

SILC & GILN's
**INDEPENDENT
LIVING IN GEORGIA**

30 YEARS OF GROWTH,
**PROSPERITY, &
RENEWAL**
*AN ORAL HISTORY
OF ADVOCACY IN GEORGIA*

TRIBUTE TO
SILCGA
DIRECTOR
SHELLY SIMMONS
*AND MORE YEARLY
UPDATES...*

ANNUAL REPORT
2024-2025



Letter from the *Acting Director*



Assistant Director Becky Tuttle (left)
with Director Shelly Simmons (right)

Dear Friends,

Shelly Simmons was a role model for anyone and everyone -- a role model for people with and without disabilities. She was proud, confident, and smart. She was also kind, and though we may not be able to emulate all of Shelly's characteristics, we can copy her sense of kindness.

Our organization does not provide direct services to consumers. We are a policy-based organization that works with Legislators, Centers for Independent Living, and other groups on policies and best practices. We don't help people directly by building ramps and providing home modifications. We work with Legislators to secure the funds to build the ramps and other modifications. Then we assist Centers for Independent Living by reviewing contracts, administering funds, and filing reports so ramps and other home modification get built.

Though it isn't our job to help people directly, that didn't stop Shelly. Though it wasn't her job as an Executive Director to help, it was her sense of kindness that pushed her to offer assistance. For example, recently Shelly was assisting a gentleman who works in our building, 315 W Ponce de Leon, to obtain a residence. It wasn't part of her job, but it was part of who she was. On her own time, she was making phone calls, helping with paperwork, and making site visits to help this person find a better home. In process, she not only toured the prospective apartment, but she talked with the woman giving the tour for at least 30 minutes to get a good idea if the community there would be a good fit.

Shelly, as an Executive Director, brought an element of kindness to her job. She was a supportive boss, a patient teacher, a good mentor, and a cheerleader. Her work was

accented with her gentle smile.

We need to remember that kindness is a sign of strength. Though we can do a job efficiently, exhibit teamwork, and show expertise, to do a job that makes the world a better place, a place better than we found it, we need to have an element of kindness, kindness when we are off-the-clock and kindness when we are on-the-job. As we live, find ways to be kinder. As we do our job, find a way to add an element of kindness. Remember Shelly Simmons throughout the day and while you work. Remember her kindness and how kindness can make the world a better place.

Warmly,

Becky Tuttle

Acting Director of SILCGA

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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?

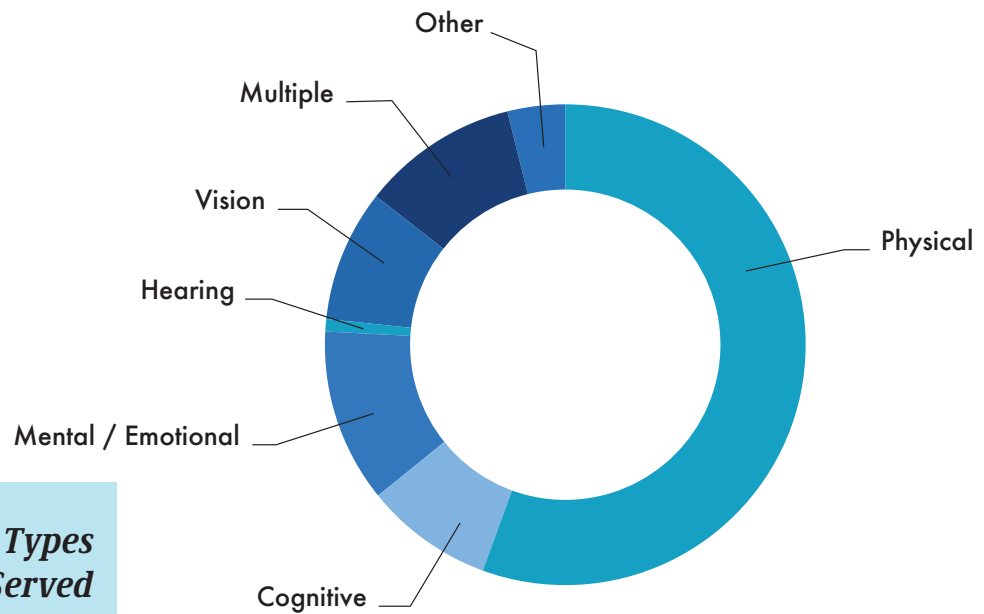
Independent Living is about changing policies and practices that under-estimate, segregate, or oppress people with disabilities.

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.

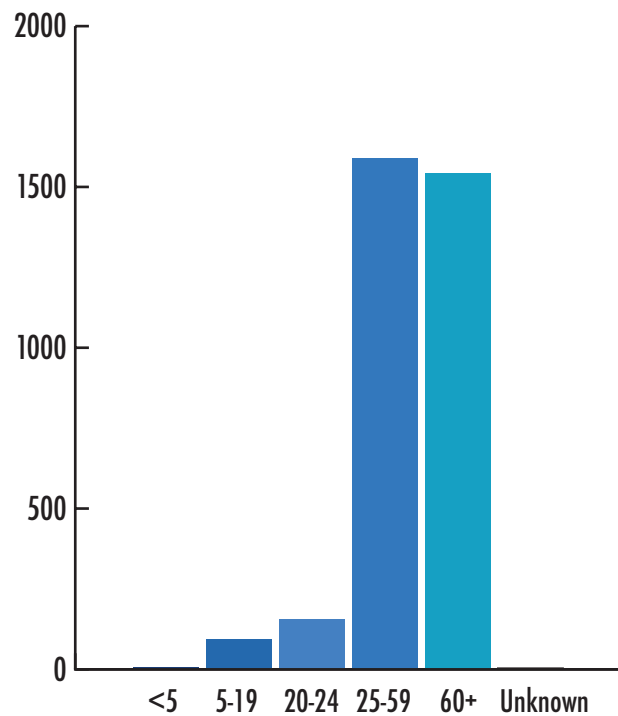
We, therefore, work to change societal attitudes by moving away from segregation, paternalism, and pity, opting instead for empowerment and independence. «

