Local Disability Advocates Storm State Capitol - Protest State ILC Funding Cuts

“Don’t be a zero; Restore the cuts; Be our hero!” These words reverberated throughout the State Capitol on August 19, as seven ATI disability advocates joined more than 200 others from across the state to convene in a large rotunda that sits down the hall from Governor Paterson’s Administrative Offices. The group represented New York’s 40 Independent Living Centers (ILCs) and rallied to support disability services that are facing severe cuts due to the impending state budget deficit.

In early August, the governor proposed immediate cuts to ILCs by 6% on remaining disbursements this year. The cut would carry over into Fiscal Year 2009 and beyond. The cut would be in addition to a 2% cut that ILCs already received.

“We who believe in freedom will not rest until we stop the cuts, stop the cuts, stop the cuts, we won’t rest until we stop the cuts.” Almost seamlessly, the group’s barks turned into a melodic mantra. ILCs provide guidance and advocacy to people with disabilities in all areas that affect their choice to fully participate in society as independent persons.

“Who do we want? Governor Paterson! When do we want him? Now!” In the early afternoon, a new chant raised the Capitol louder than any other before it. In response to the protest, the governor’s senior staff, the advocates recalled the fruits of their prior discussions with the same staff. Those discussions yielded the very cuts that the group was there to protest.

“Save our programs; Save our wages; Stop the cuts now!” With no response from the Governor, the mounting group stormed the hallway leading to the administrative offices. News crews arrived, state troopers multiplied and Senate and Assembly leaders appeared; some even joined in the protest.

The demonstration continued tirelessly until three of the group’s leaders finally gained access to the Governor’s offices. Unfortunately, the efforts were to no avail, as later in the evening state leaders had reached consensus; the cuts would remain.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Employment Conference ........2
October is NDEAM.................2
ATI UCS Eligible..................2
Staff Trainings....................3
Parks Access Pass.................3
Accessible Currency Myths.....3
Lewis Earns FDC..................4
New ADA Regs Proposed ........4
ATI Awarded $300,000 ..........4
ADA Celebration..................4
ATI Lands Chief Architect ......5
Accessibility Experts.............5
Psychological First Aid.........6
Arthritis Support................6
Cutting Edge Technology .......6
ADA Celebration Pics.............7

Independent Living Centers (ILCs) are cost-effective, peer-run organizations that provide information, advocacy, training and peer support for people with disabilities. ILCs are critical to the state’s effort to transition and divert people from placement in a nursing facility or other institution. They also are leaders in assisting youth with disabilities who are transitioning out of the educational system. Even though these centers offer a more cost-effective, non-medical model approach to meeting the needs of people with disabilities, they are facing the possibility of being cut twice in the same year!

Dan Mullins, ATI Board Member, said “it was great to participate in government and to see the results of your efforts first-hand.” He said he “encourages everyone to take part in this sort of opportunity,” after all, “it makes you a stronger advocate and a more knowledgeable Board member.”

Above: Laura Eaton, Mary Ewing, Steve Potts, Karen Sanford and Fran Pizzola rally to restore cuts.
One of the premiere components to the ATI Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) is its semi-annual Employment Conference. Last May, ATI’s Spring 2008 Conference was the agency’s most successful ever. Each of the three four-hour sessions aimed to: (1) serve individuals with disabilities who are seeking community employment; (2) build collaboration among and awareness of all local workforce development partners; and (3) reduce the stigma that exists relating to disability issues.

First, ATI’s Spring 2008 Employment Conference offered a plethora of information and hands-on activities to participants. In addition to covering their employment rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act, participants learned about work incentives, the variety of services that are available throughout the community and how to navigate them, and how to apply the independent living philosophy to their work readiness and job search processes. Participants also heard from four local employers about job opportunities that existed in the community, how to apply, and what would be expected of them as employees. The conference featured a job-search clinic that was facilitated by a local employment agency and an interviewing clinic that was facilitated by the SUNY Cortland Career Services Department.

