What is Independent Living?

With origins in the U.S. civil rights and consumer movements of the late 1960s, the Independent Living Movement grew out of the [Disability Rights Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability_Rights_Movement), which began in the 1960s. The IL Movement works at replacing the special education and rehabilitation experts’ concepts of integration, normalization and rehabilitation with a new paradigm developed by people with disabilities themselves. The first Independent Living ideologists and organizers were people with extensive disabilities. Still, the movement’s message seems most popular among people whose lives depend on assistance with the activities of daily living and who, in the view of the IL Movement, are most exposed to custodial care, paternalistic attitudes and control by professionals.

The Independent Living philosophy postulates that people with disabilities are the best experts on their needs, and therefore they must take the initiative, individually and collectively, in designing and promoting better solutions and must organize themselves for political power. Besides de-professionalization and self-representation, the Independent Living ideology comprises de-medicalization of disability, de-institutionalization and cross-disability (i.e. inclusion in the IL Movement regardless of diagnoses).

In the Independent Living philosophy, disabled people are primarily seen as citizens and only secondarily as consumers of healthcare, rehabilitation or social services. As citizens in democratic societies, the IL Movement claims, persons with disabilities have the same right to participation, to the same range of options, degree of freedom, control and self-determination in every day life and life projects that other citizens take for granted. Thus, IL activists demand the removal of infrastructural, institutional and attitudinal barriers and the adoption of the Universal Design principle. Depending on the individual’s disability, support services such as assistive technology, income supplements or personal assistance are seen as necessary to achieve equal opportunities. As emphasized by the IL Movement, needs assessment and service delivery must enable users to control their services, to freely choose among competing service providers and to live with dignity in the community.

Over the years, the IL Movement has spread from North America to all continents, adapting itself to and getting enriched by different cultures and economic conditions in the process. A considerable body of research, training materials and examples of good practice exists on such themes as transition from institutional to community living, transition from school to employment or self-employment, community organizing and advocacy, disability culture, girls and women with disabilities as well as disability and development. Supporting the movement and utilizing its work has become an important ingredient of many countries’ social policy.

In 1972, the firstCenter for Independent Livingwas founded by disability activists, led by Ed Roberts, in Berkeley, California. These Centers were created to offer peer support and role modeling, and are run and controlled by persons with disabilities. According to the IL approach, the example of a peer, somebody who has been in a similar situation, can be more powerful than a non-disabled professional's interventions in analyzing one’s situation, in assuming responsibility for one’s life and in developing coping strategies.

According to the IL Movement, with peer support, everyone - including persons with extensive developmental disabilities - can learn to take more initiative and control over their lives. For example, peer support is used in Independent Living Skills classes where people living with their families or in institutions learn how to run their everyday lives in preparation for living by themselves

"Independent Living does not mean that we want to do everything by ourselves, do not need anybody or like to live in isolation. Independent Living means that we demand the same choices and control in our every-day lives that our non-disabled brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends take for granted. We want to grow up in our families, go to the neighborhood school, use the same bus as our neighbors, work in jobs that are in line with our education and interests, and raise families of our own. We are profoundly ordinary people sharing the same need to feel included, recognized and loved."  - Dr. Adolf Ratzka

There is a fundamental set of services found in all of the Centers, but there is some variation in the programs that are offered, the funding sources, and the staffing, among other things. Depending on the public services in the community, Centers might assist with housing referral and adaptation, personal assistance referral, or legal aid. Typically, Centers work with local and regional governments to improve infrastructure, raise awareness about disability issues and lobby for legislation that promotes equal opportunities and prohibits discrimination.