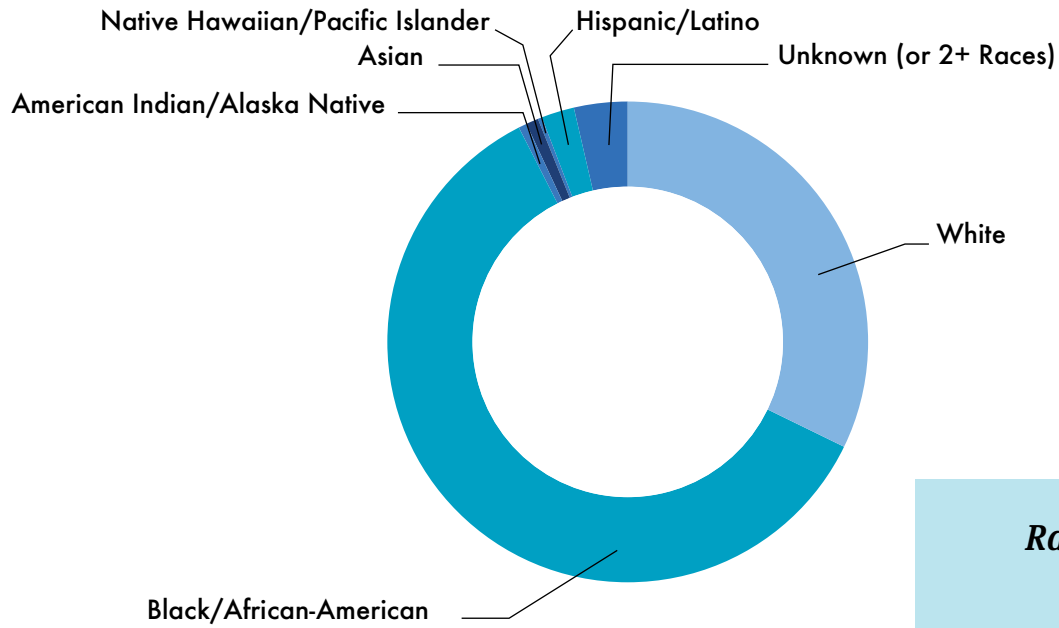
Who the CILs Serve

*Disability Types
Served*



*Ages of Citizens
Served*







Walton Options in Augusta, GA stayed busy this year with many activities, including hosting the Caravan for Disability Freedom and Justice (above) and starting a hydroponic garden to teach consumers modern farming techniques.



Reaching Statewide...

Special thanks to the GA General Assembly for the allocation of new funds that will allow the Georgia Independent Living Network to provide Information and Referral services statewide!

SILCGA, the Network and supporting individuals/entities have advocated for Center Expansion for eight years for the opportunity to reach as many people living with disabilities as possible.

With the new funding, the Centers for Independent Living (CILs) will be able to provide I & R services to the 27 counties that have gone unserved in our state. We are already receiving calls from these counties!

As we carefully capture the needs of those who reach out to the CILs, the information will be used to continue our advocacy efforts for full services in these counties. Reaching further and further with every opportunity!

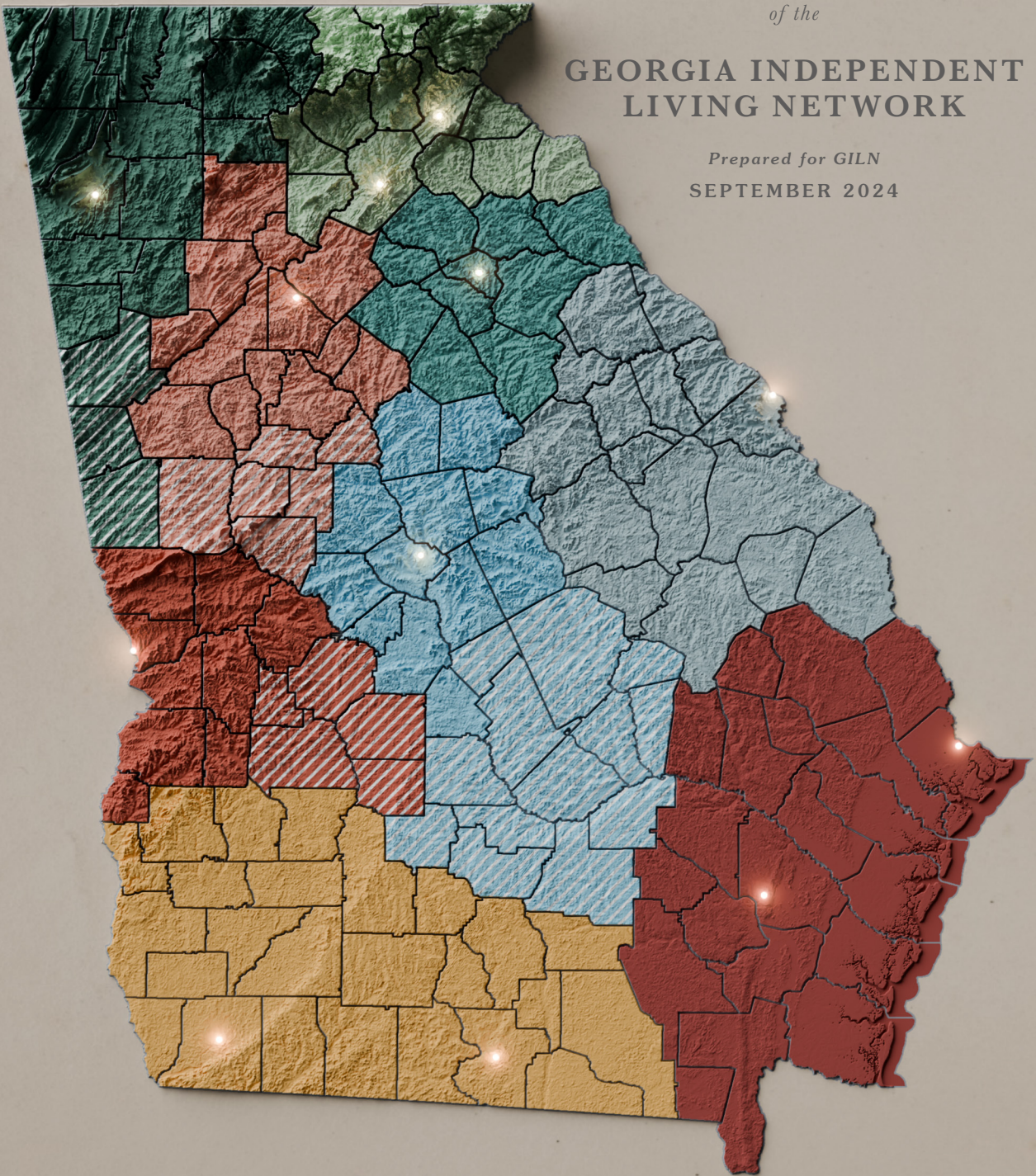
COVERAGE MAP

of the

GEORGIA INDEPENDENT
LIVING NETWORK

Prepared for GILN

SEPTEMBER 2024



Northwest Georgia

NWGA CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

ROME, GA

DIRECTOR: CHRISTINA HOLTZCLAW

COUNTIES: BARTOW, CATOOSA, CHATTOOGA, DADE,
FANNIN, FLOYD, GILMER, GORDON, HARALSON, MURRAY,
PAULDING, PICKENS, POLK, WALKER, WHITFIELD;