Second, ATI’s Spring 2008 Employment Conference aimed to bring local workforce development agencies and service providers together to build awareness about each others’ programs and services, as well as to provide a forum for dialogue on ways to collaborate and indentify ways to improve services and opportunities for mutual customers.

Third, ATI’s Spring 2008 Employment Conference aimed to educate businesses on the abilities that individuals with disabilities have and to reduce any stigma that might be associated with a person that has a disability. In addition to introducing businesses to our agency and the others in the community that offer disability services, business presenters left the conference with increased awareness of accessibility issues all around, whether it be a better understanding of needs their own customers might have, or a willingness to develop job shadowing experiences for individuals in the PMP.

Each October, Cortland County joins the nation to recognize the month of October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). This annual recognition aims to honor and celebrate the accomplishments of local employees with disabilities who have achieved success in the workplace, as well as to acknowledge the local businesses that have provided career opportunities to (and benefited from the outstanding contributions of) employees with disabilities.

Nominations for business and employee awards will be accepted until Friday, August 29. Nomination forms are available at ATI. This year, employee and employer awards will be presented in the Cortland Ramada Ballroom during a recognition breakfast on October 1, 2008, from 8:00 to 10:00 am.

On August 14, ATI received word from the State Education Department that it would be placed into a pool of eligible providers for consideration of awarding a Unified Contract Services (UCS) service contract. While ATI already offers many of the services, it would become eligible to receive fees from VESID to provide those services to qualified individuals. ATI received PASS ratings to provide the following VESID services: Entry Services Level I, II and III; Work Readiness Services Level I, II and III; Work Experience Development; Job Retention Services; Work and Benefits Community Information Sessions; Short Term and Long Term Benefits Advisement; and Coaching Supports. ATI anticipates a final decision regarding specific contract awards in the early fall.
ATI Staff Builds Stronger Access to Independence

ATI has pressed full speed ahead to strengthen ATI staff ability to provide new, high quality, and innovative programming to individuals with disabilities. Since January 2008, ATI staff has participated in more than a dozen training opportunities that enable them to serve each other as professionals in the areas of resource development and programming.

Two ATI staff attended the NY Association on Independent Living (NYAIL) Targeted Tailored Technical Assistance & Training workshop and the 2008 Council of Community Service for NYS (CCSNYS) Money for Mission: Connecting Cause to Impact conference. Both trainings aimed to train staff on how to jump-start new and innovative strategic plans and find development initiatives geared towards increasing the diversity of funding streams and development resources.

In line with ATI’s goal to provide quality health and wellness programming to consumers, staff attended several different NYS Department of Health workshops that related to living well with a disability, self-help arthritis support and overcoming stigma across cultures in the community. Other trainings related to developing disaster and emergency preparedness plans.

ATI to Host Free Psychological First Aid Training

On September 30, ATI will host a free Psychological First Aid training workshop from 2:00 to 3:30 pm in its Community Room.

Disasters, natural or man-made, can strike anywhere at anytime. Their effects can be devastating for everyone involved, but can be especially challenging for those living in some type of congregate care. Psychological First Aid is not counseling or therapy, but rather, a set of practical, easy and effective strategies and techniques that may be used to provide intentional support and comfort to individuals who have experienced a disaster.

The free workshop is open to employees of local service agencies who work directly with consumers in a direct-care, para-professional, helping role.

The training aims to provide participants with a basic understanding of disaster behavioral health, the key concepts of Psychological First Aid, when and how to refer people to other professionals or organizations, and an overview of Cortland County Emergency Response procedures.

This training is a collaborative effort between Access to Independence, Franziska Racker Centers and Cortland County Mental Health.

For more information, or to reserve your spot, contact Fran Pizzola at 753-7363.

