

**STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES
Heritage Center, Bismarck & Virtual
February 5-6, 2026**

Call to Order:

Brittney Hogan called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. A quorum was present.

Roll Call:

Members Present: Angie Bosch, Scott Burlingame, Leon Dietrich, Lisa Hermosillo, Peter Yung, Chelsy Sondrol, Brittney Hogan, Warren Granfor, McKenna Thrush, Shannon Bozovsky, Gillian Plenty Chief, Ali Brown

Members Absent: Ben Wolf Necklace, Robyn Soiseth, Joe Yasenchack, Emma-Leigh Miller

Non-Council Members Present: Aimee Volk, Cody Kurtz, Kianna Roecker, Royce Schultze, Senator Desiree van Oosting, Darrel Hannum, Stephanie Bouche, Rachel Sinness, Emily Hagemeister, Rachel Sinness

Approval of the February 2026 Agenda:

Scott Burlingame made a motion to amend the agenda as Pam Sagness is unable to present. Motion to amend the agenda and move Directors Reports and Committee reports to Thursday, February 5th in place of the Update from Behavioral Health and move agenda items up on Friday, February 6th was made Lisa Hermosillo seconded the motion. Peter Yung made a motion to approve the agenda as amended, Angie Bosch seconded the motion. Motion passed by unanimous decision.

Approval of November 2025 Minutes

Leon Dietrich made a motion to amend the minutes to reflect it was in Fargo not Minot. Lisa Hermosillo made a motion to approve agenda as amended for the November 2025 SILC minutes, Leon Dietrich seconded the motion. Motion passed by unanimous decision.

Correspondence – Brittney Hogan

The SILC PPR for FFY 2025 was submitted.

We will be starting the next three-year (2027-2029) State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). The SPIL is due on June 30, 2027. The first phase will be getting out the Needs Assessment Survey which we hope to do in March.

In December new guidance was given for non-employee reimbursements. These were sent out via email. New guidance is that any non-employee must have a W-9 or Substitute W-9 on file. As part of this new guidance, if you are staying at hotel it needs to be at state rate which is \$110 per night. These arrangements should be made through Vocational Rehabilitation prior to the stay. If you need assistance with this please work with Aimee.

Treasurer's Report – Peter Yung

Reviewed the Treasurer's Report.

Scott Burlingame made a motion to accept the Treasurer's Report as presented, McKenna Thrush seconded the motion to approve. Motion passed by unanimous decision.

Committee Breakouts

Discussion from Breakout Sessions

Quarterly Director's Report:

Angie for Freedom: See attached.

Royce for Dakota Center for Independent Living: See attached.

Scott for Independence, Inc.: See attached.

Randy for Options: See attached.

Subcommittee Reports:

Governance Committee – Royce Schultze: As of 3/31/2026, the following members are up for reappointment: Emma Leigh Miller, Scott Burlingame, Peter Yung, Gillian Plenty Chief, and Chelsy Sondrol.

Internal Affairs – Chelsy Sondrol: Reported on the GRID. Internal Affairs asked to have cards ordered with the SILC logo ordered along with envelopes. All committee members were in favor or moving forward with this. Aimee will work on getting these completed.

External Affairs – Angie Bosch: Reported on the GRID.

Special Session and Update From Appropriations Committee – Senator Sean Cleary and Senator Dick Dever

Senator Sean Cleary and Senator Dick Dever are on the Appropriations Committee and the Human Services subdivision.

In the 2025 legislative session, there was about a \$1.3 billion surplus going into session. The extra funds got used to fund programming such as corrections and education. Going into the 2027 Legislative session we are in a position to have a \$900 million deficit for the revenue forecast. The Governor's office is going to be offering a voluntary separation on for the upcoming session (2027 session). We need to manage our ongoing expenditure better. From now until session there will be conversations to guide budget recommendations leading up to session.

There have not been a lot of retirements in the legislature at this point, and term limits will start. There will be a lot of new people and that can pose problems as it will be a lot of people's first time and there is a learning curve.

For Special Session they discussed the [Rural Health Transformation Plan](#) and they got just under \$200 million. They appropriated \$397 million dollars which is two years of the budget. Grants will be available by the end of February. There are four pillars that grants will be awarded:

- Strengthen and stabilize rural health workforce
- Make North Dakota healthy again
- Bring high-quality health care closer to home
- Connecting technology, data and providers for a stronger ND

Overview of Independent Living – Scott Burlingame

Scott asked questions of the SILC to gain better knowledge of independent living. We discussed the core services, and he gave examples of how the Centers for Independent Living do those services.

Friday, February 6, 2026

Call to Order:

Brittney Hogan called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. A quorum was present.