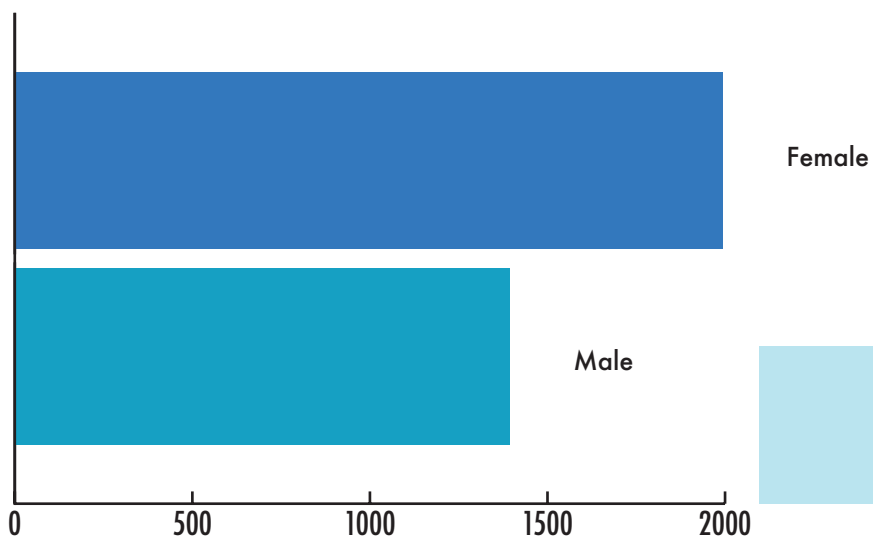
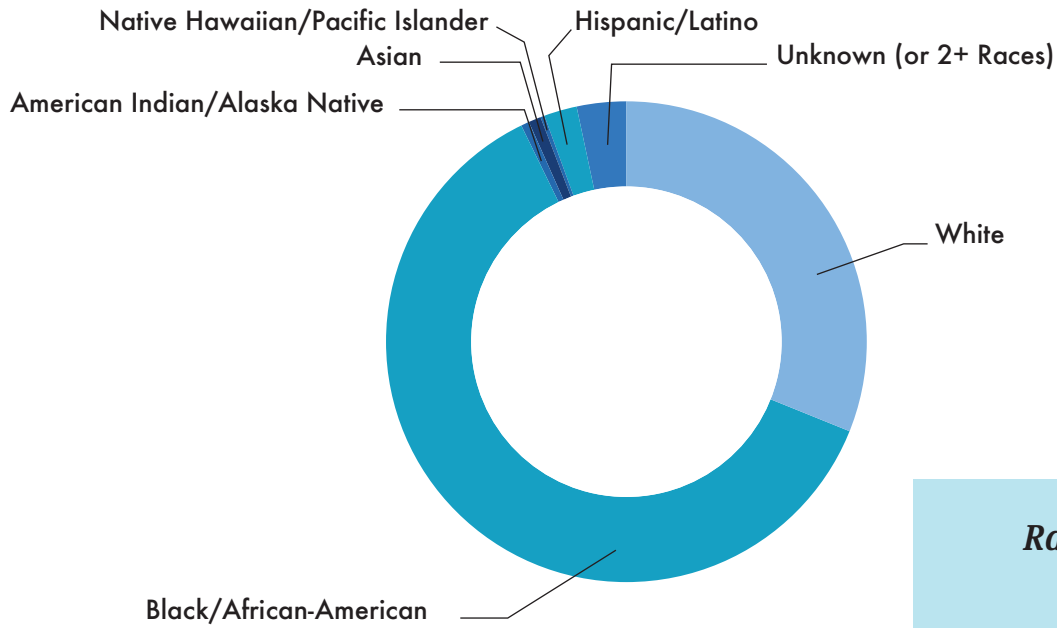
Who the CILs Serve