CARROLL, HEARD, TROUP



I&R ONLY
(STATE FUNDED)

Metro Atlanta Area

DISABILITY LINK

TUCKER, GA

DIRECTOR: KIM GIBSON

COUNTIES: CHEROKEE, CLAYTON, COBB, COWETA, DEKALB, DOUGLAS,
FAYETTE, FULTON, GWINNETT, HENRY, NEWTON, ROCKDALE;
BUTTS, LAMAR, MERIWETHER, PIKE, SPALDING, UPSON



I&R ONLY
(STATE FUNDED)

West Central Georgia

A2I: ACCESS 2 INDEPENDENCE

COLUMBUS, GA

DIRECTOR: KIRK HOLCOMBE

COUNTIES: CHATTAHOOCHEE, HARRIS, MARION, MUSKOGEE,
QUITMAN, STEWART, TALBOT, TAYLOR, WEBSTER; CRISP, DOOLY,
MACON, SCHLEY, SUMTER



I&R ONLY
(STATE FUNDED)

Southwest Georgia

BAINBRIDGE ADVOCACY INDIVIDUAL NETWORK

BAINBRIDGE, GA & VALDOSTA, GA

DIRECTOR: MALISSA THOMPSON

COUNTIES: ATKINSON, BAKER, BERRIEN, BROOKS, CALHOUN, CLAY,
CLINCH, COLQUITT, COOK, DECATUR, DOUGHERTY, EARLY, ECHOLS,
GRADY, LANIER, LEE, LOWNDES, MILLER, MITCHELL, RANDOLPH,
SEMINOLE, TERRELL, TIFT, THOMAS, WORTH



North Georgia

DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER

DEMOREST, GA & GAINESVILLE, GA

DIRECTOR: NANCY PEEPLES

COUNTIES: BANKS, DAWSON, FORSYTH, FRANKLIN, HABERSHAM, HALL,
HART, LUMPKIN, RABUN, STEPHENS, TOCCOA, TOWNS, UNION, WHITE



Northeast Georgia

MULTIPLE CHOICES

ATHENS, GA

DIRECTOR: GARRICK SCOTT

COUNTIES: BARROW, CLARKE, ELBERT, GREENE, JACKSON, MADISON,
MORGAN, OCONEE, OGLETHORPE, WALTON



Central Georgia

DISABILITY CONNECTIONS

MACON, GA

DIRECTOR: MICHAEL LEVERETT

COUNTIES: BALDWIN, BIBB, CRAWFORD, HOUSTON, JASPER, JONES,
MONROE, PEACH, PULASKI, PUTNAM, TWIGGS, WILKINSON; BEN
HILL, BLECKLEY, COFFEE, DODGE, IRWIN, JEFF DAVIS, LAURENS,
MONTGOMERY, TELFAIR, TREUTLEN, TURNER, WHEELER, WILCOX



I&R ONLY
(STATE FUNDED)

Eastern Georgia

WALTON OPTIONS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

AUGUSTA, GA

DIRECTOR: TIFFANY CLIFFORD

COUNTIES: BURKE, COLUMBIA, EMANUEL, GLASCOCK, HANCOCK,
JEFFERSON, JENKINS, JOHNSON, LINCOLN, MCDUFFIE, RICHMOND,
SCREVEN, TALLAHERRO, WARREN, WASHINGTON, WILKES



Southeast Georgia

LIFE: LIVING INDEPENDENCE FOR EVERYONE

SAVANNAH, GA & SCREVEN, GA

DIRECTOR: NEIL LIGON

COUNTIES: APPLING, BACON, BRANTLEY, BRYAN, BULLOCH, CAMDEN,
CANDLER, CHARLTON, CHATHAM, EFFINGHAM, EVANS, GLYNN, LIBERTY,
LONG, MCINTOSH, PIERCE, TATTNALL, TOOMBS, WARE, WAYNE





The Georgia Advocacy Office participated in Wagers and Waivers Day at the Georgia State Capitol. This is just one of the many examples showing how GAO cooperates with other organizations to advocate for people in need of a voice.

Working Across Organizations to Further the Cause of Independent Living

“Even the most difficult and long-standing challenges are addressed by ordinary citizens acting voluntarily on behalf of each other.”

The Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia doesn’t work alone, nor do its Centers for Independent Living. Many other groups, mandated and funded by policies at the state and federal level, work alongside the SILCGA network in the effort to help people live independently.

The Georgia Advocacy Office is one such organization, taking the cases of people facing systemic issues in nursing home transitions, employment and a host of other areas.

Cheri Mitchell, an advocate who’s spent 18 years at GAO, works in transition and housing. Mitchell spent the first part of her career in real estate and lives with a disability herself, so she’s uniquely qualified to fight for her clients.

“When I help people, when I go into nursing facilities, I know that I am one sickness away from being there myself,” Mitchell said. “So the transition is really important to me. I have complex health issues. I feel the urgency of that situation.”

While the GAO doesn’t own apartments or give out money for housing, Mitchell’s guidance, and that of their other advocates, is an invaluable resource for anyone trying to get out of a nursing home. It doesn’t stop at housing, though. Mitchell is passionate about people experiencing a real quality of life once they are independent.

“Helping people to find real homes is important to me,” Mitchell said. “A real home is where you have control of the door, the people coming and going from your home, and what happens in your home, what your home looks like. One of the things that I enjoyed the most was decorating my house. You should have control of all of that.”

In pursuit of that holistic independence, GAO has a robust resource referral department. Often, they refer people to CILs for help achieving mobility or community-related goals.

“I knew a guy that, once he got out, he didn’t leave his house,” Mitchell said. “And I was like, ‘Why are you not leaving your house?’ And he’s like, ‘I’m scared I’ll get lost.’ So then I referred him to the Center for Independent Living, and he got some mobility training, and he started going there and feeling more comfortable. And as he became more comfortable, the more he tried venturing out from his home, until he was doing things like meeting people in the mall and going to Wal-Mart.”

Carrying out the 2002 Help America Vote Act is foundational to the work done by all disability rights organizations, Mitchell said, since elected representatives can determine the funding allocated to such programs.

SCAN
TO HEAR THE
FULL STORY



Excerpted
from
SILCGA's
Podcast

Accessibility

NOW!

Cheri Mitchell serves as an advocate with the Georgia Advocacy Organization



"I really think that one of the first things that a self-advocate should be doing is voting," Mitchell said. "If you're going to practice self-determination, which is having a voice and having a choice, the very first thing you should be doing is voting... Voting matters. It really does."

Every big-picture program is reflected in on-the-ground efforts, like Mitchell's, and the efforts of other programs, like Citizen Advocacy. They pair someone with a developmental disability with someone in the community living without a disability, creating a human connection that can help people through some of the difficulties of living independently.

"People are the real key," Mitchell said of Citizen Advocacy. "People are what make the difference."

That priority is stated beautifully in the vision of the GAO, part of which hopes that in Georgia "even the most difficult and long-lasting challenges are addressed by ordinary citizens acting voluntarily on behalf of each other."

With people like Mitchell, and groups like SILCGA and the GAO working together, such a Georgia might not be too far away. «



The Multifaceted Work of LIFE, the CIL serving Coastal Georgia

“My coworkers, the majority of us, have significant disabilities,” Ligon said. “And I’ve worked in law firms and this is, in my opinion, the best environment I’ve ever worked in”

Living Independence For Everyone, or LIFE, serves a 20-county area along the Georgia coast, from Florida to South Carolina. Centered around Savannah, with a satellite office in Screven, the CIL has been seeing a lot of growth. They’ve made new hires, continued outreach to youth and explored partnerships with other organizations.