Roll Call:

Members Present:

Leon Dietrich, Warren Granfor, Scott Burlingame, Peter Yung, Chelsy Sondrol, Lisa Hermsillo, Angie Bosch, Shannon Bozovsky, Ali Brown, Brittney Hogan, McKenna Thrush, Gillian Plenty Chief, Joe Yasenchack

Members Absent:

Ben Wolf Necklace, Robyn Soiseth, Emma-Leigh Miller

Non-Committee Members:

Aimee Volk, Kianna Roecker, Cody Kurtz, Kelly Heinert, Darrel Hannum, Senator Desiree van Oosting

Warehouse – 13 – Kelly Heinert

Warehouse – 13 has an assistive technology project. They work alongside the ND Protection and Advocacy to build an ongoing socio-important project, MyLifeConnected.

[MyLifeConnected](#) was developed as centralized portal incorporating various assistive technologies together in one place. They added features to allow for remote monitoring, call-tree alarms, reporting and the ability to modify analysis for specific use cases. They teamed up with Homie (LG). The cost is \$176 for the portal per month plus the cost of the sensors. The average cost is about \$2500 as it is covered under the Medicaid waiver.

State Rehabilitation Council – Aimee Volk

They had a meeting on January 13, 2026. They have a special meeting on February 11, 2026, to review goals for the state plan.

Committee on Aging – Kianna Roecker

Nancy discussed the growth in programs and the wait list for the Family Caregiver Support Program. The Guardianship Program spent the first-year funding in five months, and there is a waiting list for this program.

OMB hosted a meeting and discussed state funding and stressed that revenue is down, they are trying to reduce spending and ensure that they focus on the spending needs. More people are being served, and resources are not lasting as long. In the first three quarters, there were 60 transitions and 234 diversions.

There have been 110 Qualified Service Professional's (QSP) enrolled and 20 new agencies. In some areas, there are more agencies than clients. On average, it takes eight days for an individual QSP to get enrolled and 36 days for an agency.

Four new HCBS Case Managers will be hired.

Olmstead Commission – Scott Burlingame

No report.

NASILC

APRIL dues were paid for 2026.

Region 8

No report.

Public Comment

No comment.

The next SILC meeting will be on May 7-8, 2026, in Grand Forks, ND, and will have the virtual option.

Scott Burlingame made a motion to adjourn the meeting, and Lisa Hermosillo seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 10:12 a.m.

DCIL Director's Report

Community Education and Outreach

DCIL held our annual health fair at Touchmark. It doubled in size from previous years to 24 booths with approximately 155 attendees. Booths include Alzheimer's Association, Bismarck Cancer Center, North Dakota office of the Attorney General, North Dakota Senior Medicare Patrol, Protection and Advocacy, and the North Dakota Brain Injury Network.

Staff presented to the ARC of Bismarck at their Cookies and Community Event. The presentation was Accommodations and the Holidays: How Flexibility and Inclusion Build Stronger Communities. Staff talked about Understanding Accommodations, Why Accommodations Matter, Barriers People with Disabilities Face, and Creating Inclusive Holiday Spaces.

Staff set up a booth at the Youth Wellness Day on the Standing Rock Reservation. Other agencies include the Job Corps, Youthworks, Rez Recovery, Abused Adult Resource Center, and American suicide foundation

Community and Systems Advocacy

Staff and board members participated in public comment sessions on changes to the transit system. Bismarck Mandan Transit will start increasing paratransit hours on Sundays from 7:30 AM to 6 PM, and fixed route hours will be extended by an additional four hours, running until 10 PM Monday through Saturday. Currently, the executive director and two DCIL board members sit on the transit board.

Success Stories

Danny has been a DCIL customer for a number of years. He passed his driver's test, and with the assistance of DCIL staff, he is currently looking for a vehicle and couldn't be prouder of himself.

An individual in Dickinson had a low-vision computer that he no longer used and donated it to DCIL. The Bismarck office had a consumer with low vision, and the computer was donated to him.

Sometimes success stories don't have a happy ending, but they show the staff's compassion. Recently, we had a consumer pass away who had no family around and was receiving hospice care. Staff took time out of their weekend to sit with him, went to his apartment to get his star quilt, and covered him up. He passed away an hour later. This shows that this is more than just a job to the staff.

Feb. 5, 2026 - Director's Report - Independence, Inc. - Scott Burlingame, Executive Director Individual Services

Successes

A man with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 1 came to Independence, Inc. seeking support with communication challenges that were affecting both his work and home life. While he understood his own strengths, difficulty reading social cues, navigating conversations, and expressing care in ways others expected were creating barriers to the growth he wanted for himself and his family.