*Disability Types
Served*



*Ages of Citizens
Served*





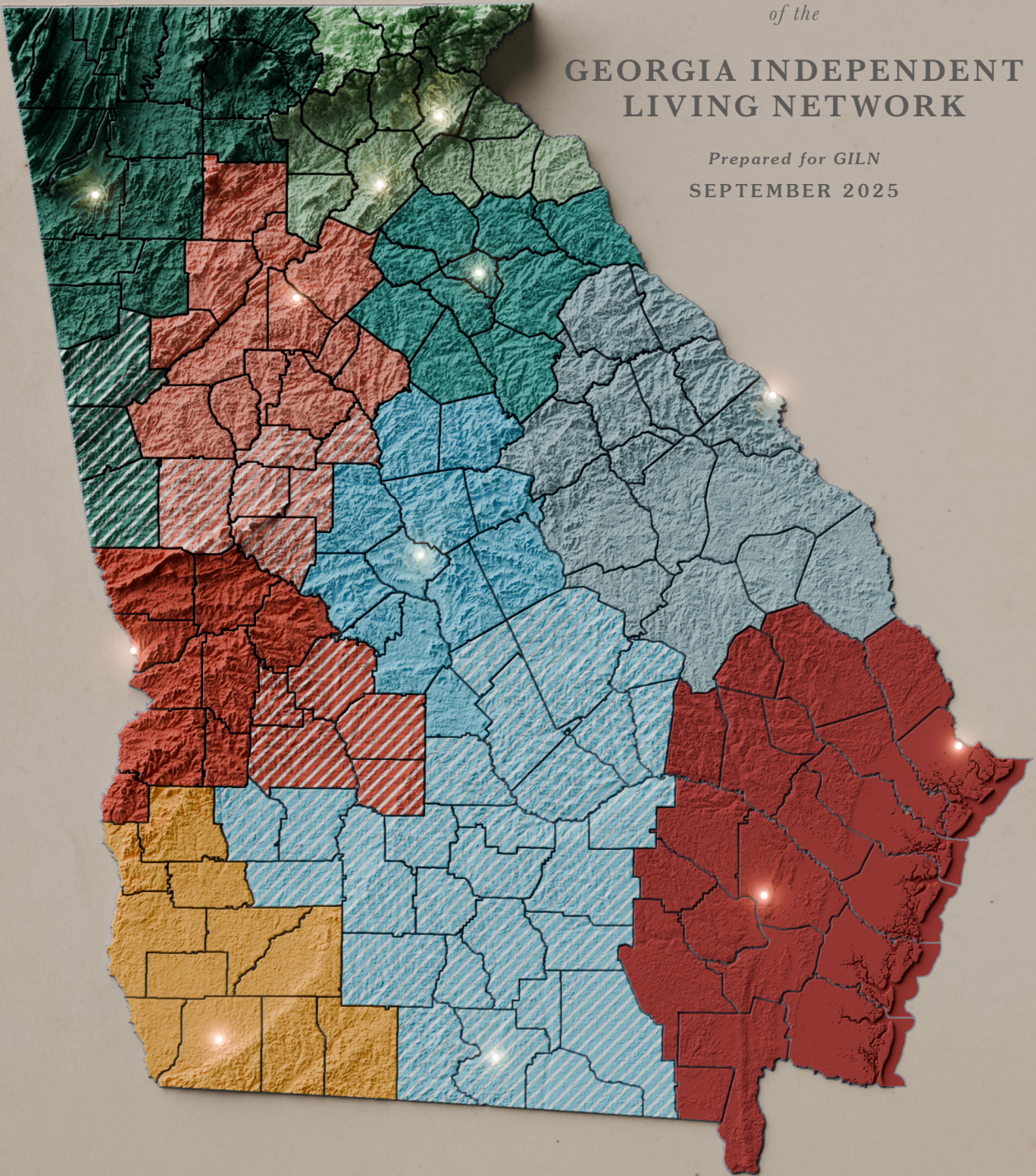
COVERAGE MAP

of the

GEORGIA INDEPENDENT
LIVING NETWORK

Prepared for GILN

SEPTEMBER 2025



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

DIRECTOR: STANCIL TOOTLE

COUNTIES: BAKER, CALHOUN, CLAY, DECATUR, EARLY, GRADY, MILLER,
MITCHELL, RANDOLPH, SEMINOLE, THOMAS



North Georgia

DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER
DEMOREST, GA & VALDOSTA, 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; ATKINSON,
BEN HILL, BERRIEN, BLECKLEY, BROOKS, CLINCH, COFFEE, COLQUITT,
COOK, DODGE, DOUGHERTY, ECHOLS, IRWIN, JEFF DAVIS, LANIER,
LAURENS, LEE, LOWNDES, MONTGOMERY, TELFAIR, TERRELL, TIFT,
TREUTLEN, TURNER, WHEELER, WILCOX, WORTH



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





Top row (left to right): Lois Curtis, one of the plaintiffs in the 1999 Olmstead v. L.C. Supreme Court decision; SILCGA Board in 2005; GILN Event in 2010.



1989–1990

Lee Ann Pendergrass becomes Georgia's first statewide independent living coordinator within the Division of Rehabilitation Services (later GVRA).

1995

Georgia incorporates SILCGA as a nonprofit; Pat Puckett becomes first executive director.

1999

Olmstead v. L.C. Supreme Court decision affirms right to community-based services.

Early 1990s

Pendergrass travels across Georgia, training new Centers for Independent Living in compliance, governance, and reporting.

Late 1990s

SILCGA manages Part B funds to build capacity in local disability-led organizations.

Early 2000s

Mentorship model established for Independent Living Centers.



A Timeline of SILCGA and the Georgia Independent Living Network



Early 2000s

SILCGA participates in Blue Cross settlement, creating Georgia Health Foundation.

2015

SILCGA's first executive director Patricia Puckett retires and is succeeded by SILCGA's current executive director Shelly Simmons.

2025

Expansion of Home Access Program from \$100,000 to \$600,000.

2000s

Completed to expand Centers for Independent Living (CILs).

2000s–2010s

Sponsored projects like Concrete Change promote accessible housing nationally.

2023

Statewide coverage for Information & Referral services achieved.



Bottom row (left to right): Public demonstration in D.C. in the 1990s; Peer support program in 2004; Swearing in ceremony with Governor Nathan Deal in 2013; SILCGA Director Shelly Simmons with first director Pat Puckett at her retirement event in 2015.

CONCRETE
CHANGE

ADAPT
ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSIT
Wheels of Justice

Perish
NOW!
Adapt

Disability
Day



at the
Capitol

COMMUNITY FIRST

FREE OUR PEOPLE



ADAPT

IT'S A CIVIL RIGHT

L.I.F.E. INC.

LIVING INDEPENDENCE FOR EVERYONE



TRANSPORTATION
EDUCATION
TECH SUPPORT
INDEPENDENCE

Flipping The Switch From



If you have come to help me, you are
wasting your time. But if you have come
because your liberation is bound up
with mine, then let us work together.



ADAPT or Perish - Charles Darwin

Life
This person is
Worthy
of Life
as are all people



SILCGA quilt assembled from ADAPT
event t-shirts over the years donated by
first SILCGA Director Pat Puckett

SHAMELESS
EXCITATOR

An Oral History of SILCGA

Thirty years ago, the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) began a journey that would transform disability advocacy across the state.

Born from the passion of grassroots advocates and the momentum of national legislative changes, SILCGA has evolved from a small advisory body into one of the most robust independent living networks in the country.

We spoke with three key figures to pull together the following history of the organization from its early days up until the present: Pat Puckett, its first executive director; Tiffany Clifford, a longtime leader in Georgia's Independent Living Movement and current director of Walton Options; and Lee Ann Pendergrass, Georgia's first statewide independent living coordinator.

From Advisory Board to Independent Nonprofit

Before it was incorporated, the independent living council in Georgia operated as a state advisory board for over a decade. The turning point came in the mid-1990s, when federal law changed to allow independent living councils to become corporate entities. This shift offered greater autonomy and the ability to manage funds directly.

Pat Puckett, already active on the advisory board, recalls how the transition unfolded. "When the law changed that allowed independent living councils to become corporate entities," she explained, "the board chair and Lee Ann Pendergrass, who at the time worked for the state VR agency, incorporated the SILC. And when there was a job opening, I applied."

The timing was historic. Georgia was within the first 10 states in the nation to formally incorporate its council, and Puckett stepped into the role of executive director in September 1995. With incorporation came the ability to manage federal Part B funds – about \$400,000 to \$500,000 in those early years – which SILCGA used to build capacity among local disability-led organizations.

While Puckett's appointment marked the beginning of SILCGA as a nonprofit, Lee Ann Pendergrass's work behind the scenes laid critical groundwork. Having begun her career in Orlando in the mid-1980s as a volunteer teaching sign language, Pendergrass later became Georgia's first statewide independent living coordinator. In

The Council in the early 2000s with Georgia Governor Roy Barnes.



that role, she occupied a unique, and often tense, position between state government and grassroots advocates.

"I kind of was like Henry Kissinger," she remembered. "You're working for the state and you're also working for people with disabilities and you're trying to be productive for both sides."

Her position required her to administer funds, educate local centers on compliance, and compile reports for the state rehabilitation division, all while advocating for greater autonomy for Centers for Independent Living (CILs). "My goal was to help the state agency get out of the role of taking the money and giving it to them. I wanted the money to go directly to them because that was their money."

Pendergrass described driving across Georgia, visiting new and emerging CILs, and offering technical assistance on paperwork, funding compliance, and governance. It was painstaking work, but she saw it as essential: "They wanted more autonomy, they wanted more respect... and I wanted to be able to say, yeah, we need to get that for you."

Laying the Foundation: Training, Peer Support, and Readiness

One of SILCGA's earliest priorities was educating communities about what it meant to be a consumer-controlled organization, which is one of the key requirements for becoming a CIL. Many of these groups began by providing tangible supports, like home modifications and adaptive equipment, while also learning the federal requirements for core independent living services.

Training played a central role in those formative years. Peer support, in particular, was carefully defined to ensure it upheld the values of independence and empowerment. "Peer support is helping people get through rough times and learn how to advocate for themselves."

These efforts paid off. When more federal dollars became available, Georgia's emerging CILs were far more prepared to secure and manage funding. "The readiness that we had when federal dollars became available is one of the biggest achievements," Puckett reflected. "We were much more ready to become centers for independent living."