A few things set their service area apart: the low elevation and a high water table affecting sidewalk infrastructure, for one. But when it comes down to it, Executive

Director Neil Ligon said LIFE’s top three issues are the same as the ones at CILs everywhere else.


“There’s not enough affordable, accessible housing,” Ligon said. “There’s not enough transportation, and [there’s not enough] employment. All three of those go hand in hand with one another. It’s hard to maintain any of the three without the other two.”

To help address the housing issue, home modifications can make the places people already live more

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Accessibility

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accessible through ramps, grab bars and other devices.

LIFE's home modification program, headed by Angel Denardi, receives a lot of requests: they have a waiting list in almost every county they serve. The good that home "mods" do is demonstrable. It can act like a positive feedback loop in a community. Once one ramp is up, other residents start to ask where it came from and how to get one of their own.

"I think the home modification program really piques people's interest because it's tangible," Denardi said. "You can see clearly the before and after. And human beings love a happy ending and a good story. And so that's what home modifications represent, a story."

When LIFE builds a ramp with a contractor, it can run them up to \$12,000. A volunteer-built ramp, for which LIFE only pays for materials, costs around \$1,400. That more than \$10,000 difference can then turn into more ramps and home modifications for others in need.

"Our volunteers, they're my heroes," Denardi said. "They're how I get to sleep at night. Because the knowledge that we can move some of these people off of the waiting list gives me the drive to continue. Because I am human, and I like the happy endings myself. I want to see these success stories."

Denardi said LIFE is seeking more teams of volunteers to build ramps, particularly in Chatham County.

To address the underemployment issue, they put a particular focus on young people through initiatives like Students for LIFE, a peer-led instructional program that prepares high schoolers for college and the workplace.

Speakers travel to visit students' classrooms, meeting them where they are, or talk with them via Zoom. Program director Maggie Meade said equipping students to navigate our unequal society can make a real difference later in life.

"If you get thinking about these things early, you work on these skills early, and if students and young people have the opportunity to make this part of their life early on, It just allows you to have greater independence and really plan ahead for a lot of these things," Meade said.

The program also partners with Project Search, an organization that enables students to do three different internships and get additional classroom

instruction focused on excelling at a job. Many of the interns get hired after the program, and for those who don't, Project Search aids in finding another position.

Students for LIFE culminates in a yearly conference, called the Power of You, which features speakers and local organizations focused on helping students feel encouraged about moving to the next stage of their lives.

These comprehensive, growing initiatives are all indicative of a work ethic unique to the people at LIFE, Ligon said.

"My coworkers, the majority of us, have significant disabilities," Ligon said. "And I've worked in law firms and this is, in my opinion, the best environment I've ever worked in ... I see a lot of ability to adapt to new environments and to support others and to know how to listen. The active listening component, I think, is something that you just don't find many other places."

Compassionate, competent, and above all, ready to listen – that's what goes into a difference maker at LIFE. «





Improving Mobility with Jordan Hall

Through her efforts, Jordan Hall is ensuring that the voices of individuals with disabilities are heard and that their mobility needs are met,

For SILCGA's Mobility Coordinator Jordan Hall, mobility is not just about transportation. "When I think about mobility, I don't just think about transportation," she says. "Transportation is key, but I really think about the walkability of sidewalks and infrastructure as well, and just any mode of traveling that an individual with a disability might use."

Jordan has a clear and ambitious vision for enhancing mobility for individuals with disabilities across the state. Her work is centered on expanding access to transportation and infrastructure that accommodates all forms of mobility.

One of Jordan's primary focuses is on rural areas, where transportation options are often severely limited. "In rural areas, there will only be one transit provider, and even if the transit provider is available, the hours are very limited," she explains. This lack of accessibility creates significant barriers for individuals with disabilities, limiting their access to participate fully in community life.

To address this, Jordan is involved in several strategic initiatives aimed at expanding transit options in these underserved regions. She is an active participant in the

Georgia Department of Transportation's Rural Human Services Transportation Plan, where she provides direct feedback and advocates for policies that will increase transportation availability and accessibility in rural communities.

Additionally, Jordan is working on projects with the Atlanta Regional Commission, where she hopes to demonstrate successful models of expanded service that can be replicated in rural areas. "The goal is to be able to use that as an example to give to the county commissioners in the rural areas to expand transit," she notes.

Looking forward, Jordan is particularly interested in helping Georgia's transit systems transition to a microtransit model. Microtransit allows individuals to book trips in real-time, a significant improvement over the current paratransit system, which requires bookings to be made at least a day in advance. Microtransit would allow for much more flexible and responsive transportation solutions.

To advance this goal, Jordan is partnering with innovative organizations like On The Go and Paseo Technologies, which are pioneering new approaches to microtransit. She believes that by working with these entities, SILCGA can present proven models to local governments and transit authorities, making it easier to implement these systems

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TO HEAR THE
FULL STORY



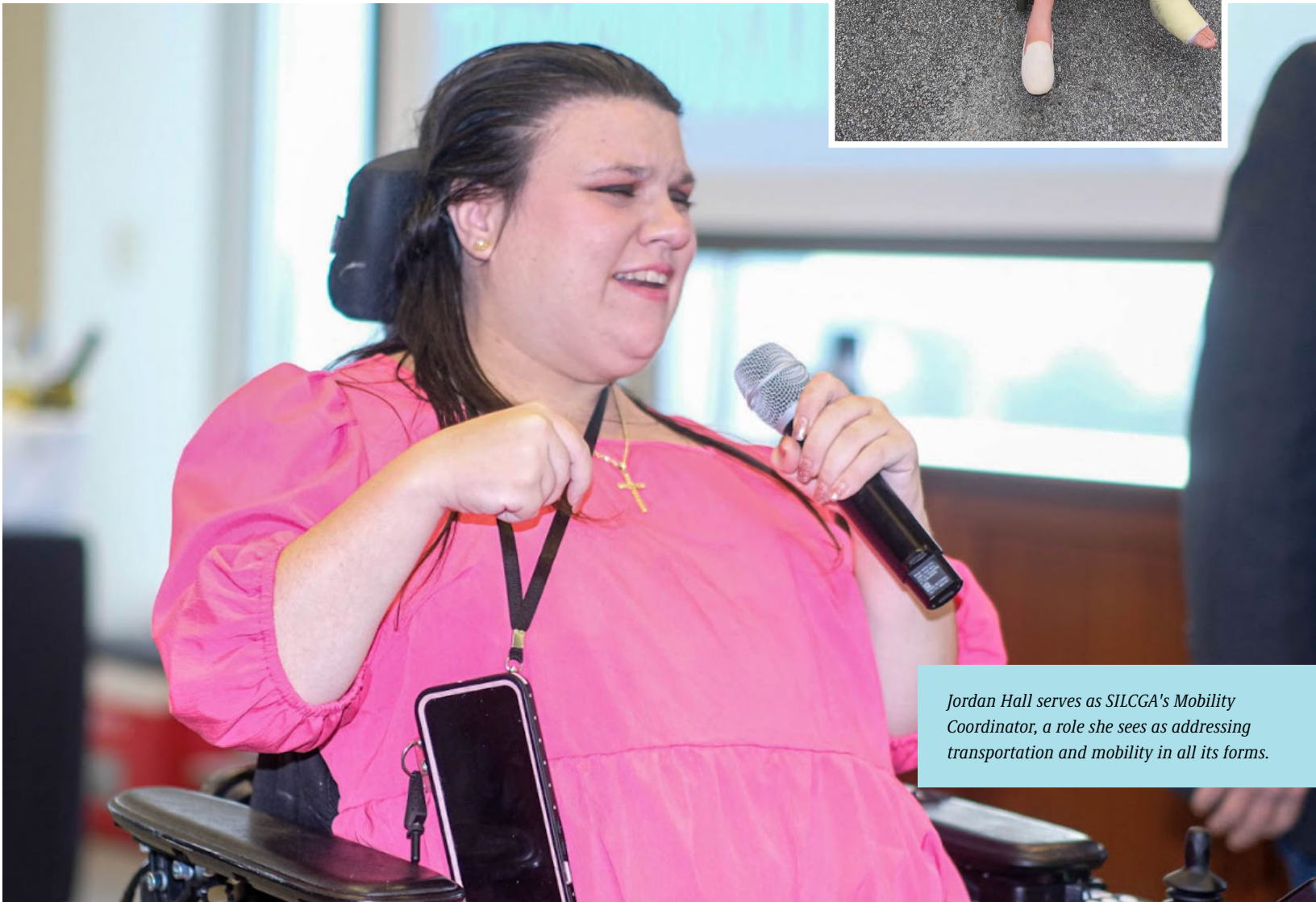
Excerpted
from
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statewide.