Through individualized support, he worked on practical communication skills, including body language, conversational timing, and real-world application. As a result, he experienced stronger connections at work, more effective communication at home, and increased confidence during a period of significant stress that included a move and medical recovery. He is now exploring new career opportunities, considering starting a small business, and continuing to build relationships in ways that feel authentic and sustainable.

A 29-year-old woman came to Independence, Inc. after facing significant challenges related to substance use. She sought support to rebuild her stability while completing her treatment program. Staff assisted her with navigating licensing requirements, securing employment, and working toward safe, independent housing.

Over time, she achieved several major milestones. She regained her driver's license, found stable work, and reconnected with her children. With continued progress, she obtained her own apartment, allowing her to live independently in a safe and supportive environment.

As her confidence grew, she also strengthened her recovery network and pursued training to become a certified Peer Support Specialist. She now works for a local nonprofit serving individuals affected by substance use disorders, behavioral health needs, and the criminal justice system. She uses her lived experience to help others succeed.

A 27-year-old woman connected with Independence, Inc. after years of struggling with trauma, addiction, and repeated legal involvement. She needed consistent support, encouragement, and service coordination to work toward stability. Staff provided guidance while helping her explore treatment options, rebuild her confidence, and focus on the wellbeing of her children.

With time, she made the decision to enter inpatient treatment, where she is currently thriving. She has been actively participating in services, maintaining sobriety, and attending all scheduled court dates as she works toward reunification with her children.

Her commitment has remained strong throughout eight months of significant personal change. Although the journey has included many challenges, she has continued to show determination and progress.

A consumer working with Independence, Inc. needed help replacing a kitchen table after his previous one became unusable. Staff assisted him in obtaining a new table, allowing him to return to one of his favorite activities. He can now sit comfortably and complete his puzzles again, which has greatly improved his daily quality of life and independence.

A woman served by Independence, Inc. had lost all of her belongings because of a severe infestation and needed help furnishing her space. Staff assisted her in obtaining new furniture from I. Keating's.

When she learned the items would be brand new, she became emotional and shared that she had never owned new furniture before. This support helped her reestablish a safe and livable home environment.

A 20-year-old man relocated to Minot from Dickinson and felt uncertain about how to manage the transition. Independence, Inc. assisted with moving expenses and coordinated the details to ensure a smooth relocation.

Over the next two months, both his physical and mental health began to improve. As he settled into his new environment and worked toward his goals, his confidence grew and he became increasingly independent.

Community Services

Employer Experience Survey

Independence, Inc. launched the Employer Experience Survey to better understand the workforce challenges faced by local businesses and to ensure that employment readiness services align with employer needs. Survey responses showed that many employers continue to struggle with finding and retaining qualified applicants. They also noted frequent gaps in skills such as communication, reliability, professionalism, and the ability to work well with different personality types. These insights help clarify which vocational and pre-vocational skills are most important for job seekers with disabilities to practice and strengthen.

Employers also described several challenges related to hiring people with disabilities. Common concerns included uncertainty about available resources, limited knowledge about accommodations, and misunderstandings about disability in the workplace. Some employers reported anxiety about making mistakes or not knowing how to support an employee with a disability. Others identified stigma or lack of experience as barriers that prevent more inclusive hiring. These responses highlight a clear need for community education that improves understanding, reduces fear, and increases confidence among employers.

The survey also revealed what businesses want from Independence, Inc. going forward. Employers asked for more training related to disability awareness, clearer communication about our services, support with matching candidates to appropriate positions, and continued access to job coaching. Many stressed that ongoing communication and relationship-building are key parts of successful partnerships.

Independence, Inc. will use this data to strengthen both community education and the skill-building supports we provide to people with disabilities. By teaching the specific workplace skills employers identified and by educating the community about disability, accommodations, and inclusive hiring practices, we can improve employment outcomes for job seekers and better meet the needs of local businesses. This information will guide program development, reinforce employer partnerships, and help build a more inclusive and skilled workforce across the region.

Homelessness Awareness Month Activities

During Homelessness Awareness Month, Independence Inc. worked alongside the Minot Alliance to End Homelessness to raise awareness and strengthen community engagement. We participated in the Mayor's proclamation event, shared educational information with the public, and used media opportunities to highlight local needs and the growing impact of homelessness on people with disabilities. I took part in The Dakotan podcast to broaden outreach, and our staff collaborated with partner agencies to promote resources, encourage volunteerism, and support ongoing efforts to create long term solutions for individuals experiencing homelessness. These activities helped increase visibility, reinforce partnerships, and advance our mission to support people in our region who are unhoused or at risk.