Pendergrass, too, saw this readiness as transformational. She recalls the shift from state-employed independent living coordinators to consumer-led centers as a landmark victory: "We went from state employees, six of us. Now we're all out and they're running the show. That's huge. That's a huge victory."

The early years were not without friction. Pendergrass recalls sitting uncomfortably between the more cautious state agencies and the passionate advocates who made up SILCGA and the local centers. "At times it was stressful," she admitted. "People weren't always eye to eye... sometimes it was opposing views in some ways. So we had to make them fit, or at least respect each other."

Where the state demanded compliance and caution, SILCGA demanded urgency and boldness. "The council tended to be a little more militant in how they perceived things, where the state agency, that was not on the radar to be militant," Pendergrass explained. But she also saw value in both sides: "Fighting for getting people out of a nursing home, that was a no-brainer from both sides. How you go about doing it, though, that's where the conflict was."

She emphasized that her role was not to hold back the advocates, but to ensure their demands were taken seriously by the state. "For me, working with the council, I really didn't have a problem. I knew where they were coming from: 'We can do this. Just give us the funding.'"

While Puckett and Pendergrass were steering SILCGA's earliest years, another leader was entering the movement. In 1999, Tiffany Clifford moved to Georgia from Florida, where she had worked with adults who had deaf-blindness. She joined Walton Options, a CIL based in Augusta, and her introduction to SILCGA came quickly.

"My full integration to understanding independent living and also the SILC kind of came simultaneously," Clifford recalled. "The very first SILC meeting I had was very soon after I started as the executive director at Walton Options... it was kind of my stepping in. I wasn't really clear, honestly, as the executive of this organization what all that really entailed."

What she found was an organization deeply committed to

collaboration. “The SILC was always very... approachable, supportive,” she said. “Pat definitely had a drive to build independent living and the centers in Georgia and make sure that we had the supports and the resources to help Georgians across all places of Georgia to live independently.”

Growing a Statewide Network and Major Victories

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, SILCGA worked to strengthen and expand Georgia’s network of CILs. One innovative approach was mentorship: established CILs would guide new ones through the complex process of becoming federally recognized Part C centers. This mentorship reduced the risk of losing federal dollars to other states if applications failed.

“Walton Options mentored Macon,” Clifford explained, “and then once we had Part C established in Atlanta, Augusta, Savannah, and Macon, each of us began to mentor another area... so pockets of people who had the drive and desire to create independent living centers in their communities were part of that.”

For Pendergrass, this expansion reflected a new spirit of independence: “With the SILC, you are able to do more, to speak out more, to challenge the status quo and influence what the government thinks should be done... Don’t let

people think you have no power. You have power. Take it. Use it and reuse it.”

As SILCGA matured, it took on larger advocacy campaigns, from the Blue Cross Blue Shield settlement that created a \$169 million health foundation, to fiscal sponsorships of initiatives like Concrete Change, which pushed for “visitable” housing.

But perhaps no achievement looms larger than the *Olmstead v. L.C.* decision. Originating in Georgia, the case established that unnecessary segregation of people with disabilities in institutions constitutes discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act. SILCGA played a pivotal role in convening attorneys and advocates. Many advocates also attended the earlier appellate court in Atlanta, wherein three judges sided with the plaintiffs’ right to community-based services. Puckett herself attended the oral arguments at the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., where the case reached its historic conclusion.

For Pendergrass, this kind of advocacy connected directly to her memories of activists like Pat Puckett and Mark Johnson: “I saw Pat Puckett get arrested more times than I care to think about. I never got arrested, that was where I said I can’t, but I knew my role was to make CILs all they



Disability Day rally in 2010.



Advocacy demonstrations in the early days of SILCGA from the 1990s

can be, from the community, not from me.”

Changing of the Guard

In 2015, SILCGA experienced a major leadership transition. After two decades of guiding the organization, Pat Puckett stepped down as executive director. Her retirement marked the end of an era defined by persistence, bold advocacy, and outspoken leadership. SILCGA's Assistant Director Becky Tuttle recalled, “The development of the SILC required different personalities at different times. Pat was very outspoken. That was exactly what was needed early on to push things forward.”

Succeeding her was Shelly Simmons, who brought a more diplomatic approach. “Shelly took a more diplomatic style,” Tuttle explained, noting how the contrast in leadership reflected the organization's growth and evolving priorities.

One of the final projects under Puckett's leadership led by Simmons symbolized this transition. SILCGA conducted

a comprehensive study of apartment complexes across the Atlanta metro region, examining accessibility for tenants with disabilities. Volunteers surveyed rental units and complexes, gathering critical data that would inform advocacy on housing access and compliance.

When Simmons assumed the executive director role, the council's priorities broadened. Funding emerged as a defining achievement of her tenure. Tuttle emphasized Simmons's success in securing new satellite services, as well as expanding information and referral services statewide: “When we include information and referral services, we actually have some independent living services all across Georgia now, not just in pockets.”

Another significant contribution under Shelly's leadership came through the expansion of the Home Accessibility Program with its budget growing from just \$100,000 annually to \$600,000 per year. “That is attributed to Shelly's advocacy,” Tuttle noted.

From strengthening programs to ensuring statewide reach, Simmons carried forward the mission of SILCGA

Left: Shelly Simmons at a Georgia Votes that Count event in 2010. Right: Pat Puckett, SILCGA's first director.





Left: SILCGA Director Pat Puckett showing 2010 county coverage map; Right: Staff photo with Becky Tuttle, Shelly Simmons, Kelly Rhine, and Parker Glick (left to right)

with a steady hand. Where Puckett had embodied the fiery drive of a young movement, Simmons built on that foundation with the pragmatism and diplomacy needed to expand resources and services for Georgians with disabilities.

Challenges, Persistence, and the Call for New Voices

Despite progress, SILCGA and its partners faced ongoing hurdles: lapses in state funding, budget threats at the federal level, and cultural barriers in Georgia. Pendergrass described the state as historically “paternalistic,” with people with disabilities expected to remain quiet. But she has seen change: “In the past, people with disabilities were patient and didn’t rock the boat. Now they’re willing to rock the boat and say, I need this. I’m not asking for something that’s not appropriate.”

Her message to the next generation is simple: “Do not give up. We have to continue to fight or advocate, because it could be taken away

tomorrow. The younger generation needs to rise up and take it.”

Reflecting on three decades of impact, Puckett, Clifford, and Pendergrass all share pride in the unified vision that has guided SILCGA. Clifford emphasized the importance of building a strong network; Puckett pointed to persistence and channeling resources toward integration; and Pendergrass reminded advocates never to underestimate their own power.

Together, their stories highlight not only what SILCGA has accomplished, but also why its work remains urgent. The victories of the past – whether in funding, civil rights, or housing accessibility – are reminders that progress is never permanent. As Pendergrass put it: “We need more accountability and people at the field, they can do that. Don’t let people think you have no power”. “

Left: Board meeting in 2011; Right: Board member Rashell Baldini with daughter Kennedy at our annual gala in 2022.





