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Abstract

This information sheet describes citizen advocacy, what citizen advocacy is NOT, the role of the Citizen Advocacy office, the goals of citizen advocacy, and who benefits. **Keyword: Advocacy**

CITIZEN ADVOCACY

WHAT CITIZEN ADVOCACY IS:

Citizen Advocacy is an important "mutual help" program. It enables caring volunteers, through one-to-one involvement, to help members of our community who have an intellectual disability, to speak up for them and protect their rights and interests.

This need for Citizen Advocacy has evolved for many reasons:

Many people labelled as disabled are cut off from participating in and contributing to community affairs.

Many have no supportive personal ties with family or friends. The only people who relate to them are those paid to do so, and often staff are moved on in a short time.

Lacking the natural support of family and friends, and limited in their capacity to represent their own rights and interests, people with disabilities are frequently denied the life conditions and opportunities most of us take for granted: homes (instead of institutions), jobs, education, control over decisions affecting our lives, adequate medical care, basic human and civil rights.

Since advocacy needs are diverse, each citizen advocacy relationship is unique. A citizen advocate may have any or all of the following functions:

Spokesperson	advisor	negotiator	guide
Friend and ally	monitor of services	vital link to community	activities

The involvement might be long-term or short-term, informal or legal (as in the case of guardianship), very intense to minimally demanding. In some cases, the relationship may be life-long.

WHAT CITIZEN ADVOCACY IS NOT:

Citizen Advocacy is NOT "in-house" advocacy. Some agencies have a member who hears consumers grievances. Other agencies designate a key person 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 group organizations 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 the staff. He or she is responsible for ensuring that one individual receives the services and experiences that he or she needs.

ROLE OF THE CITIZEN ADVOCACY OFFICE;

A citizen advocate is recruited by, and receives training and support from the Citizen Advocate Office. The C.A. staff provide backup to the relationship, help plan strategies in problem solving and link advocates to professional resources. Unlike traditional volunteers however, a citizen advocate is not a volunteer to the office, but the loyalty lies with the person to whom he or she is matched.

THE GOALS OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY:

Citizen advocacy has four broad goals:

1. ADVOCACY: Help ensure that persons with disabilities have the same opportunities and life conditions which are available to everyone else.
2. COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE & INCLUSION: Help affirm the unqualified value of disabled persons as partners in our community by including them in our community organizations and activities.
3. PROTECTION: Help safeguard disabled persons from abuse and neglect.
4. STRENGTHEN OUR COMMUNITIRS: By increasing peoples' opportunities to develop their talents, to help, understand and appreciate each other.

WHO BENEFITS FROM CITIZEN ADVOCACY?

Obviously, citizen advocacy benefits persons with disabilities in numerous ways. They become included in day-to-day experience in the community rather than being isolated with other handicapped people. This facilitates the contribution they can make of their skill and talents. They receive help to gain access to appropriate housing, education, jobs, health care and leisure time activities. Citizen advocates provide much needed individual attention, caring, support and spokespersonship, on a continuing basis.

Citizen advocates, in turn, gain personal satisfaction from sharing experiences with another person, from being involved in community affairs, and from making their community a richer and better place in which to live.

It is, perhaps, our local communities that are the greatest long-term beneficiaries from citizen advocacy. Citizen advocacy asks: "What is the nature of our community? Are we a supportive humane society or are we a society which converts those among us who have some extra needs into statistics for nursing homes or institutions?" We know people will volunteer for service organizations and to numerous other agencies. Citizen advocacy is challenging people to make longer and more basic commitment - to help sustain our citizens who have disabilities to live amongst us rather than shutting them away. This strengthens the fabric of our entire society.

Community members who have previously been isolated and shunned are enabled to make their contribution rather than be kept dependent on others. The financial cost to the community is greatly reduced, while the human benefits are immeasurable. The increased appreciation and respect in the community for human "differentness" enriches everyone's lives. The ethic of neighbour helping neighbour, critical to human success and survival is promoted and nurtured.

*THE FINEST GOVERNMENT HUMAN SERVICE PROGRAMMES OR
EXTENSIVE "EQUAL RIGHTS" LEGISLATION CANNOT MAKE THESE THINGS HAPPEN!*

More information on Citizen Advocacy can be obtained from contacting an Office in your State:

ACT (02) 6253 4818

NSW (02) 9557 2933

VIC (03) 9851 9421

QLD (07) 3368 3815

WA (08) 9322 5999

SA (08) 8365 2775

NT and TAS no present programme