

By David Martinez
The Tribune

Norma Trujillo struggled for years to leave her family's home and strike out on her own, having to find the funds and means to live independently without the gift of sight. But when the 32-year-old Greeley native started meeting with Greeley's Connections for Independent Living in 2004, she said she finally had access to the resources that allowed her to live on her own — helping her pay her bills online and picking up food boxes from Weld Food Bank, for example.

"They have helped out so much these past years that I've been working with them," Trujillo said. "They have been so good. I don't even know where to begin."

Connections for Independent Living helps those with disabilities live independently. It connects them with programs that assist with self-sufficiency, advocacy, employment, housing, peer support and skills training, according to the organization. It's also one of eight agencies receiving help from the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund, which provides resources for local human service agencies dedicated to helping community members struggling to meet basic needs.

Trujillo, who was born blind, said it's worked out "wonderfully" living on her own. She's planning to move to Denver to attend The Colorado Center for the Blind in Littleton.

"I needed help, urgent help, to try to find a place of my own because I so desperately wanted to get out," Trujillo said, adding that she was living with a relative at the time. "I guess you could say it was a little something that snapped. My family, I don't know why they don't understand, why I find resources like this. I guess I probably just wanted my freedom."

Trujillo said her biggest help came from her case worker, Michael Stevens, whom she's worked with for the past two years. Stevens said he's helped Trujillo pursue greater personal independence, going as far as driving her to Denver and back on occasions to help familiarize her with life in the city.

Stevens, who is the supervisor of the organization's three independent living specialists, also helps about 90 other people. He said the problems people are having in Greeley are getting worse, saying many organizations such as his are "flat tapped out," across the board.

But cases such as Trujillo's keep him going. "At times it is incredibly frustrating. Sometimes, when I think I'm gonna hang it up and stock shelves at Walmart instead, something happens that will keep me here," Stevens said. "Norma's the perfect example of that. She's just so positive, ambitious, unafraid."

Trujillo said she's excited to leave for Denver and knows that if Stevens and Connections for Independent Living weren't in her life, she'd probably still be home, not knowing what to do next.

"What really kind of hurts me is there's a few other (people with disabilities) who say they want to get help, want to do what they want to, but it seems like something's holding them back," she said. "I didn't want anything to hold me back."