Kip Slade, employment advocate for people with disabilities

Building Pathways to Employment and Self-Sufficiency

For more than two decades, Kenneth “Kip” Slade has been a driving force in disability advocacy. His journey began in Cobb County, Georgia, with a statewide initiative called Project Access, which aimed to help people with disabilities secure employment. Initially hired as a grants and project manager, Slade oversaw the program’s operations and saw it through to completion. But when the grant ended, his involvement in the disability community was only beginning.

“After we completed the project,” Slade recalled, “all of these organizations started calling me to ask me to participate on their boards and advocate for them. And I did, without pay. I went ahead and started managing grants in other places, but I stayed connected to the community.”

That commitment has endured for 20 years. His motivation, he says, comes from witnessing the transformative effect of meaningful work. “When I saw people with disabilities going to work...it was just fascinating to me. I felt compelled to stay involved.”

From Customized Employment to Self-Employment Advocacy

One of Slade’s central passions is customized employment, a model that tailors jobs to an individual’s strengths and interests rather than forcing them into predefined roles. He notes that his early work on Project Access was doing exactly this, though the term had not yet been coined. Today, he is an advocate for incorporating customized employment strategies into Georgia’s workforce systems, particularly through one-stop career centers.

Customized employment begins with a discovery process, conducting a personal inventory, meeting with family members, and identifying natural skills and passions. “We create a job based on their own strengths,” Slade explained. “Instead of different types of assessments that currently are used, we go to

the individual to discover what’s natural for that person and then create income around it.”

While Slade supports many forms of customized employment, his true love is self-employment. He argues that it offers a powerful alternative to the discrimination people with disabilities often face in traditional workplaces. “Forget all that, just start your own business,” he says. Self-employment not only provides independence for the person with a disability but can also create income opportunities for family members who have sacrificed careers to provide care.

Success Stories and Microenterprises

Over the years, Slade has helped launch or support dozens of small businesses based on individual interests. Among his favorites is a young woman on the autism spectrum who started a mobile paper shredding service after discovering a fascination with shredders in her mother’s office. “She was able to get about 10 businesses around and she did all the shredding...and increased her income that way through a microenterprise,” Slade said.

Another standout is a young man who turned his love for animals into a mobile dog grooming service, starting in his own neighborhood before expanding by word of mouth. And then there was a young woman passionate about baking, who used creative funding to acquire an oven for an existing bakery, creating a sustainable job for herself and boosting the bakery’s capacity.

These examples, Slade says, show how employment rooted in personal passion can generate far more than the typical disability income of around \$800 per month. In some cases, he has seen incomes rise to \$3,000 or \$4,000, bringing greater financial stability and self-sufficiency.

Funding the Vision

Slade’s work often involves piecing together

funding from multiple sources to support customized and self-employment ventures. He is currently exploring a partnership model in which the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) could bring \$100,000 to Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), triggering a match from the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration’s Innovation and Expansion funds. With an 80% match, that \$100,000 could become \$500,000, which could then be used for staff training, equipment purchases, and microenterprise seed funding.

His goal is ambitious: fund 20 to 40 small businesses with \$2,500 each, enough to purchase essential equipment or supplies. “Say for example somebody wants to start a lawn care business, they could buy a riding mower with the money that we give them,” he explained.

Slade also champions policy changes, such as allowing Georgians with disabilities to save more without jeopardizing benefits. In other states like California, individuals can save up to \$100,000 without penalty, providing capital for ventures that could transform their lives.

Federal Threats and the Fragility of Funding

Slade is candid about the risks posed by political and budgetary shifts. His day job as a financial analyst for the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education has given him firsthand insight into how dependent programs are on federal dollars. A recent disruption in federal fund disbursements temporarily threatened critical student support programs and, by extension, illustrated how quickly disability-focused initiatives could be affected.

“It’s just an example of how much this country is intertwined with federal support,” Slade noted. “I believe funding cuts will affect us, and it will affect the largest number of people who are least able to defend themselves.”

Shelly Simmons: A Legacy of Love and Service

Shelly Simmons, Executive Director of Georgia's Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), lived a life defined not by limitations, but by resilience, clarity of purpose, and a steadfast devotion to creating opportunities for people with disabilities.

"I grew up in California, Southern California, Los Angeles—a little city called Inglewood," she once recalled. As a young girl, her dreams had little to do with disability advocacy. "I wanted to be a veterinarian... but I realized I could not physically handle animals. I thought about sports broadcasting, but at the time it was a male-dominated business. So I said, well, let me move on to something else."

At just 13, Shelly was diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, a condition that weakens the muscles around the hips and shoulders. Though she resisted using a wheelchair for many years, she eventually accepted her first power chair in her late 20s. "As crazy as it sounds, my chair gave me my independence back," she said. "I was able to get around without fear... but it was also very scary because I knew once I got in the chair that would be it."

Shelly's advocacy career began in California at the Disability Resource Center in Long Beach.

"I was a navigator, a disability navigator," she explained. "I helped inform individuals how they could work and still maintain their benefits. It was a learning experience. I was fired up, energetic, willing to be able to pass this information along as I was learning it."

Her role as a disability navigator allowed her to use her life experience to guide others—work that solidified her calling as an advocate.

Shelly later moved into another role at a Center for Independent Living in Anaheim. While the details were different, the passion was the same. She brought her experience, determination, and belief that systems could be made easier for those navigating disability.

But after years of service in California, Shelly began to feel restless. "I was just ready for a change," she said. "Born and raised in California, I was just looking for something different."





Her move to Georgia became a turning point. “Moving to Georgia, everything was slow for me compared to California. In my mind I’m like, oh my God, you guys don’t have this, you don’t have that. What’s happening here?”

Her first step into Georgia’s disability community came at Disability Link, one of the state’s Centers for Independent Living.

“I went to Disability Link just to see about different resources, find out what’s happening here in Georgia,” she recalled. “I submitted a resume, worked with their employment coordinator at the time, because I was ready to get to work and do some things.”

This role grounded her in the local landscape and prepared her for the broader impact she would soon make.

Soon, Shelly moved upstairs, literally, to the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILC). “That’s where I felt more useful,” she reflected. “Doing the policy work—policies that will have a positive effect on individuals with disabilities and for a larger group of people instead of just one individual.”

At SILC, Shelly moved from direct service into systemic change. She engaged legislators, agencies, and communities in conversations too often missing disabled voices.

“Finding out that they have no individuals with disabilities represented,” she explained, “causes them not to fully think things out, instead of going to the horse’s mouth and getting the information

they need to make critical decisions.”

