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### Abstract

This British article provides a brief reasoning of citizen advocacy, its key concepts and what citizen advocacy is NOT. **Keyword: Advocacy**

# CITIZEN ADVOCACY

Services have begun to enable people with handicaps to live, work, go to school and follow leisure pursuits alongside non-handicapped people. As a result it has become apparent that our human services cannot on their own assure that each individual leads a full and valued life. Improvements in services, like more money, more staff and more technology are not enough. Good workers can be doing a good job and still be massively disadvantaging people. If they are to enable people with disabilities to live fully in their local communities, service providers must join forces with people's support networks - their families, friends and neighbours.

Citizen Advocacy schemes are one way to make sure that handicapped people are personally represented in matters which affect them directly. Citizen Advocacy is essentially a match between two people and can be defined as a competent volunteer representing as his or her own interests the interests of another person who is in some way handicapped or disadvantaged.

## KEY ELEMENTS

1. No conflict of interest: the advocate's loyalty to the person he or she represents is central to the success of the relationship. The advocate must be free from concern for job, career or the needs of an organisation. Otherwise the interests of the handicapped person are likely at some point to be sacrificed. To safeguard from inbuilt compromise, it is essential that:
  - the advocate is independent from a service provider or potential service provider;
  - the advocacy office is independent from service providers in administration, funding and location;
  - the advocate, advocacy office and others have a clear understanding of each other's roles.
2. One to one relationships: one way for the general public to start changing negative and stereotyped attitudes is by positive experiences on a one to one basis. Citizen advocacy focuses on one individual who is handicapped in a relationship with another individual who is not handicapped. The scheme offers a way for an advocate to spend time, energy and resources on behalf of an individual.
3. Unpaid volunteers: often the main non-handicapped people in the lives of those with handicaps are paid to be there. This is especially true for people whose handicaps are substantial. Citizen advocacy aims to increase the number of people who choose to relate to a handicapped person without being in any way paid for the relationship. It is important that advocacy is not seen as a job either by the advocate or by the person represented.
4. Sustained relationships: people who have handicaps often meet a large number of others who come and go in their lives. This happens either because of the way staff schedules are organised or because staff are promoted or change jobs. The relationship between an advocate and the person represented should have the capacity to develop over a long period of time. Sometimes, this relationship may be for life.

## Who needs advocates?

People who have few opportunities to participate in our community with non-handicapped others need access to an independent voice to help them state their needs and preferences. So candidates for advocacy include: people who live in hospitals or who are just leaving for community living; people who lack a voice such as children, some old people, people with mental handicaps or

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disorders; and people whose voice is not understood, like those who have speech problems or do not speak English.

### Who are the advocates?

Once someone has been identified as needing an advocate, it is helpful to get a more precise understanding of their needs. The next step is to describe the characteristics an advocate should have to meet those needs. Recruitment is made easier by very local discussions. The general characteristics of an advocate include the lowest possible conflict of interest, a willingness to go through training, a commitment to the community or the potential for continuing relationships and a sensitivity to the rights and needs of people with disabilities.

### What do advocates do?

The advocacy relationship doesn't always imply friendship or mutual giving. If it did, people who don't reciprocate the attention or affection of an advocate would become ineligible. It is helpful in recruiting to think of advocacy as having two strands. The first is the **instrumental** role, in which the advocate helps solve practical or material problems; he or she might, for instance, help with shopping, voting, claiming disability benefits, or represent the individual at individual programme plan meetings. The second role is **expressive**, in which the advocate is involved in meeting the needs for communication, warmth, love and support; he or she might, for instance, share significant activities and events, share family and friends, visit and offer support during a crisis. An advocate could be involved in either one or these roles, or a combination of both.

### What Citizen Advocacy is NOT

- Citizen advocacy is NOT just a befriending scheme. The advocate represents the interests of the individual as if they were his or her own. That implies fervour, and depth of feeling and is likely to cost the advocate something in time, money or energy. There is no guarantee that friendship will develop; sometimes a reciprocal relationship may not be possible.
- Citizen advocacy is NOT 'inhouse' advocacy. Some agencies have a member who hears consumers' grievances. Other agencies designate a key worker to help individual clients. But it is essential that the citizen advocate and the advocacy office are completely independent of service providers, to avoid inbuilt compromise.
- Citizen advocacy is NOT group advocacy. Individuals and organisations often advocate on group issues like legislation, disability rights, employment. But citizen advocacy is a match between two people, in which the advocate's loyalty is to one specific individual.
- Citizen advocacy is NOT a way to supplement the workforce. The advocate is not a volunteer to the agency, or there to take over the duties of staff. He or she is responsible for ensuring that one individual receives the services and experiences that he or she needs.

### Further reading

Wolfensberger, W., and Zauha, H., Citizen Advocacy and Protective Services for the Impaired and Handicapped, National Institute on Mental Retardation/Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded Publications, Toronto, 1973.

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