Another key aspect of Jordan's strategy is ensuring that the Centers for Independent Living (CILs) across Georgia have access to the resources they need to advocate effectively for their communities. She has created a directory of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), which are the entities that receive most federal funding for transportation projects. By providing this directory to CILs, Jordan aims to empower them to participate in funding solicitations and influence transit planning at the local level.

Through her efforts, Jordan Hall is ensuring that the voices of individuals with disabilities are heard and that their mobility needs are met, paving the way for a more inclusive future in Georgia. «



Jordan Hall serves as SILCGA's Mobility Coordinator, a role she sees as addressing transportation and mobility in all its forms.

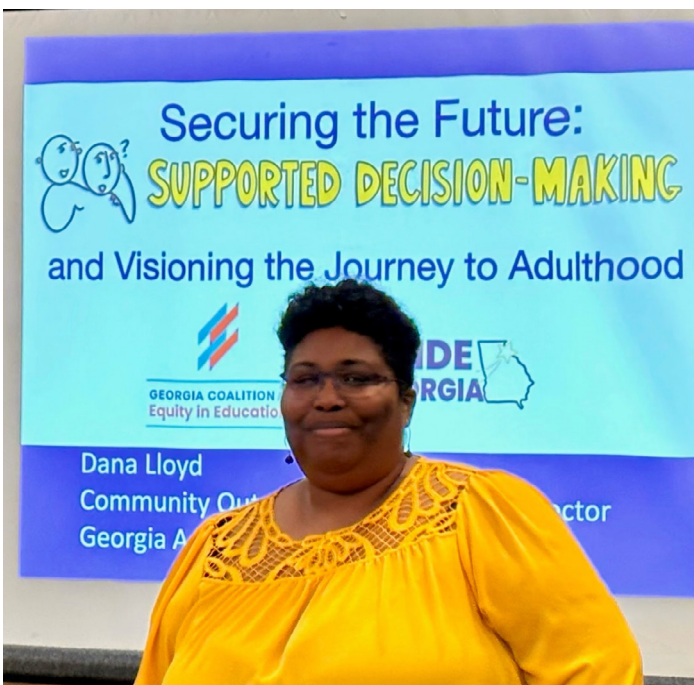
Strengthening Georgia's Protection and Advocacy Network with Dana Lloyd

"We're thrown into the deep end in a system that's not always family-friendly or easy to navigate."

Working at the Georgia Advocacy Office (GAO) was not initially the direction Dana Lloyd thought her career would take. In fact, after graduating from college, Dana found herself uncertain about her career path. A chance encounter with a friend led her to consider working in a field she had never previously thought about—supporting people with disabilities. Initially, she was hesitant. "I just wasn't sure that this was the work for me," she admitted. However, a compelling conversation about the civil rights aspect of this work piqued her interest.

She got into the field and stayed, and over the years, she found herself deeply embedded in advocacy through her work in Georgia's Protection and Advocacy (P&A) network. The P&A network was established in the 1970s in response to the shocking conditions uncovered in institutions like Willowbrook State School. The GAO has served as Georgia's designated P&A system since 1977, with a mission to protect and advocate for the civil and human rights of individuals with disabilities. Dana explained that the network's creation was driven by the need to address systemic abuses and ensure that people with disabilities have access to the legal protections they deserve.

The P&A network has expanded its scope over the years to include various programs beyond developmental disabilities, addressing the needs of individuals with traumatic brain injuries, mental illnesses, and more. Dana highlighted the importance of the GAO's dual focus: legal advocacy and the promotion of relationships. She noted that in Georgia, the GAO's founders recognized that people with disabilities needed more than just legal protection—they needed connections within their communities. "GAO and citizen advocacy are kind of two trees that grew out of the same soil," she said.



Dana Lloyd is an advocate with the GAO who collaborates regularly with SILCGA

As Dana looks to the future, she sees several critical challenges that the GAO must address to continue its mission effectively. One pressing issue is the inadequacy of current systems to prevent abuse and neglect by service providers. Dana explained that even when abuse or neglect is substantiated by state agencies, it often does not result in criminal charges, allowing offenders to remain in the system. “Unfortunately, a criminal background check just doesn’t catch that always,” she noted, underscoring the need for systemic changes to better protect individuals with disabilities.

Another area of focus for the GAO is supported decision-making, which aims to help people with disabilities maintain autonomy over their lives.

Dana is leading efforts to promote this approach, which offers an alternative to guardianship and emphasizes the importance of enabling individuals to make their own decisions with appropriate supports. Additionally, the GAO is preparing for upcoming elections by advocating for the voting rights of people with disabilities and working to prevent voter suppression.

Collaboration remains key to the GAO’s strategy, particularly in working with organizations like the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). Dana described the partnership as essential for advancing shared goals, whether in promoting voting rights, conducting vaccine education, or addressing new challenges as they arise. “

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Accessibility

NOW!



*Jimmy Peterson, Executive Director
for the Georgia Center of the Deaf and
Hard of Hearing (Source: GCDHH)*

Facilitating Communication with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community

If there is one message Peterson wants to convey to the hearing population, it is that Deaf and Hard of Hearing people are not impaired; they simply communicate differently.

Jimmy Peterson has served as the Executive Director of the Georgia Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (GCDHH) for the past ten years. As a Deaf individual, he understands firsthand the barriers faced by the community. His journey to this role has been driven by a lifelong need to advocate for himself and others.

Growing up, Peterson encountered numerous obstacles due to his deafness. These experiences taught him the importance of advocacy and self-empowerment. When the opportunity to lead GCDHH arose a decade ago, he knew it was the perfect fit.

“Their mission, their goals, their love from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community has been great,” Peterson says. “They always try to empower and give empowerment to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community all around Georgia.”