Smoked Bacon Podcast

Independence, Inc. participated in a recorded discussion on Smoked Bacon, a local podcast hosted by Minot Police Chief Michael Frye and Minot Fire Chief Kelli Kronschnabel. The conversation provided an opportunity to share information about the organization's mission, the people we serve, and the evolving needs within the Minot community.

The discussion focused on the real barriers people with disabilities experience and the importance of accessibility in everyday community life. Topics included how small but critical actions, such as maintaining clear and accessible sidewalks, can have a significant impact on independence and safety. The conversation also emphasized the value of strong partnerships between service organizations, public safety, and community leaders in building a more inclusive and responsive community.

Emergency Warming Center

During a period of extreme cold weather in January 2025, the Minot Alliance to End Homelessness activated a temporary emergency cold weather warming center in response to dangerously low temperatures and wind chills below -30 degrees. The warming center operated for three nights and served as an emergency, life-saving measure to prevent cold-related injury and loss of life among individuals experiencing homelessness or without safe shelter.

The warming center was located at The Salvation Army and operated through a coordinated effort involving local nonprofit organizations, First District Health Unit, the Minot Police Department, the Minot Fire Department, and community volunteers. A total of nine individuals stayed at the warming center during its operation. Of those individuals, four were able to connect with and make use of services available through partner organizations while staying at the shelter, helping address immediate needs and connect them to longer-term supports.

Unwrap Minot

During the early weeks of December, Independence, Inc. promoted free, community-based holiday activities through the *Unwrap Minot* initiative. This outreach highlighted accessible opportunities for individuals to connect, participate, and feel included in community life.

Sharing free and inclusive activities helps reduce barriers related to cost, isolation, and accessibility, which disproportionately affect people with disabilities. Encouraging participation in community events supports connection, belonging, and overall well-being, and reinforces the importance of full inclusion in community life.

Point-In-Time Count Participation

Independence, Inc. participated in the annual Point-In-Time Count, a federally required effort to identify and document individuals and families experiencing homelessness in the community. The data collected through this process helps inform planning, funding decisions, and the development of housing and support services at the local, state, and federal levels.

Participation in the Point-In-Time Count supports a clearer understanding of local needs, strengthens community partnerships, and contributes to building more effective systems that promote housing stability and independent living.

Office News and Notes

Trainings Completed - Trinity Riverside

During the November All Staff Meeting, Independence, Inc. welcomed the team from Trinity Riverside for a professional development training. The session was led by Franklin Ballard, Program Director for St. Joseph's and Riverside, who provided an in-depth presentation on understanding a variety of personality disorders. The training covered conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Schizoid Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and other related diagnoses commonly seen among the individuals we serve.

The training offered staff valuable insight into how these conditions may affect behavior, communication, and engagement with services. This information supports our efforts to interact more effectively with consumers, respond to complex needs, and maintain a supportive and inclusive environment across all programs.

Staff shared that they found the presentation extremely valuable and appreciated how clearly the information applied to their daily work. Many commented that it helped them better understand the people we serve and that they would like to have more trainings like this in the future.

While this report typically focuses on programs and community outcomes rather than individual board members, John Sallee's service as Board President reflects the long-term impact and value of Independent Living in a way that is important to acknowledge. John concluded his term after a period of significant organizational growth, including the relocation to a new office, increased community recognition, and a lot of people served by our organization. His leadership during this period helped ensure that these changes remained aligned with the mission and values of Independence, Inc.

John consistently approached board leadership with a focus on excellence, collaboration, and accountability, while centering the voices and needs of people with disabilities. He was a strong supporter of staff, assisted with fundraising efforts, and guided the organization through major milestones including the pandemic, implementation of a new strategic plan, and multiple community events. He often spoke about how serving on the board provided a deeper understanding of the barriers people face and the importance of maintaining a strong, mission-driven organization.

John's leadership is grounded in lived experience. Nineteen years ago, he transitioned out of a nursing home just before Christmas, an experience that continues to shape his commitment to Independent Living and the belief that people should have the opportunity to live in the community on their own terms. His story reflects the outcomes Independence, Inc. works toward every day, long-term independence, leadership development, and meaningful participation in community life. For that reason, his service as Board President represents not only governance, but the full circle of Independent Living in action.

Staffing Update

Damond Schemmel started as an Independent Living Advocate in January. He lives in Rolla and primary will serve the counties of Bottineau, Rolette, Pierce, and McHenry County. He works 25% of his time providing core independent living services, and 75% as part of the MFP and TDP programs.

Shawna Grubbs started last week as a Peer Support Specialist as part of a special contract we received as part of the MFP Program. Shawna will use her lived experience with a physical disability and her past experience with the HCBS system to provide mentorship support to people who transition home, or who are hoping to transition home. She is the first Peer Support who has all of her time designated to this project, and we are all hoping she is successful.