When longtime SILC director Pat Puckett prepared to retire, she surprised Shelly by saying the decision had already been made: Shelly would step into the role. “I didn’t know it—she was grooming me,” Shelly remembered. “She said, ‘I’m going to retire in the next year... and I already found my replacement.’ I said, ‘Wait, what?’ But she said, ‘The time is now.’”

As Executive Director, Shelly guided the expansion of independent living centers across Georgia, revived the state’s home access program for disability-related modifications, and fought tirelessly for equitable caregiver pay.

Her leadership was both bold and steady. “I didn’t want to destroy anything Pat had already established,” she said. “So I was very careful to take it slow, keep what she had put in place going, and then you could start to put your stamp on it.”

Her words carried conviction, but they also carried grace. She often reminded younger advocates: “Find one or two things that you’re passionate about and go for it. My first year, I tried to put too many irons in the fire and nothing got hot. I had to back up and say, okay, what do I need to do? Take two or three things, make some serious progress, and run with that.”

Above all, Shelly believed.

She believed in independence when others doubted it. She believed in fairness when systems resisted it. And most of all, she believed in people: their abilities, their potential, and their dignity.

That belief lives on in the centers she helped expand, the programs she revived, the advocates she mentored, and the communities she strengthened.

Her story reminds us that one person’s courage can spark a movement, one person’s belief can transform lives, and one person’s legacy can continue long after they are gone.

Shelly’s victories are our victories. Her vision is now our responsibility. And her memory will forever be a light guiding the work of SILCGA and the disability community she so faithfully served. «





Staff Reflections

"She was a pillar for not only our office but our entire community. She was the first person who believed in me and gave me my opportunity. All of my victories were never just mine—they were hers as well."

— Jordan Hall, Mobility Coordinator, SILCGA

"Shelly was a shining light in the independent living movement and especially in Georgia. She was a force to be reckoned with—she did it with sweetness and kindness, but she got her point across and got things done."

— Becky Tuttle, Assistant Director, SILCGA

"She taught me to be who I was out loud and not to be afraid of someone else's opinion. She pushed me to walk into every room knowing I belonged there."

— Ester DuRante, Advocate/Outreach Coordinator, SILCGA

"She was diplomatic and always willing to work across the aisle. For her, it wasn't about politics—it was about serving as many people with disabilities as possible. Just this past year, she went out of her way to help an older gentleman secure affordable senior housing. That was Shelly."

— Victor McRae, Housing Policy Coordinator, SILCGA

"Shelly was always supportive of my work and made sure I had time off to care for my parents when I needed it. I'll never forget how much she believed in me, but most importantly, how much she cared about me as a person."

— Matt Shedd, Communications Coordinator, SILCGA



Left photo: Shelly with staff members Ester DuRante, Victor McRae, and Jordan Hall (left to right); Right photo: Shelly with her parents Loretta and John Simmons



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SILCGA Represented on the NCIL Board

A pivotal moment came from Shelly Simmons, executive director of the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) introduced Ester DuRante as someone she was mentoring to potentially step into leadership. What began as an unexpected introduction soon grew into a genuine pathway: Ester was invited into meetings with other directors, joined peer cohorts, and began sharing her perspective as one of only a few non-directors in the room.

“Out of all of the directors, there were just two of us who were advocates,” Ester recalled. “That led me to the position on the NCIL board. I didn’t even know what position at first, it turned out to be member-at-large.”

Taking her seat on the board, Ester was immediately asked to share her “why.” For her, the answer came from family and community.

“My ‘why’ has been about representing Georgia, but also representing my family,” she said. “My family is diverse in so many ways, with different dynamics of disability. I felt it was important for voices like mine to be heard. Not that others’ voices aren’t important, but real diversity is needed in order to make change.”

Her perspective reminded her that leadership is not about title or status, it is about representation. “Sometimes I can see that there are more people who don’t look like me than those who do,” she reflected. “That’s why I felt it was time to step forward. True diversity is needed, and I knew I had to follow that calling.”

For Ester, the most powerful part of joining the board so far has been the genuine connections. At her first meeting, she had a long conversation with Jason, another leader. “He didn’t just want to know why I wanted to be on the board,” she said. “He wanted to know who I am outside of being a

representative. He asked about my daughters, told me about his, and really let me in. It wasn’t one-sided. He saw me.”

That experience, she says, made her feel welcomed in a way that wasn’t about labels or roles, but about mutual respect. “That’s a great quality in leadership,” she reflected. “It gave me a sense that I belonged and that my voice matters here.”

Looking forward, Ester describes herself as a visionary. “I feel like I’m here on purpose,” she said. “I’m divinely guided into something greater than myself. And because of that, I allow alignment to lead me.”

Her vision for the NCIL board and the broader disability rights movement is rooted in inclusivity, balance, and the recognition of each person’s gifts. “We all have God-given talents,” she explained. “Sometimes, because we’re trying to fit into a label or a role, those talents go unnoticed. My hope is that we come together and use everyone’s strengths without exhausting just a few people. Balance is key.”

That balance, for Ester, also means modeling the diversity and inclusion that the disability community advocates for. “We say we are for the disability community, so what does that look like? We have to show the world. We have to be the example people need to see.”

Though she still describes herself as new to leadership, Ester sees her role on the NCIL board as an opportunity to embody the change she wants to see. “Why not be the example I’m desiring to see?” she asked. “Why not be the true leader I’m looking for?”

Her hope is simple yet profound: “Together, we can show inclusivity and diversity. We can use our voices and our talents to build the community we say we stand for. And if I’ve been aligned to this role at this time in my life, then I want to live up to that calling”. “

Left photo: Ester DuRante (center) with Jordan Hall (left) and Becky Tuttle (right); Right photo: Jordan Hall speaking at an event hosted by Senator Jon Ossoff





Expanding Our Leadership in Transportation and Emergency Preparedness

By Jordan Hall, Mobility Coordinator

The Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia (SILCGA) continues to make meaningful progress in advancing mobility and accessibility for people with disabilities across the state. By actively engaging in statewide and national initiatives, the Council has elevated its role as both an advocate and a resource, ensuring that the voices of individuals with disabilities are represented in critical transportation and emergency preparedness planning.

One of the most significant ways SILCGA has expanded its influence is through membership on key boards and committees. As a board member of the Georgia Transit Association, SILCGA brings disability perspectives to statewide transit planning and decision-making. This involvement ensures that accessibility remains a priority when discussing funding priorities, operational challenges, and long-term strategies.

In addition, the Council plays an active role on the MARTA Accessibility Committee, where it advises on improvements that directly affect riders with disabilities in the Atlanta region. Through this membership, SILCGA provides valuable feedback on areas such as station design, vehicle accessibility, and rider support services.

On a national scale, SILCGA also serves on the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center Coordination Advisory Committee, representing Georgia in broader conversations about aging, disability, and mobility coordination. This role not only strengthens partnerships with other states but also provides resources and strategies that inform local initiatives.