Visit our website at: www.aticortland.org

Email us at: info@aticortland.org

Arthritis Support Group

Tuesday’s 1:00 to 2:30 pm
ATI Community Room
9/09 - Workplace Accommodations
9/23 - Immune System
10/14 - Medications & Nutrition
10/28 - Tai Chi
11/11 - Alternative Treatments
11/25 - Kinesio Taping Therapy

For more information, contact Fran Pizzola at 753-7363.

Accessible Currency: Myth or Fact?

Q: Making paper currency accessible to persons that are blind or visually impaired is an extreme and an unheard-of accommodation. A: Myth! Almost 200 countries that issue paper currency have made it accessible (from Canada and the European Union to Barbados, Namibia and Uruguay), leaving the United States as the only industrialized nation that prints bills in all denominations that are identical in size and color.

Q: Making paper currency accessible isn’t really necessary because it only affects a small group of people. A: Myth! Making paper currency accessible will impact a much larger group of individuals than just those who are blind and visually impaired. By 2020, roughly 1 in 250 people will have some sort of visual impairment, many caused by cataracts, diabetes, macular degeneration and glaucoma. An increased ease in differentiating money would benefit seniors, individuals with cognitive disabilities and even people without disabilities in environments where there is low lighting such as in restaurants, taxis, and bars.

For more information, contact Day Al-Mohamed, Director of Advocacy and Governmental Affairs; American Council of the Blind; 1115 15th St. NW; Washington DC 20005; 202-467-5081; dalmohamed@acb.org

NYS Parks Offers Free Access to Residents with Disabilities

Did you know that New York State residents with permanent disabilities are eligible to access certain state parks and recreational areas for free?

Eligible individuals may use an Access Pass to enter parks, historic sites, and recreational facilities operated by the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), as well as forest preserves, wildlife management areas, and programs on public lands that are operated by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

To qualify for an Access Pass, you must be a New York State resident and you must have proof of your disability. Applicants must also provide a recent photo with complete information (photo will be affixed to your Access Pass).

If you have internet access, visit: www.nysparks.state.ny.us and click on the Admission Programs link to learn more about the Access Pass or to print an application form.

For more information, or to obtain an Access Pass application, please contact Sue Lewis by phone at (607) 753-7363, or by email at slewis@aticortland.org.

Cutting Edge Technology

In this edition of Cutting Edge Technology, we welcome the newest addition to its array of available adaptive technology, the Sorenson Videophone (VP-200). The VP-200 makes it possible for individuals with and without hearing impairments to communicate with each other using videophone technology. The VP-200 includes new deaf-friendly features such as a LightRing for visual caller ID, a pan/tilt/zoom camera that works with a click of a button, and a new user interface and remote control.

The videophone will work in two ways. First, it facilitates direct communication between NYS Parks American Sign Language (ASL) users via video. Second, it facilitates communication between one ASL user and one non-ASL user through a video relay service by way of an interpreter.

Sorenson Video Relay Service (VRS) is a free service provided by Sorenson Communications that enables individuals with and without hearing impairments to conduct video relay calls with family, friends, and business associates through a certified sign language interpreter, Sorenson videophone, TV, and a high-speed Internet connection. The deaf user sees an interpreter on their TV and signs to the interpreter, who then contacts the hearing user by way of a standard phone line and relays the conversation between the two parties.

Hearing customers can also place video relay calls by simply dialing the DirectVP number of the deaf person or by dialing Sorenson’s toll-free number. Sorenson VRS is available 24 hours a day.

For more information on Sorenson Video Phones go to www.sorenson.com or contact us via email at info@aticortland.org. The VP-200 will be available for public use in early September. Stop by and check it out!

Stop by ATI to learn how to use it ahead of time! For more information, call us at 753-7363.

I have a disability... and I vote

This Year on Election Day, all Cortland County Polling Sites will feature Accessible Ballot Marking Machines!

ATI and the Town of Cortlandton have joined together in an effort to ensure that all voters have a full opportunity to exercise their right to vote in the 2008 election.