Nonprofit Storytelling Conference

I recently attended a national nonprofit storytelling conference focused on how organizations communicate their work in ethical, effective, and mission-aligned ways. The training emphasized the science behind why stories resonate more deeply than data alone, and how shared narratives help build trust, connection, and long-term support for nonprofit organizations.

A strong focus of the conference was ethical storytelling. Sessions addressed the importance of consent, protecting individual autonomy, and ensuring that the stories we share reflect the dignity, strengths, and lived experiences of the people we serve, rather than reducing them to problems or outcomes. The presenters reinforced that storytelling is not about persuasion, but about identity, helping people understand who they are, what they value, and why the work matters to them.

The conference also reinforced that effective storytelling supports advocacy, community engagement, and fundraising when it is grounded in authenticity and respect. This approach aligns closely with the Independent Living philosophy and the values of Independence, Inc., particularly our commitment to self-determination, empowerment, and lived experience.

Options Interstate Resource Center for Independent Living – February 2026

Options services can generally be divided into three categories which are Community, Education and Outreach; Information and Referral; and Direct Service.

Community Education and Outreach (CEO) is a program category that generally involves Options initiating contact with a group of people, training groups, completing an outreach effort, or coordinating the management of a service. They initiated pointed outreach to various entities serving people within it's service area. Some outreach is conducted yearly such as to State providers and nursing homes, while other outreach is dependent on those populations that from service analysis show that they are underserved or unserved so designed to increase that populations usage. The local, regional, and state entities reached out to included all four Regional Human Service Centers, Grand Forks Housing, Job Service of North Dakota, North Dakota School for the Blind, and DD Services. Yearly, Options is required to visit the nursing facilities found within the service area to date Options has visited Valley Senior Living, St. Aloisius Nursing Home, Golden Acres Manor, and Wedgewood Manor. Pointed outreach included both Mountainbrook day program and Dakota Prairie Community Action Agency.

Also, included with CEO is systems advocacy services. Options has worked on various efforts including an ADA complaint against Grand Forks County Jail for not dispensing needed medication in a timely manner resulting in an Inmate's Hospitalization, research into a local middle school to assess whether the entrance staff require people with disabilities to use fulfills the regulations defining an accessible path of travel, sending an advocacy letter to a local bar and restaurant that remodeled and replaced all the low tables in the bar area with high tops, and researching grantors that could fund an effort to evaluate trail systems within Options service area.

Options continues to collaborate with other entities including North Dakota Aging Services, Nodak Rural Electric, Grand Forks Emergency Management, North Dakota Dept. of Commerce, North Dakota Department of Transportation and Bridges Transportation Solutions. All efforts align with furthering the goals related to increasing people with disabilities ability to live within any community they choose.

Staff work with various groups within its service area, some it manages wholly and others with other organizers. Some of the groups are recreational such as Options Art Group, Cooking Group, Exercise Group, and two activity groups with another being a Central North Dakota Advocacy Group where we work with another entity to facilitate action.

Organizationally Options maintains its two websites and social media accounts for people who are connected and also is part of various community events that highlight our services to others such as the Harvey Health Fair and the Alerus Center Aging Expo. Options has a durable medical equipment program that provides people access to donated equipment Options receives from the community. The equipment is provided on a loaner basis or by giving it to them outright. During the last fiscal year Option provided people with over 500 pieces of equipment that represents over a ninety-nine-thousand-dollar savings to reimbursors and to individuals who otherwise would have had to purchase or rent the equipment.

Information and Referral is a program area that is distinguishable for the most part by people reaching out to Options to fulfill their needs and where staff ascertain that a longer contact time such as that provided through Direct Service is not needed. Information and Referral assistance was provided to three-hundred and twenty-four people, the largest group being people with disabilities at almost 75% followed by in rank order, the General Public, Service Providers, and Family or Friends of people with disabilities. The most common areas where information was requested was related to

Options services, followed by equipment, housing, Social Security Information, Accessibility, and services to maintain one's independence.

In Direct Service, one hundred and twenty-nine people are being served with all major ethnic groups being represented including Caucasians, Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians, from larges to smallest. People with physical disabilities were served over twice as much as all other groups combined with persons with cognitive disabilities being the next highest group served. Females are represented ten percent more than males at 55% of the case load. The predominant service being provided is Relocation Services, people being assisted from institutional care or being prevented from going into institutional care.