Beyond these leadership roles, SILCGA has prioritized collaborating with Georgia's Centers for Independent Living (CILs) by sharing information and resources to help them connect with regional partners. The Council has worked to identify funding opportunities that strengthen community collaboration in the areas of transportation and emergency preparedness.

For transportation, SILCGA has directed CILs to potential grants and partnership opportunities that allow them to expand mobility options for people with disabilities, particularly in rural or underserved areas where reliable transit remains limited.

In the area of emergency preparedness, SILCGA has collaborated with CILs in building stronger partnerships with regional emergency management agencies and other organizations, ensuring that people with disabilities are not overlooked in disaster planning and response efforts.

These combined efforts demonstrate SILCGA's ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive Georgia. By balancing advocacy at the state and national level with collaboration alongside CILs, the Council is making strides in shaping a transportation and emergency preparedness system that empowers individuals with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in their communities. «

The Annual March to the Capitol in DC at the 2025 National Council on Independent Living Conference (NCIL).



Under Threat:

Voices from the Frontlines of a Movement in 2025

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

The disability rights movement in the United States stands in a precarious moment. Protections once assumed permanent – Medicaid, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Administration for Community Living, and even the language of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility – are under coordinated attack. This is not simply about budgets or legal disputes.

It is about whether millions of Americans with disabilities will be recognized as full participants in community life or once again pushed toward segregation and invisibility.

Theo Braddy, Executive Director of the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), underscored the urgency: “We need people right now, more than ever before, to work together collectively. Because we are facing threats we haven’t seen in a long time

Medicaid: More than a Program, a Lifeline

For people with disabilities, Medicaid is the backbone of independent living. It funds personal attendants, home modifications, and supports that allow people to live outside of institutions. Cuts and new work requirements threaten to destabilize the system.

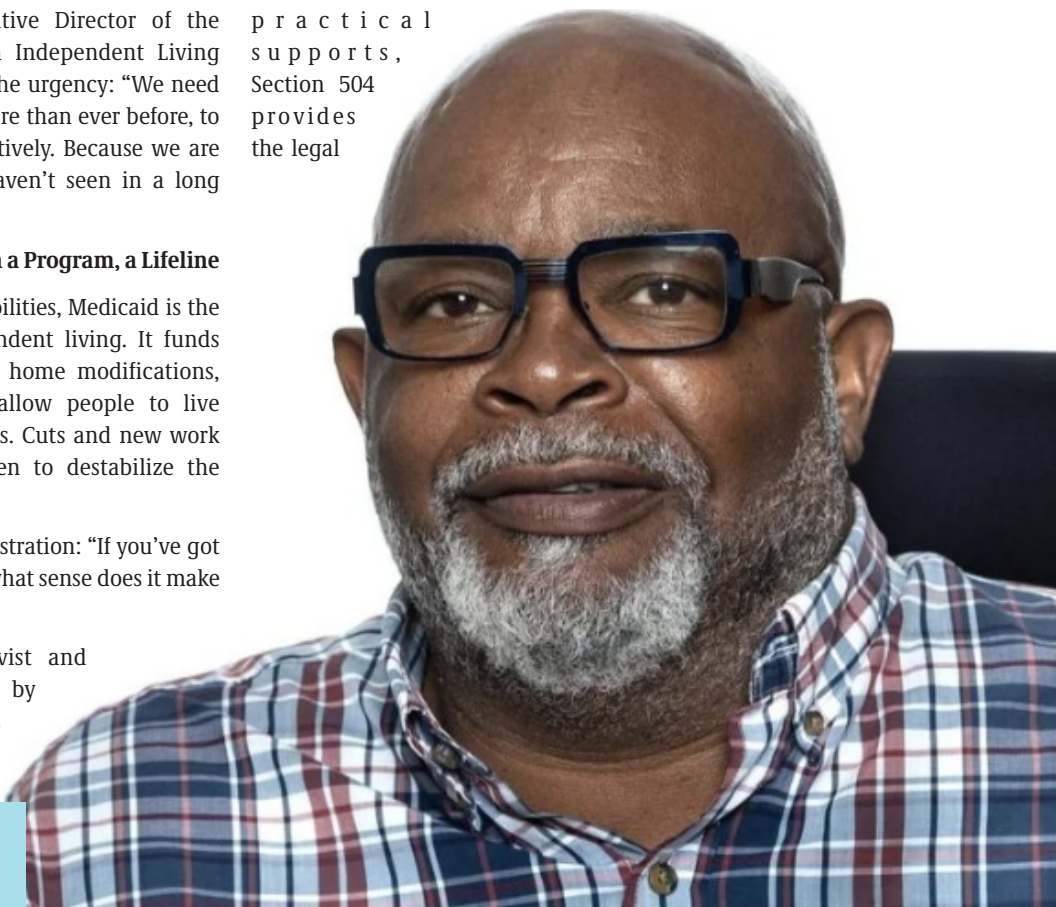
Braddy voiced the frustration: “If you’ve got a lifelong disability, what sense does it make to keep proving it?”

For Keri Gray, activist and founder of Ignite by Keri Gray, the stakes

are deeper: “When you create barriers to basic supports, you’re not just threatening services. You’re threatening people’s ability to survive with dignity.” Behind such policies is a vision that sees dependence as inevitable and institutionalization acceptable. The independent living movement has spent decades countering that vision. Medicaid, advocates argue, is not charity – it is civil rights funding. Without it, many would be forced back into settings that strip away choice and community.

Section 504: Civil Rights Under Siege

If Medicaid secures practical supports, Section 504 provides the legal



Director of NCIL, Theo Braddy.

foundation. Passed in 1973, it was the first federal civil rights law protecting people with disabilities. It was hard-won – activists staged the famous 504 Sit-in in 1977 to force implementation. Today, lawsuits threaten recent updates to 504 rules that strengthened healthcare protections, requiring accessible equipment and banning biased medical metrics. Braddy was blunt: “That belief, that disabled lives are worth less, has never disappeared. Section 504 is the shield against that ableist logic.” Rolling back protections would reopen the door to discrimination many thought long settled.

The Administration for Community Living: Losing Ground Already Won

The Administration for Community Living (ACL), created in 2012, united aging and disability services under the independent living philosophy. Its programs emphasized empowerment over paternalism. Now, restructuring threatens to scatter ACL’s work across agencies. Braddy worried: “It’s almost like we have to start over again. We built understanding at ACL about the social model of disability. If it moves, will that knowledge transfer?” Advocates fear not just bureaucratic confusion but cultural regression – programs once rooted in empowerment could be recast in paternalistic terms.

DEIA: When Words Become Targets

The backlash has reached language itself. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility – once baseline commitments – are being reframed as controversial. This shift leaves organizations vulnerable. Some fear referencing DEIA could jeopardize funding. “If funders start treating DEIA as a liability, it could put centers out of business,” Braddy warned. But he urged: “Don’t succumb. Elevate DEI! Don’t water it down into buzzwords.”