Stop by ATI to learn how to use it ahead of time! For more information, call 753-7363.

It is both your right and responsibility to vote and have your say in government. New York State’s deadline to register to vote in the 2008 election is Friday, October 10. Forms are available at Access to Independence! For more information, call us at 753-7363.

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ATI Awarded $300,000 More For Access to Home Projects

On June 30, Governor David Patterson announced that ATI would receive $300,000 in grant funding through 2012 from the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR).

The latest round of funding will aim to provide an additional 20 low-income households with funds to complete accessibility modifications to their homes. Mary E. Fering, ATI’s Executive Director, said the money will be used for accessibility modifications to households that include persons with physical, mental and developmental disabilities, as well as “frail” elderly. Rob Ferri, ATI’s Architectural Barrier Specialist, manages the agency’s Access to Home program.

Ferri noted that this is a third grant from the state in three years. The DHCR has previously awarded ATI two grants of $200,000 each through its Access to Home programs. With past grants, ATI has provided assistance to about 35 households throughout Cortland County. All Access to Home funding is targeted toward low-income families at or below 80 percent of the county’s median income level.

ATI is dedicated to providing expert-level accessibility construction services to consumers. In line with that commitment, ATI is poised to secure the status of Certified Renovation Firm from the Environmental Protection Agency. Staff has already completed training on lead-base paint and aims to complete future trainings to gain Certified Risk Assessor and Certified Clearance Technician status. Staff plan to secure Certifications for Safe Work Practices and Aging in Place, as well.

ATI Lands Chief Architect

In mid-July, the Chief Architect Foundation awarded ATI’s Accessibility Construction Services (ACS) and Access to Home programs a $3,990 grant to purchase its state-of-the-art architectural design software, training videos and two user licenses.

Chief Architect is professional three-dimensional architectural design and drafting software that allows us to save time and money for contractors and provide consumers with a better experience with design and implementation of home modifications.

“Having access to this program is going to improve our ability to provide top-notch services to our consumers and the community at-large,” said Rob Ferri, the ATI Architectural Barrier Specialist.

Ms. Lewis remarked that she had completed the training to allow her to work more effectively with families using empowerment and family support principles. “These principles nicely complement the independent living philosophy, which emphasizes personal choice and personal responsibility,” Ms. Lewis said at a recent staff meeting.

In addition to completing bi-weekly training sessions, Ms. Lewis developed a portfolio that documented her newly acquired knowledge and skills, and successfully passed a standardized exam.

ADA Celebrates 18th Birthday!

On July 11, ATI celebrated the 18th anniversary of the American’s with Disabilities Act. More than 100 community supporters gathered at the Suggett Park Rotary Shelter to commemorate the landmark legislation that opened doors for all individuals with disabilities. The event featured the 2nd Annual Watermelon Eating Contest, a live broadcast of Oldies 101.5 WXHC, and food and drinks for everyone.

Madison/Cortland ARC, Cortland Community Re-entry Program (CCRP), SUNY Cortland’s Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) and First Niagara Bank were financial co-sponsors of the event. Anderson’s Farm Market donated the watermelons; and Price Chopper and Grand Rental Station made in-kind contributions.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to the success of this fun-filled event! Be sure to check out pictures from the picnic on page seven of this newsletter!

ADA Posed to Expand Accessibility Expertise

ATI is poised to expand accessibility expertise to families and contractors. In line with that commitment, ATI is poised to secure the status of Certified Renovation Firm from the Environmental Protection Agency. Staff has already completed training on lead-base paint and aims to complete future trainings to gain Certified Risk Assessor and Certified Clearance Technician status. Staff plan to secure Certifications for Safe Work Practices and Aging in Place, as well.

Planning a home remodel? Having difficulty with daily activities? Concerned for the safety of a parent? History of falls? Fear of falls? Call us for a free estimate (607) 753-7363. We are your Local Accessibility Experts!