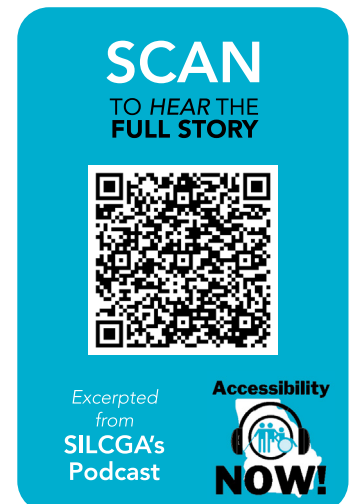
At GCDHH, a variety of services are offered to clients, most of whom live in the Atlanta area, though some are spread across different cities in Georgia. Services include advocacy, training, and various support mechanisms, delivered both in-person and virtually. The organization strives to break down barriers, especially in critical areas like communication within the medical field, where access to interpreting services is vital.

One of the primary challenges clients face is securing reasonable accommodations,

such as interpreters or captions, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Many providers are either unaware of their legal responsibilities or resistant to complying. GCDHH educates and advocates, ensuring that clients receive the access they deserve without having to provide their own interpreters. They also offer American Sign Language (ASL) classes to businesses and organizations, fostering a more inclusive environment.

An essential part of GCDHH’s work involves educating hearing individuals and businesses about effective communication with Deaf people. For instance, when interacting with a Deaf person, it’s crucial to maintain eye contact and address the individual directly, not the interpreter. The interpreter is merely there to facilitate communication.

The organization’s cultural outreach includes significant events like DEAFestival, a biannual celebration of Deaf culture. DEAFestival showcases performances, art, and businesses run by Deaf individuals, providing a platform for them to share their talents and achievements. Hearing people are encouraged to attend and immerse themselves in the culture, gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Deaf community. The next DEAFestival will be held in Savannah, followed by an event in



Rome four years later.

The response to DEAFestival has been overwhelmingly positive. It offers a wealth of information and resources, particularly for hearing parents of Deaf children, who often gain hope and inspiration from seeing successful Deaf adults. Deafness is an invisible disability, making such visibility and representation crucial for the community.

“Hearing parents who have Deaf children also tend to come, and it kind of gives them hope,” Peterson explains. “It’s like, ‘Oh, my child can grow up and do this, and be an actual successful adult?’”

There is a nationwide shortage of interpreters, and Georgia is no exception. Currently, only two colleges in the state offer interpreter training programs, and it takes several years for graduates to become fully certified and qualified. ASL is a unique language with its own grammar and syntax, distinct from spoken languages. It’s also very visual, with regional variations akin to dialects in spoken languages.

Understanding these nuances is vital. For example, there are multiple signs for a single word like “strawberry,” depending on the region. Similarly, ASL has its own humor and storytelling traditions, which can be difficult for outsiders to grasp.

While GCDHH doesn’t handle legal advocacy directly, it works closely with other organizations in Georgia that specialize in this area. Their focus remains on empowering individuals to advocate for themselves and providing access to necessary services.

If there is one message Peterson wants to convey to the hearing population, it is that Deaf and Hard of Hearing people are not impaired; they simply communicate differently. They are capable of achieving anything a hearing person can.

He also notes that ASL is not just a helpful tool for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. “Learning sign language can be beneficial for everyone, not just the Deaf community,” he emphasizes. “It can help in various situations, from losing hearing later in life to communicating in noisy environments.”

At GCDHH, the organization relies on financial donations, grants, and government funding to continue its work. They have been serving the community for 35 years, offering a range of services including advocacy, support, and education. More than half of their staff and board members are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, providing strong role models for young people.

For more information about their services and how to support GCDHH, please visit their website www.gcdhh.org. They offer interpreting services, equipment at no charge, and even summer camps for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.. «



GCDHH participates in events like ASL Day at the Atlanta Braves Game and also serves the community by putting on events like Camp Julien for children who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Source: GCDHH)



SILCGA's Podcast Recognized as a Top Independent Living Podcast

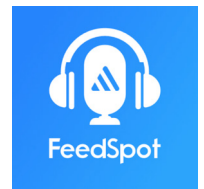
We are delighted to announce that our podcast, "Accessibility Now: Stories About Disability Rights in Georgia," has been honored as one of the Top 15 Independent Living Podcasts on the web by Feedspot. This recognition underscores our commitment to sharing vital stories and advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities in Georgia.

Our podcast highlights the challenges and triumphs of the disability community through in-depth discussions, personal

stories, and expert insights. Being selected by Feedspot, a platform known for curating quality content, is a significant acknowledgment of our work's impact.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our dedicated listeners, contributors, and the entire community for their unwavering support. For more details, visit the list here.

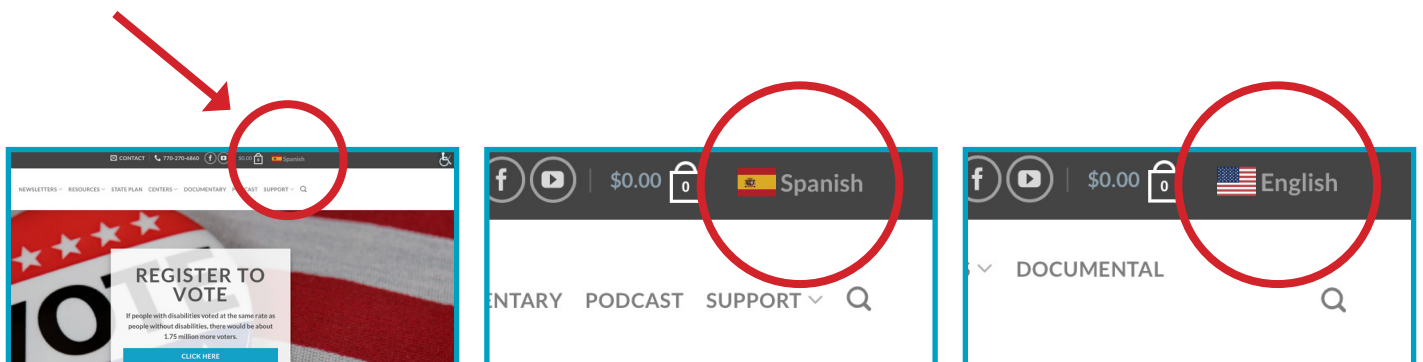
We are excited to continue our mission of amplifying voices and creating a broader impact through "Accessibility Now."



SILCGA Website Now Available in Spanish

We are very excited to announce that our website for the Statewide Independent Council of Georgia is now in Spanish! Simply click on the icon that says Spanish with the Spanish flag in the top right corner. Please share this information with everyone you know because you never know who may be in need! Thank you and happy advocating!

¡Estamos muy emocionados de anunciar que nuestro sitio web de Consejo Estatal Independiente de Georgia ahora está en Español! ¡¡HURRA!! Simplemente haz clic en el icono que dice Spanish con la bandera de España en la esquina superior derecha. ¡Por favor, comparte esta información con todos sus conocidos porque nunca se sabe quien puede estar necesitado! ¡Gracias y feliz abogando!



Advocating for Accessible Housing: Victor McRae's "Access for All" Report

"Housing costs are going to keep going up, at least for the near future. If we keep on this trajectory, no one will be able to buy a house."

Victor McRae, SILCGA's Housing Policy Coordinator, is the newest addition to our team and is already making a huge impact. On our podcast episode featuring him, he shared how his path to advocacy began at age nine when he was diagnosed with Stargardt's disease, a macular degeneration that eventually led to him becoming legally blind.

Reflecting on his journey, Victor shared, "For a long time, I tried my best to ignore my disability. It probably wasn't the healthiest way to deal with it, but I was uncomfortable with it being brought up. Now, I see it as something that gives me a unique perspective on life."