Scenarios

Options Transition Coordinator began working with an individual in May of 2025, who had been referred to the Money Follows the Person program for assistance in transitioning back to the community from a skilled nursing facility. The individual was residing at the nursing home, awaiting hip surgery, and along the way, ended up with some skin breakdown, that ultimately delayed the surgery. Upon being a part of the MFP program, this individual had an apartment in rural ND that was being held for him, but as time passed, the apartment needed to be rented out and was no longer available to him. This individual was also in the process of working on spending down some of the income in their bank account, to apply for Medicaid. The individual had successful surgery, followed by physical therapy, and was eager to begin searching for apartment. The individual worked with the MFP Housing Facilitator and was placed on a waiting list for an apartment of his choice, with a timeline of 5-6 months. The apartment was a Housing funded property with rent being 30% of his monthly income, which is key for individuals of low income to assure that they do not move into an apartment in which they cannot afford the rent long term. After being on the waiting list for just 3 months, an accessible apartment had opened, and the individual accepted the apartment. This writer worked with the individual and the nursing facility to request prescriptions from the primary physician for needed medical equipment. The individual received a hospital bed and a wheelchair through Medicaid; however, the shower bench was denied through his insurance. MFP funding provided a shower bench and lift recliner, along with various household supplies. This writer requested Supplemental Services funding from MFP for a grocery stock in the sum of \$250 and purchased the groceries for this individual on the day of transition back to the community. This individual had also been fitted for a wheelchair, but had not received it by day of discharge, so a wheelchair was loaned to the individual from Options Resource Center for Independent Living. This writer also helped provide MFP funding for MFP rental assistance for 1st months rents, deposit, along with two additional months of rent, and checks were issued to the property management. This individual was authorized for 24-7 care through Home and Community Based Services and is currently successfully living at his apartment and has expressed gratitude for his return to the community with the assistance of this writer.

Harvey staff recruited a current consumer to serve on a caregiver focus group panel through the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities. This group includes people from across the state with diverse ages, disabilities, and experiences. They meet on Zoom twice a month, and the group is facilitated by Karyn Harvey, PhD, a Trauma-Informed Clinician who has worked with over 300 individuals with Intellectual Disabilities. She is a psychologist, author, trainer and speaker whom Minot State University has contracted with for this pilot project. This group shares experiences, barriers, challenges, and resources people with disabilities use to navigate life and work in their respective communities. This has been a wonderful leadership and learning opportunity for the participants. It involves approximately 12 sessions, with a \$25 stipend per session.

Options outreach staff assisted a senior man with an intellectual disability who had remained in his familial home his whole life up until his mother's passing. With her passing the extended family decided they would need to sell the house causing the gentleman to have to relocate. In coordination with his sibling guardian Options assisted the person to find and receive a subsidized apartment in a Section 8 housing project. In order to qualify for some services, the individual had to spend down the assets he had accumulated, everyone worked together to do this carefully in order for him to be set up for the long term. The assets helped him purchase a burial plot, prepay for his funeral, upgrade his car to ensure reliability, and purchase his apartment essentials.

Mid-summer an individual came in requesting help with making his home more accessible, specifically to move his bathroom from an upper floor to the main floor. Though a stair lift was installed previously to enable him to access the upper bathroom his disability had become more severe resulting in an inability to use it that any longer. Options helped the consumer with an USDA application and a HISA Grant (Military Grant), both designed to help people with home modifications that were funded. With both grants awarded the individual was able to remodel with little personal expense. Due to continued declining health this remodel has been the determining factor in enabling the individual to remain home.

Options received a referral from DD Services to assist a parent-guardian in setting up an ABLE Account for her daughter with disabilities. Staff played an instrumental role in the guardian understanding what an ABLE Account is, the basic rules of the account, qualified expenses, and the importance of saving all receipts. The individual can now save over \$2,000.00 without affecting her SSI or Medicaid benefits! The account is a safety net when the need arises, giving the individual the opportunity to save for the future without limiting access to critical income, healthcare, food, or housing assistance programs.

Freedom's Director Report

Fargo Highlights and Consumer Stories

From our IL Advocate: Katelyn Vilmo (Fargo)

I have been trying to work on rebuilding past connections to see if I can build more interest into the peer mentor program. I am partnering with Sarah to do some outreach in the community this week. I am building new connections after attending the Well Told Conference. One of the administrators at Fargo Dome recognized my name after donating to our silent auction last year. The rapport building is going so well that she welcomed me to continue reaching out for donations and has branched past small talk. I hope to continue to build on that connection.

I have been continuing to find new things to learn within the disability community. One of the things I'm researching is the ADA laws in court as I've had three consumers with significant concerns over their rights and court proceedings. It has been a challenge to find attorneys that will help navigate this, especially if Protection and Advocacy doesn't take it on. It has been rewarding to try to learn the basic ADA laws with court proceedings and see what resources are available to direct consumers to. This is an ongoing process. Two of the three consumers are parents with disabilities and one of them is a consumer who is deaf. These have been really challenging in my Advocacy career, but it's fun to learn new things. The consumers all provided feedback and thanked me for my perseverance and my attentiveness to their concerns and spoke highly about FRC.

