



Group working to put independence within reach

First fundraiser is Oct. 19

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ADVOCACY—Camarillo resident Dani Anderson, pictured with her cat Fred, is executive director of the Independent Living Resource Center, which provides disability advocacy and peer support for the Central Coast. The organization will host its first gala fundraising event this month in Santa Barbara. JOSEPH A. GARCIA/Acorn Newspapers

For most residents, Southern California Edison's public safety power shut-offs mean they can't run the air conditioner, use the internet or save the food in their freezer (see related story [here](#)). But for disabled residents in Ventura County, the loss of electricity means they may not be able to refrigerate their medication, get out of bed because they can't charge their powered wheelchairs or breathe without their oxygen machines.

Dani Anderson, the executive director of the Independent Living Resource Center, said her organization is trying to work with Edison to make sure disabled residents get the resources they need in the event of a widespread shutdown.

The 33-year-old Camarillo resident said ILRC is also working to create "battery libraries" so disabled individuals will have the power they need in case the power grid goes dark in extreme weather.

Anderson, who has a “rarer than-rare” form of spinal muscular atrophy, said it’s not as simple as evacuating to a friend’s house because not all disabled individuals can drive, and even if they can, they may not be able to access the front door or use the bathroom if the house isn’t designed to accommodate someone with a disability.

“The power companies are not going to set up shelters. They’re not viewing them as emergencies. People are going to have nowhere to go,” she said. “Those are some of the layers I think people don’t really think of unless they have that personal experience.”

Personal experience is a specialty at the resource center, which serves people of all disabilities, ages and income levels in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

Cindy Liu is the mother of a special needs child. She also serves as the chairperson of Conejo Valley Unified’s Special Education District Advisory Committee. She said Anderson is a frequent presence at SEDAC meetings to advocate for the disabled community.

“I respect the work that she does and I respect the work ILRC does,” she said. “I would like to unhide it as a gem.”

The Santa Barbara-based organization offers housing, personal assistance, assistive technology, government benefit and peer support services at no charge.

Around 80% of the organization’s staff has a significant disability.

“For clients to come in and see someone like them, especially in a small community, I think that’s a really powerful thing for them,” Anderson said.

Jenn Griffin is the center’s deputy director. She said the organization frequently helps clients get the government benefits they qualify for, even if they’ve been denied before. She said it’s an effort that helps clients keep food on the table and a roof over their heads.

“People come in at their wits’ end,” she said. “It’s life-changing.”

Griffin said the resource center helps people who were born with disabilities as well as those who became disabled later in life. She said the nonprofit helped her father live independently after he fell and broke his leg in several places.

Griffin, who has worked for the center for almost 20 years, often hears that ILRC is the tri-county area’s best-kept secret.

“I’m tired of hearing that. We’ve been here for 43 years. We shouldn’t be a secret,” she said.

The Ventura County office also has a youth transition program for people between the ages of 14 and 24. Anderson said the center teaches them about options for employment, higher education and independent living.

She said young adults with disabilities should expect more from life than to live with their parents and rely on Social Security after they graduate from high school.

"That's a lightbulb situation for a lot of people," she said. "There needs to be some fulfillment in all of our lives, so why not shoot for the stars?"

The group is hosting its inaugural fundraising event, Passion for Independence, on Sat., Oct. 19 at the Santa Barbara Club. For more information, go to ilrc-trico.org.