His college years took him to Georgia Southern University, where he studied marketing and management. After several jobs, Victor found his calling in accessibility advocacy, beginning as a travel trainer at a non-emergency medical transportation company. In this role, he witnessed firsthand the housing disparities affecting people with disabilities. "Many of the people I worked with lived in

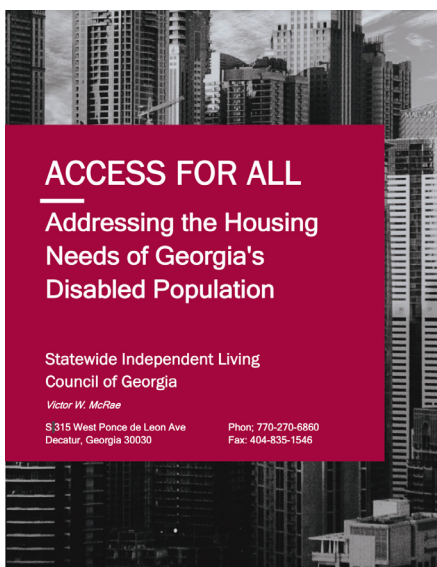
Section 8 housing or apartments that hadn't been renovated in years. They were on SSI, just trying to find a way to get to their doctor's appointments," Victor recalls. This exposure opened his eyes to the urgent need for accessible and affordable housing, particularly for those with disabilities.

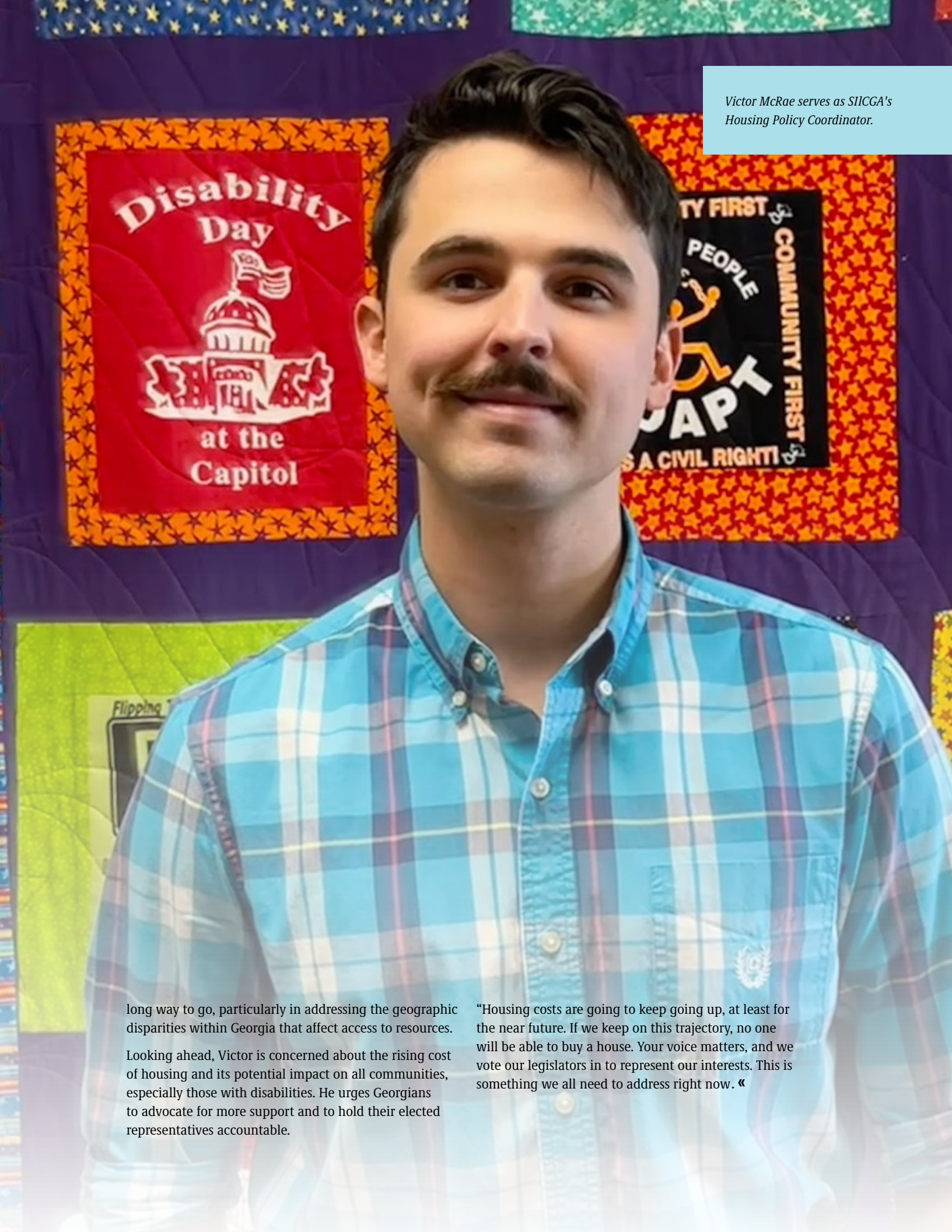
Now, as SILCGA's Housing Policy Coordinator, he's putting all those experiences to excellent use. Victor is committed to advocating for policy changes that address these disparities. His role involves working with Georgia developers and state legislators to push for more inclusive housing options.

Since he began working with us late last year, he has put together a comprehensive report titled "Access for All." The report highlights the critical issues faced by the disability community, from income inequality to limited access to housing programs.

"The goal of this report is to compile all this information and make policy recommendations to our state legislators. We want to show them the data so they can see the real problems Georgians are facing." You can access the full report by visiting our website.

Victor states that we can certainly acknowledge that some progress has been made, but he reiterates that there is still a



A portrait of Victor McRae, a man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a blue and white plaid button-down shirt. He is standing in front of a purple background decorated with various posters. To his left is a red poster with a star border that reads "Disability Day at the Capitol" and features a drawing of the Georgia State Capitol dome. To his right is a black poster with a red star border that reads "COMMUNITY FIRST & PEOPLE FIRST" and "HABITAT IS A CIVIL RIGHT", with a graphic of a person in a wheelchair. Other posters with star patterns are visible at the top and bottom of the frame.

*Victor McRae serves as SIICGA's
Housing Policy Coordinator.*

long way to go, particularly in addressing the geographic disparities within Georgia that affect access to resources.

Looking ahead, Victor is concerned about the rising cost of housing and its potential impact on all communities, especially those with disabilities. He urges Georgians to advocate for more support and to hold their elected representatives accountable.

“Housing costs are going to keep going up, at least for the near future. If we keep on this trajectory, no one will be able to buy a house. Your voice matters, and we vote our legislators in to represent our interests. This is something we all need to address right now. “

Home Access Program In Need of More Funding

Home renovation jobs are becoming more expensive. Our existing budget of \$100,000 doesn't go as far as it used to.

Through the HAP, SILCGA works to fund home retrofitting so that individuals with disabilities who can't afford these upgrades can safely navigate their homes.