MFP and TDP - Program Highlights

From our Assistant Program Director: Merri Christlieb

The end of the 2025 year was a little quieter with referrals and transitions but overall, the 2025 year was a very successful one for the Money Follows the Person (MFP) and Transition and Diversion Program (TDP). MFP had a total of 95 referrals with 32 transitions. These numbers come from the Freedom Resource Center staff assisting 32 people out of a nursing home level of care setting into their own home in the community. The transition may not always be a nursing home; as it may be assisting an individual with a developmental disability moving from an Intermediate Care Facility (ICF-Developmental Disabilities home) to the community or from a hospital, or from a nursing home. TDP, which is made up mostly of the program diverting someone from a higher level of care; referrals were 221 for the year with 138 transitions or diversions. Many times these referrals are coming from the Home and Community Based Services social workers who knows the potential for a nursing home stay is likely if the grant is not used to get the consumer to a different setting where they can ambulate better or they need some type of equipment to assist them to more independently live in the community. Most consumers come with many barriers to transitioning or diverting (legal issues, evictions, poor money management, and or poor decision making). The Freedom staff's ability to navigate the various obstacles is often times extremely difficult, but I could not be prouder of the willingness of the staff I supervise to step up each and every day to assist so many consumers.

In December, Freedom Resource Center was given two certificates from the MFP Administrator, the first is for "the Most Running TDP Transitions" and the second is for "the Most Running TDP Diversions" meaning that throughout the entire state of North Dakota our Freedom Resource Center staff are assisting more consumers than any other area of the state!

MFP Highlights and Consumer Stories

From our IL Advocate and Transition Coordinator: Tricia McNamee, Fargo

I have been working with consumers on transitioning out of facilities back into independent living in the community. I am working with many consumers in various stages of transitioning out of facilities or who have already transitioned. I assist individuals with getting connected to needed services by providing Information and Referral.

Recently, I attended a visit with my Consumer to the North Dakota Assistive- Fargo office. Also joined by the Consumer's caregiver and Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) Case manager. Together, we received a tour of the Demonstration Center, where various adaptive devices and assistive technology are on display. The Assistive Technology Consultant giving the tour was able to point out specific items that may be helpful to the Consumer. By the end of the visit, the Consumer was able to check-out items (Eco Show device, weighted writing pen, and sound magnification device) from ND Assistive's Device Loans program to borrow for up to 6 weeks. Also, the Consumer was given applications to fill out for "Senior Safety Program" to submit to receive an Eco Show device, and "Possibilities Grant" to submit for funding to purchase a robotic companion pet and other items she is interested in. The Consumer expressed enjoyment from visit and looking forward to trail of items. This was a wonderful collaboration of agencies to help the Consumer.

From our Transition Assistant: Michelle Stoker, Fargo

I have been shopping for multiple consumers. Providing needed furniture, household, and assistive technology. When needed, I help consumers pack and unpack their belongings in their new home. I have also set up many apartments from scratch. Always looking for the best prices for decent quality items. I also went around town to the furniture stores in town after pricing increases from the tariffs that happened in 2024. Made a spreadsheet comparing prices at six different stores. I have helped transition coordinators on transition day or if they were not able to be there, I filled in for them making sure they had what was needed. We try always to have someone there on transition day. I have been driving around town dropping off luncheon fliers with my business card attached looking for silent auction donations when I am caught up with everything. I like to keep busy.

Jamestown

Highlights and Consumer stories

From our IL Advocate and Transition Coordinator: Keeta Smith, Jamestown

Oct, Nov, Dec and the first part of Jan. were busy for me.

- one consumer transitioned to Minot Jan. 5th and was time intensive in December
- another consumer transitioned the same day consent was signed in October (she loves her place)

On October 1, one of my consumers moved into his own apartment, and it almost made me cry. It was the first time that he had lived independently in over 5 years. He spent most of his 67 years at that time in an institution of some kind. I taught him how to use a coffee maker and he was so appreciative. Everything that was done for him, he appreciated it so much. He hugged me and thanked me for everything that I did. It was the second time that I had a referral for him, and he's

doing so wonderfully. He got his driver's license and purchased a car. That was a bit of a learning curve for him because he didn't realize he needed to transfer the title, but I was able to guide him on how to do so. He kept in touch with me in January (he closed on December 30).