The Mental Health Toll of Uncertainty

Beyond policy losses, uncertainty itself wears people down. Constant reversals create instability. Braddy described it as perpetual firefighting: “They put out one executive order, then another. They’ve got us running around putting out fires.” The cycle erodes both organizations and people. Advocates report burnout, staff anxiety, and community members unsure if supports will still exist tomorrow. As Gray noted: “Sometimes the most radical act is to rest, so we can rise again.”

Reframing Disability: From Burden to Investment

Despite the climate, younger leaders are carving new strategies. Keely Kat-Wells, disability employment advocate and founder of Making Space, insists on shifting perceptions: “We cannot allow disability to be treated as a liability or a cause for pity. This community is an investment, an opportunity.” Her platform connects disabled professionals with employment and training, reframing accessibility as a driver of growth. Technology is central to her vision: “AI could be the new curb cut, but only if disabled people are in the room shaping it.”

Intersectionality and Collective Power

Gray emphasizes coalition: “It cannot just be the disability community fighting Medicaid cuts. If you’re not working alongside racial justice groups, LGBTQ groups, women’s groups – you need to form better friends. Liberation doesn’t happen in silos.” As a Black woman with a disability, Gray embodies intersectionality. Her advocacy insists disability rights must be rooted in broader struggles for justice.

Generational Transition: Passing the Baton

The movement is also navigating generational change. Braddy acknowledged: “I am on the other side of the mountain. My job now is to pass the baton well, to share wisdom, and let the younger generation lead.” For leaders like Kat-Wells and Gray, stepping forward means honoring decades of struggle – from the 504 Sit-in to the ADA – while charting new strategies for a digital, intersectional era. Kat-Wells reflected: “When you look at the legends who built this movement, it can feel intimidating. But what matters is that we keep building, together.”

The Heartbeat of the Movement

Amid policy debates, advocates return to a core truth: the disability rights movement is about humanity. Gray put it plainly: “We always have to bring it back to the heartbeat of our movement. And that is our community’s desire to be seen as people, to be worthy. And we deserve it.” That heartbeat carried activists through the Capitol Crawl, the 504 Sit-in, and every battle where society said no and they answered yes. Today, it carries them through uncertainty.

An Invitation to Join

The challenges of 2025 are real, but retreat is not an option. Braddy reminded: “Oppressors only become powerful when those who are oppressed allow them to.” Kat-Wells stressed opportunity: “This is not about charity. It’s about building the future together, with disability at the center of innovation and community.” And Gray offered the call: “Get involved. Show up. Make the connections across movements. This is how liberation happens.”

The disability rights movement has always been about refusing invisibility and insisting on dignity. That future is again on the line – and the invitation to join remains open. «



SILCGA staff Victor McRae (left) and Jordan Hall (right) met with US Senator Jon Ossoff (center) in July 2025.

★ MEETING WITH LAWMAKERS ★



In March 2025, Senator Larry Walker formally presented our staff with Georgia Senate Resolution 125: "A RESOLUTION recognizing and commending the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia."

The National Aging and Disability Transportation Resource Center: Ensuring Mobility and Independence

Access to reliable, safe, and accessible transportation is a cornerstone of independence for older adults and individuals with disabilities. The National Aging and Disability Transportation Resource Center (NADTC) plays a critical role in supporting this need, providing resources, technical assistance, and guidance to communities across the United States. Through its efforts, the NADTC helps ensure that transportation systems work for all people allowing them to remain active, engaged, and connected to essential services such as healthcare, employment, education, and social opportunities.

The NADTC offers a wide range of resources to support state and local agencies, transit providers, and organizations serving older adults and individuals with disabilities. These resources include best practice toolkits, research and data on accessible transportation, guidance on policy development, and training materials designed to enhance mobility services. By equipping communities with these tools, the NADTC promotes transportation solutions that address both the physical and social barriers that can limit independence.

Despite its vital role, the future of funding for organizations like the NADTC remains uncertain. As national budgets and administrative priorities evolve, it is unclear what level of support will be provided to ensure the continued operation of this essential resource. The potential loss of funding could severely impact the availability of technical assistance and guidance for state and local agencies, leaving older adults and individuals with disabilities without critical transportation support. Protecting and maintaining organizations like the NADTC is therefore crucial, not only for the populations



Jordan Hall (center) with Kofi Wakhisi (left) and Bennett Foster (right) from the Atlanta Regional Commission.

they serve but for the broader goal of building accessible communities.

The importance of such initiatives was illustrated in earlier years when Walton Options, a local Center for Independent Living (CIL), was utilized by the NADTC. Through this collaboration, Walton Options helped provide insights into transportation challenges and served as a conduit for community engagement, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions and informed policy-making. This partnership highlights how national organizations can leverage local CIL

expertise to translate research and resources into practical, community-based solutions.

In conclusion, the National Aging and Disability Transportation Resource Center remains a vital pillar in ensuring mobility and independence for older adults and individuals with disabilities. As the landscape of funding remains uncertain, it is imperative that policymakers, communities, and advocates recognize the importance of protecting organizations like the NADTC, ensuring that accessible transportation remains a reality for all who need it. «



Home Access Program Achieves Record Funding and Impact

By Victor McRae, Housing Policy Coordinator

This has been a wonderful year for the Home Access Program (HAP) here in Georgia. Earlier this year, many SILCGA staff members visited the state Capitol on multiple occasions to advocate for HAP. During these visits, we met with numerous Georgia representatives and spoke to the Appropriations Committee about the merits of the program. Our voices were strengthened by Commissioner Nunn from the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), who highlighted how HAP helps individuals with disabilities remain in their homes while living independently.

A few weeks later, we received the exciting news that our funding had been approved by the Governor, increasing it from \$100,000 in previous years to an incredible \$600,000. To put this in perspective, last year's funding allowed 13 home improvement projects to be completed. With this year's increased funding, we have high hopes for making a much greater impact across the state.

In just the last two months, nine projects have already been approved. This work could

not have been accomplished without the dedication of the contract administrators from the various Centers for Independent Living (CILs) across Georgia.

Our goal before the end of this fiscal year is

to fully utilize the funding and improve the homes of 50+ residents across the state. This is a huge step forward for disability advocacy, and we hope you will continue to raise your voices in support of initiatives that help all Georgians live independently. «



Top: Ribbon-cutting ceremony for Phoenix Station, which opened 244 units of affordable, high-quality, accessible housing in Decatur in August 2025. Bottom: Victor McRae speaks at the ribbon-cutting event.



SILCGA

Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia

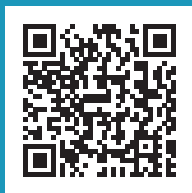
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