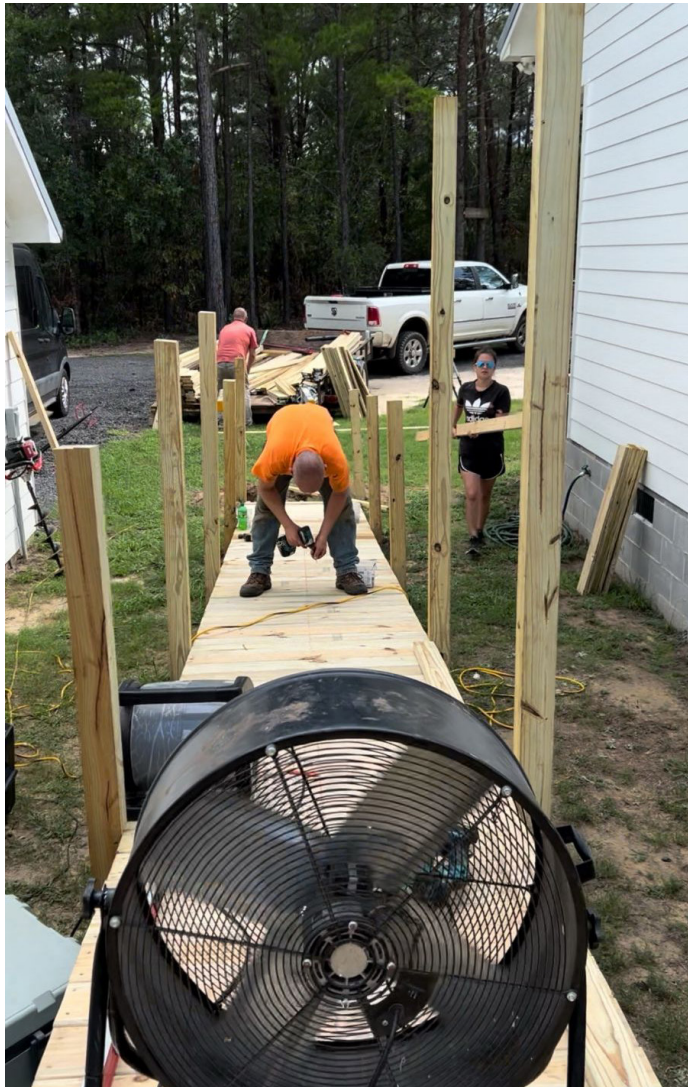
Home renovation jobs are becoming more expensive. Our existing budget of \$100,000 doesn't go as far as it used to. To meet our long waiting list for one of our most utilized services, we need additional funding.

State funding of \$500,000 to the Department of Community Affairs will allow the Centers to assist approximately 41 constituents per year with their home modification needs such as ramps & bathroom modifications.

With additional funding, individuals will be able to safely navigate or return to their own homes after disabling events. Georgia will save a considerable expense when nursing facility placement is avoided.

Featured in one of the photos here, Access 2 Independence wants to share the excitement of the Snipes family on their new ADA compliant ramp for Xavier. Prior to the ramp being installed the Snipes family and caretakers had to physically lift Xavier and his chair up 6 steps to get to the landing to access their home. This was a \$10,000 project that was free to the Snipes Family because of Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) and from donations. Access 2 Independence has completed 78 home modifications over the last 4 years totaling \$375,000. «





Before (left) and after (right) photos of one of the Home Access Program projects.



Being Seen Past the Label: A New Video Series on Disability and Identity

"When I finally decided to see myself past the label, I felt free, and freedom is everything. It gave me a voice"

Have you ever felt as if somebody was just seeing you for one aspect of yourself, a role that you have, or a label that they may have placed on you? "Being Seen Past the Label" is a new video series led by Ester DuRante, Advocate and Outreach Coordinator for SILCGA. The series features filmed interviews with people with disabilities, inviting them to share their stories beyond the confines of whatever disability label they may have.

When asked why she decided to do this project, Ester shared: "There are many labels that I have worn, and I learned to see myself as someone that exists beyond those labels, like being on the spectrum."

"I'm too big to fit in a box," Ester continued. "And I see so many people that are trying to fit in a box, and they're too big for the boxes, and it creates more harm or problems for them. When I finally decided to see myself past the label, I felt free, and freedom is everything. It gave me a voice."

Participants open up about their personal experiences, discussing how they've been labeled in the past and the ways they've navigated and challenged these perceptions. Through these powerful narratives, the series aims to foster understanding and highlight the rich, diverse identities of people with

disabilities.

The project not only sheds light on personal stories but also emphasizes the importance of seeing individuals as more than just their disabilities. It's a call to action for viewers to challenge their assumptions and broaden their perspectives.

You can follow this compelling series on our social media channels, Facebook and Instagram, and watch the full interviews on YouTube. Join us in this journey of understanding and advocacy by tuning in and sharing these stories. «





Screenshots of the videos to be featured in our new video series "Being Seen Past the Label"



Statewide Plan for Independent Living 2025-2027

October 1st marked the first day of our new State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL)! For the FYs 2025-2027, our mission will be **Cultivating a Culture of Inclusion!** We believe the goals listed are exactly what is needed in this moment. Compiling the responses of consumers and stakeholders from the needs assessment, the Georgia Independent Living Network (GILN/Network), was able to develop a plan we believe will benefit many individuals living with disabilities.

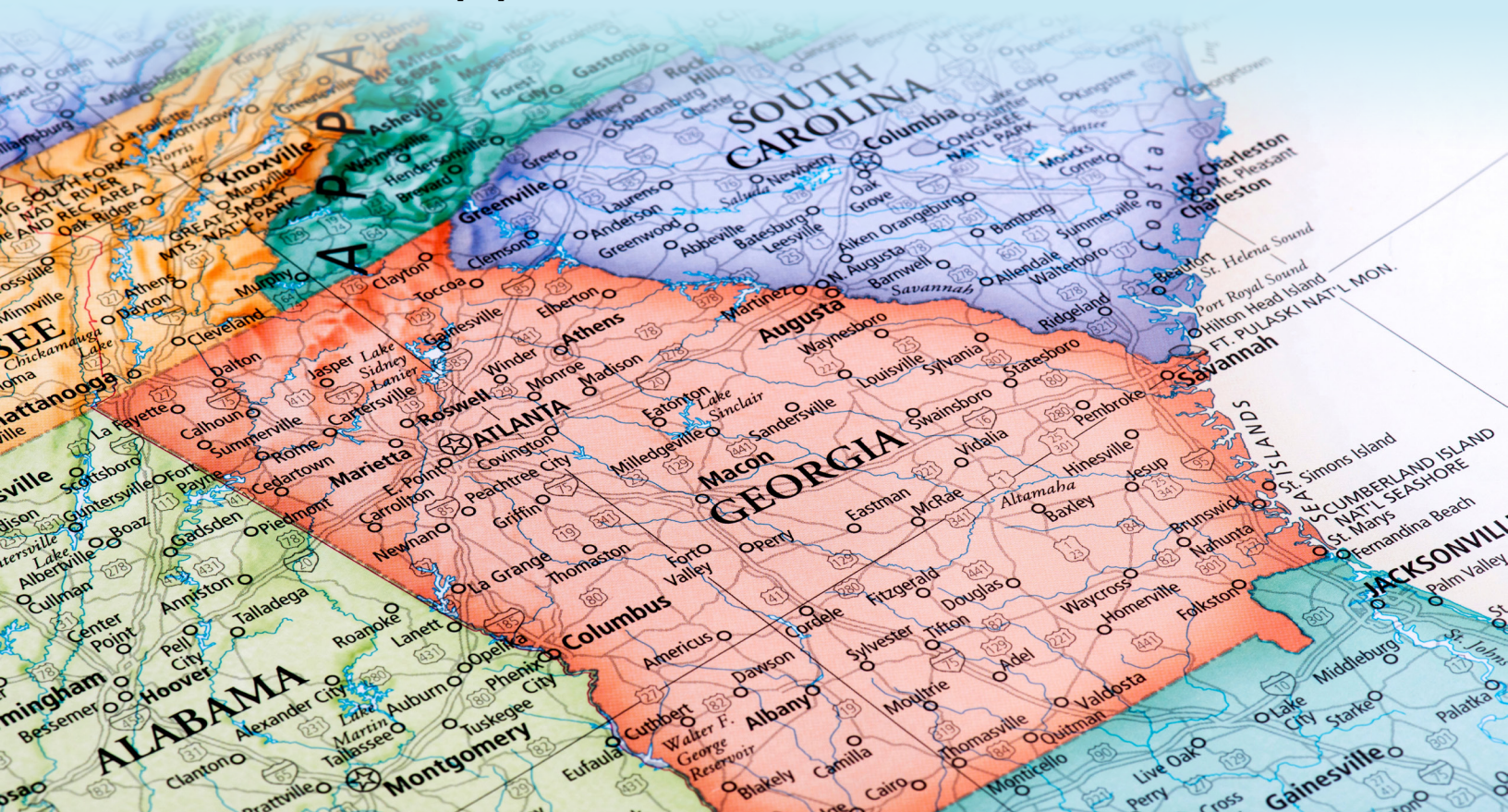
Goal 1: The Georgia Independent Living Network (GILN) is funded and supported to provide increased IL services to people with disabilities

