



*The United Voice
of Independent Living
in Rural America*

January 2026

A message from the Executive Director's Desk

First things first... Happy New Year! I genuinely hope everyone had a magical and relaxing holiday season surrounded by the love and joy that family and friends bring. I got to enjoy quality time with all 3 of my grown children and all 6 of my grandbabies!! It was glorious. I even managed to actually “unplug” from work in a meaningful way (something I struggle with!)

Acknowledgments: APRIL is very saddened by the loss of Bob Kafka over the holidays. This loss will reverberate through the IL Community for many years to come. I will truly miss listening to his monthly podcast interviews.

We also lost Rita Byers, long time Executive Director of Mainstream CIL here in Little Rock, Arkansas. She will be truly missed.

As we settle into 2026, as I'm sure many of you agree, we're off to a very concerning and rocky start politically. We have federal occupation in many of our cities with violent and deadly interactions happening right before our eyes. US Citizens, Veterans, Indigenous People, Tribal Elders, People with Disabilities are all being swept up in these brutal “immigration raids”.

Families are being ripped apart. We must stay aware, make a plan, check on our neighbors, support one another and never become desensitized or complacent to what is happening. These violent actions affect ALL OF US! We must find the courage to get loud and speak out! If you live in an area that is experiencing any of this and you think there is something APRIL can do to help – **please reach out**. We want to help support you!

Life in general these days can get pretty stressful and overwhelming, so my goal for this year is to not only keep APRIL Members aware of and engaged in current critical issues that affect Independent Living and all of

us, but also to offer some fun, outside the box ways of building community, relationships and hopefully de-stress and calm our nervous systems. I hope to tap into our members' unique skills and hobbies and showcase them in fun, meaningful ways. Bottom line, **we are all we have!** So, let's maximize our connections and nurture our relationships to strengthen our bonds and build a circle of trust, comradery and safety where we can truly lean on each other and learn from each other.

Of course, we must still also focus on the pressing business at hand. We can't take our eye off the ball for even a second and must make sure we're contacting our representatives frequently – especially given the looming threat of another Government shutdown at the end of January. APRIL will continue to offer dynamic training opportunities and ways to be engaged. If you have topic ideas or specific needs – please do let us know so we can develop trainings to address your specific needs. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the various public facing APRIL Committees that hold monthly calls such as Advocacy, Emergency Preparedness and Transportation (every other month) as these are ways to engage with the broader IL community and stay up to date on what APRIL is doing in these spaces. We also offer several youth committee calls.

These calls are listed on our website: www.april-rural.org

APRIL also unveiled our new Member Portal! This is where you will register and pay your Membership Dues. If you are a voting member, this is also where you will vote on any By-Law changes and APRIL Board Member elections. [Login | APRIL Rural Portal – Access Your Account](#)

You will also notice some changes to our Membership Listserv. We will be moving to monthly Listserv emails instead of weekly. We will still send out critical, time sensitive, stand-alone information as it comes to us, but many of you have expressed that you simply get too many emails from us and we heard you loud and clear. Your feedback is always welcome here! I will also be sending out these messages from the ED's desk as a new feature of your Membership. I'm not sure if it will be monthly or quarterly yet, but I want to stay engaged and keep y'all in the loop on what's going on here at APRIL. We're better together and intend to make our community stronger!

Now, onto the good stuff!! As for the “fun, out of the box” stuff, which some might even describe as cooky or weird (FYI we embrace weird around here!!): I have created a JotForm for you to get a feel for the direction we’re hoping to take and also solicit feedback from you all! Is there a hobby or “side hustle” you’re really proud of and want to share? Something that brings you joy? We would love to showcase that with your fellow APRIL Members. As you can tell, and those of you who know me know, I’m a very touchy, feely, “look at the moon”, sending good vibes kinda gal (LOL). And I truly believe we need more of that. We reject cruelty and injustice and instead embrace each other with love and compassion. We need to be able to lean on each other, ask for support and not feel like it’s burdensome to us or the folks we’re leaning on. One of the most common comments we get at APRIL Conferences is that “APRIL feels like family”. And that, to me, is our strength. That is a source of pride for us that I want to lean into. We want to nurture and expand that feeling. When you are having a tough day and need a friendly face, a safe place to talk about it and be heard – I want you to think of APRIL. When you have a success, something you are super proud of, some great news that you want to share – we want to know!! We want to celebrate that with you and highlight it to the community. We all need and **DESERVE** to be heard, supported and celebrated.

Link to 2026 Feedback and Ideas.

Please share far and wide and with all your staff!

<https://form.jotform.com/260157119283052>

P. S. One of the most meaningful ways you can increase your support of APRIL is to encourage your fellow Executive Directors to become members. We hope that you will do that.

Looking forward to building a better, more loving future with all of you!

Elissa Ellis

Elissa Ellis, Executive Director