From our IL Advocate: Ashley Gabehart (Jamestown)

Happy New Year from the Jamestown office. We wrapped up 2025 on a good note. I was selected to attend the APRIL conference in Portland, Oregon. This is the second time I've attended an APRIL conference. It was interesting to see the difference in the tone of the conference this time. I was also able to connect with a couple of people who had attended the previous conference. During the conference I was able to gain new knowledge to bring back to our organization and make new professional contacts. I was able to bring one of the presentations from the conference to our monthly staff meeting in November. October's Freedom In Action (FIA) event was well attended, we decorated spooky themed wooden cut outs. In November I finished up an IL Skills Class: Living Well 101. The FIAs in November were both successful. We did an event on Assistance and Service Animals that Jen, our accessibility specialist, facilitated. We also did an event to make friendship soup. I also attended the National Federation of Families Virtual Conference in the beginning of November. Valley City's transition class finished Living Well 101 and started Living Well 102. In December we did a holiday themed Young Adult Gathering and did a holiday card FIA. Participants got blank holiday cards with envelopes and were able to decorate the cards with various supplies provided including stickers and markers. The new year has been off to a busy start. We did a New Year's themed Young Adult Gathering. Since we are in the middle of winter, January's FIA event was glove decorating. Each participant was given a pair of white cotton gloves to decorate with fabric markers. I have also started facilitating my first IL Skills Class of 2026, Safe and Healthy Relationships, with several more classes planned throughout the year. It's hard to believe 2025 is already over and we're halfway through January of 2026. The year is off to an amazing start.

Lisbon

Highlights and Consumer stories - From our IL Advocate: Kristine McFarland

The Lisbon Office has been busy! In December I completed a transition from a rural unsafe home in Fort Ransom to an apartment in Valley City. This gentleman is 94-years old and really had a hard time leaving his farm. The farm trailer house he lived in was unsafe, and with winter upon us, the team really felt for his safety it was time. He is extremely happy where he is. It is a great pleasure to work with him and watch him succeed in his new home.

Currently, I have a few Consumers I am working with that I have developed behavioral plans to help them reach their goals. Unfortunately, in the rural areas I serve there just is not enough services to work with Consumers on that level.

I am also working with a gentleman that has rapid growing ALS. I have been reaching out to the ALS Foundation to try to help with this Consumer. I have spent some wonderful time with him, and we have been able to connect, and it has also been tough to watch as well as his ALS is progressing so much. Our goal is to be able to transition him soon, so he can enjoy the time he has left. His one goal is to move to an apartment and go fishing "one last time". We will be working on that!

New Lisbon News:

Calvin Samek joined our team on January 5. He is working in our Lisbon office as an Independent Living Advocate. Calvin is enthusiastic and is quickly learning about Independent Living Centers and the IL philosophy. Calvin is our 20th employee.

ND Accessibility Projects and Updates

From our IL Advocate and Accessibility Specialist: Jen Erickson

October 2025 – early January 2026

- Adult Foster Home review in Horace at the request of ND Adult and Aging Services to provide input on the entrance or ramp, possible chairlift options, and bathroom accessibility.
- Presented for FIA in Jamestown in November; topic was Assistance Animals.
- Outreach meeting with FMWF Chamber of Commerce Workforce Engagement Coordinator - shared information about services offered through FRC and learned about a current grant program called The Good Jobs Challenge. It offers \$5,000 grants to eligible participants to apply toward education and short-term job training in high demand fields. It's available in all counties in ND, and in each of the counties that Freedom serves in MN (and more). Training must be completed by September 2026.
- Gearing up for Giving Hearts Day – our committee is showing a lot of energy and enthusiasm.

Event Updates

From our Office Coordinator: Wanda Lokhorst

Giving Hearts Day is February 12, 2026. We needed to reach a minimum of \$3,000 by January 26 to get the grow grant from DMF. We have officially hit \$5,605.00. Setting us up well for a successful giving hearts day. Our big overall goal is to reach \$25,000 to represent 1 in 4 people with disabilities. For every 10th donation we get in- someone will get a pie in the face! This has been a fun activity to do the last couple years and seems to be a hit with our donors. We are working on getting community members to participate. Some will donate in order to pie someone, some may even take a pie to the face. Videos of people getting pied will be posted to Facebook and Instagram.

Our Appreciation Luncheon event is our next event, save the date for May 7, 2026. From 12:00-1:00. We are working on putting together themed baskets- keeping to a smaller number of baskets with more valued added in. People will pay for tickets to put into a jar of their choice (can do more than one) that go with each basket—we will then draw a ticket at the end to determine who wins that basket. Be present to win. We are working on an idea for those who want to partake but can't attend. If you would like to help with a basket- connect with Wanda to see which themes are still available or for ideas.

Award Nomination deadline is March 16, 2026. Nominate people or businesses for an award on our website.

FRC Resource Fair is officially a yearly event after a successful first year!