Goal 2: Increase education and resources on transportation options for individuals with disabilities in local communities statewide.

Goal 3: Increase education and resources on housing options for individuals with disabilities in local communities statewide.

Goal 4: Persons with disabilities will have resources to live independently in the community of their choice through application of services and supports.

Goal 5: Increase emergency preparedness options for people with disabilities in local communities statewide. «



Enable Work

The financial conundrum that many Georgians with significant disabilities who are able to work remain unemployed or underemployed in order to not risk losing their necessary Personal Assistant Services. An individual loses out on rewarding opportunities for personal and professional advancement, while Georgia loses tax dollars that workers with disabilities could contribute when they work to their full potential. A policy that promotes work and sharing the cost of services is a common-sense approach.

Unfortunately, some individuals and families are in the frustrating position of having to prioritize between vital coverage for health care, community services and supports they need to live and work in the community, and greater economic self-sufficiency through employment. Simply put, those who rely on home care have no choice but to remain poor. Many who enter the workforce and are enrolled in the Independent Care Waiver program suppress their earnings due to state-specific income limitations.

Almost all services for individuals with severe disabilities are funded through Medicaid. Medicaid is more than healthcare, and includes residential services, personal care and employment supports. Most individuals with disabilities access these services through a Home and Community Based Medicaid Waiver.

The purpose of a Medicaid Buy-In program is to provide people with disabilities who are working the opportunity to earn a modest income and/or accumulate savings while maintaining needed health coverage. With this program, 45 states have created new Medicaid eligibility categories for working people with disabilities whose earnings

and/or resources would otherwise make them ineligible for Medicaid. Put simply, workers with disabilities can earn more income without the risk of losing the basic Medicaid-funded services.

Currently, Georgia has a Medicaid buy-in program (Georgia Medicaid for Workers with Disabilities GMWD) for individuals with disabilities that is essentially nonexistent due to the unearned income rate that has not changed since 2008. We envision this program will incentivize employment by allowing for higher incomes and no resource limits. This is beneficial for the majority of individuals with disabilities, but because the state has imposed program limitations, some individuals are ineligible.

Our goal is to modernize the GMWD Buy-In program and expand the income rates! Consider some of the benefits of modernizing the GMWD. Individuals with disabilities will have less dependency in publicly-funded systems as they work, develop skills, gain experience and are empowered to make decisions about employment career advancement and independent living.

Employing a diverse workforce sends a strong message to all employees that those with health care needs will have the opportunities and supports needed to stay employed. Generally, individuals are healthier when they work. We believe public policy should incentivize working and saving to the greatest extent possible. As people earn more, they purchase more goods and services thereby stimulating the economy and paying more taxes. Finally, there is dignity in work and in paying a reasonable insurance premium!

Stay engaged as we assertively advocate for policy change at the Gold Dome. «

ITS4US Georgia Department of Transportation | Safe Trips in a Connected Transportation Network: Stakeholder Engagement is Key

ST-CTN seeks to enhance the travel experience for underserved communities, including people with disabilities, older adults, and travelers with limited English proficiency (LEP)

The U.S. Department of Transportation's (U.S. DOT) ITS4US Deployment Program (<https://its.dot.gov/its4us/>) is a \$40 million multimodal effort, led by the Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) Joint Program Office (JPO) and supported by the Office of the Secretary, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Federal Transit Administration, to identify ways to provide more efficient, affordable, and accessible transportation options for underserved communities that often face greater challenges in accessing essential services.

Gwinnett County's Safe Trips in a Connected Transportation Network (ST-CTN) was one of the sites selected during Phase 1 of the program. Phase 1 focused on concept development

efforts. In June 2022, ST-CTN was one of four sites selected to continue Phases 2 and 3 of the program. These phases include the design, testing, operation, and evaluation of the deployment. ITS4US Program sites work together to share information and resources.

SILCGA is a key partner in this exciting project. Jordan Hall from SILCGA is spearheading stakeholder engagement, collaborating with various community members to gather valuable feedback during the current testing phase. She shared insights from some of these efforts in a captivating webinar in November 2023, which you can watch here <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHbFUSoJzYg>>. SILCGA is committed to working with partners on future training



initiatives. Visit the project website <https://georgia-map.com/> to watch Jordan's interview on how G-MAP aims to benefit the community.

ST-CTN seeks to enhance the travel experience for underserved communities, including people with disabilities, older adults, and travelers with limited English proficiency (LEP). It will leverage innovative solutions and existing systems such as connected vehicle (CV) deployments, an advanced trip routing engine, and a regional trip planner—all to be developed within an open-sourced application called the Georgia Mobility and Accessibility Planner (G-MAP). The application will allow travelers to create a personalized trip plan to navigate physical infrastructure,

resolve unexpected obstacles, and ensure accessibility throughout their travel. Trips are also able to be shared with appointed individuals if desired. The application will be available via the website ([Georgia-map.com](https://georgia-map.com)) and an up-coming mobile app.

Development of G-MAP is led by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) with support from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), Gwinnett County, and community and consultant partners. G-MAP will be available for use in Gwinnett County in early 2025. Please visit the website and sign up for our distribution list to keep updated and be informed first on access to the application when it becomes available. «



Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia

SILC STAFF

SHELLY SIMMONS | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
REBECCA RAMAGE-TUTTLE | ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
JORDAN HALL | MOBILITY COORDINATOR
ESTER DURANTE | ADVOCATE/OUTREACH COORDINATOR
VICTOR MCRAE | HOUSING POLICY COORDINATOR
MATT SHEDD | COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR
GEORGE TUTTLE | IT VOLUNTEER

SILC BOARD MEMBERS

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JUAN MAITLAND | BOARD MEMBER
SAMUEL VERNIERO | BOARD MEMBER
COURTNEY SAPP, GVRA LIAISON | EX OFFICIO MEMBER
JEROME GREATHOUSE, DCH | EX OFFICIO MEMBER

315 WEST PONCE DE LEON AVENUE, SUITE 660 | DECATUR, GA 30030
PHONE: 770.270.6860 | FAX: 404.835.1546 | TTY: USE 711 RELAY



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Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration for Community Living or Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency policies.

Magazine created by Matt Shedd | mattshedd.com