ECI Mourns the Passing of Steve Johnson

Always a mentor and advocate, Steve embraced life and made it his life’s work to expand disability rights and independent living. In 1967, Steve was paralyzed from a fall. Rather than dwell on his circumstances, Steve moved forward with his education and sought opportunities to work with others with a passion for independent living. He earned a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Science in Education from Old Dominion University. In 1982, Steve was hired as a peer counselor by Handicaps Unlimited of Virginia. This is the organization that established the Independence Center, a disability advocacy organization that Steve went on to become Executive Director until his retirement in 2018.

Steve was appointed by Governors to the Statewide Independent Living Council (1993 and 1997) and the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities (1989). He was also appointed to serve on the National Steering Committee of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Independent Living Management (2000), Sentara Trauma Center Task Force (2003), Virginia Beach Mayor’s Committee for the Disabled (1984), Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation Commission (1992), and Virginia Mayor’s Committees/Commissions for People with Disabilities (1987).

Steve was involved in hard and long fought battles for the Virginians with Disabilities Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). After these laws were enacted, he led ECI’s efforts to educate the community about these laws. Access to the Virginia Beach oceanfront, Harbor Park Stadium, schools, Town Center, the Virginia Beach amphitheater, The Spirit of Norfolk, and Virginia Zoo occurred with Steve’s leadership. Community living for hundreds of people with disabilities who have left institutions is possible due to Steve’s encouragement and commitment to changes in services.

Knowing firsthand the importance of quality supports, Steve led statewide advocacy efforts and a pilot project to establish the first consumer-directed personal assistance services in Virginia. Today over 25,000 Virginians use consumer-directed personal care services to control their supports.

Funding to expand advocacy and other independent living services was made possible through collaborations Steve established and maintained with the following: localities of Chesapeake, Franklin, Isle of Wight County, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach; Hampton Roads Community Foundation; Hampton Roads Transit; local hospitals and insurance systems; Mid-Atlantic ADA Center; public housing agencies; and Senior Services. Striving to establish needed services used by people with disabilities, Steve worked to establish fee for service agreements with state agencies that provided funding to not only ECI, but other Virginia Centers for Independent Living. An early pioneer of teleworking and the belief that teleworking could be beneficial to people with disabilities, Steve initiated involvement in a project with the Commonwealth to establish telework practices.

Achieving financial stability for ECI, Steve ushered a process to establish Endependence Properties, a private nonprofit, that purchased the building that ECI now uses.
Steve had a manner of promoting and praising ECI, but never his role. He treated everyone with respect and valued teamwork. His mentoring of other advocates over the years made ECI a strong organization respected throughout Virginia. Steve was a leader within the Virginia Association of Centers for Independent Living. He mentored new Center Executive Directors and endeavored to find consensus on challenging disability issues.

Nearly every local community service, public accommodation and government program was influenced by Steve’s leadership over the past 30 years. Steve had a unique style of working with participants and staff encouraging them to find their passion and to have the tools needed to live that passion.

In addition to a life of advocacy and leadership, Steve enjoyed his family life with his wife, Linda, their children and grandchildren, and his siblings. He was a Philadelphia Eagles fan enthusiast, enjoyed the beach and was an occasional prankster.

Steve’s career as an advocate resulted in significant changes throughout Virginia paving the way for independent living.

Silence Isn’t the Answer

The death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was a moment that shook the nation. It shook us because it forced us to face reality. Police violence is real, and it affects the black community at a rate that is 2.5% greater than for white individuals. Too many times when this occurs, we hear the statement that it was an isolated event, but the truth is, it isn’t this was just the one that was captured on camera. How do we respond to these acts?

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

This quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. is the answer to that question. Have conversations about what has occurred, what is happening, and what changes we hope to see. Reach out to your policymakers, legislators, and elected officials to let them hear from your experiences what needs to change. Silence doesn’t need to be a standard response anymore. As I thought about ways that we can use our voice to ensure that the change we want occurs, I am reminded that the most significant way to use our voices collectively is to VOTE. If you are unhappy with the current policies in place, replace those who make and implement them by voting; it is our right.

Nichole Davis
Executive Director

ECI Operational Plan

ECI recognizes the seriousness and effect that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) can have on those we serve and work with. So that ECI staff and participants stay safe, we have established the following operational plan:

- ECI will remain closed to the public until further notice.
- ECI staff is available by phone and email Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm.
- ECI will not be holding any in-person group activities and participant-led events. ECI is holding two different Independent Living Skills Training through Zoom (see next page).
- ECI’s Facebook page, website and newsletter will be updated to reflect this policy and any changes.
Virtual Independent Living Skills Training Webinars

During the month of July, the Endependence Center will hold webinars on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. All participants are welcome to join these webinars. Webinars will be held on July 1, 6, 8, 10, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24, 27, 29 and 31, and each webinar will begin at 11:00am for about 45 minutes, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

To obtain a list of the topics, see calendar insert in this newsletter or view our calendar of events at http://endependence.org/event-calendar/

You must register in advance one time for any of the webinars in this series: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_-qnN-DgiTEussc-J691jEA

After registering, you will receive a confirmation e-mail with information about joining the webinar. If you have sound on your computer, you will be able to hear the presentation through your computer. If you do not have access to the Internet or do not want to use sound through your computer, you can join the webinars by phone by calling 1-312-626-6799 or 1-646-876-9923, and when prompted, you will need to provide the meeting ID number and password that will be provided to you in the confirmation e-mail. If you prefer to call in to the webinar, contact Cheryl Simpson at 351-1575 for the meeting ID and password.

ECI will facilitate the webinars. If you have a suggested topic for a webinar, please let us know. Call 461-8007 and leave a message with your ideas for future webinar topics.

If you need captioning for the webinar, contact Cheryl Simpson at csimpson@endependence.org or 351-1575 at least two days before the webinar and leave your name and e-mail address and once captioning is scheduled, the link will be e-mailed to you.

Youth IL Skills Training

The Endependence Center is hosting Youth IL Skills Trainings for youth ages 17 – 24 on Tuesdays and Thursdays in July. If you are interested in attending these virtual Youth IL Skills Training sessions, please contact Amy Ouellette at (757) 351-1597 or auellette@endependence.org for information on how to participate.
Check ECI website at www.endependence.org/event-calendar/ for any changes to the schedule or by calling 461-8007, Option 4

To request an accommodation, contact Cheryl Simpson at 351-1575 Voice, 461-7527 TDD or csimpson@endependence.org

ECI will not be holding any meetings at the office in July.

All meetings will be via Internet or phone.

The following activities are canceled for July: IL Support Group; Mix-n-Mingle; Movie Monday; Nursing Facility Group; and Advocacy Group.

There will be NO Participant-Led events in July.