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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of Citizen Advocacy. It details the reasons for its inception in Sunbury, Victoria, and the prevailing negative attitude of the community. Comments are made by staff, committee member, advocate and partner which help provide an understanding of citizen advocacy. **Keyword: Advocacy**

"THE IMPACT OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY ON ME"

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Overview of Citizen Advocacy

Citizen Advocacy is a community based organisation that aims to educate the community to an understanding of the needs and aspirations of people who have a disability. The concept of Citizen Advocacy is based on the assumption that all people have the right to be included in the life of the community.

A Citizen Advocacy office challenges ordinary citizens to spend some of their time and energy building a one to one, personal, responsible relationship with a person who has a disability. It provides local people with the opportunity to get to know another person whom they would not normally meet, to step into their shoes and see the world from their point of view. For some people who have a disability, this relationship may be their only connection to the mainstream of community life.

The Citizen Advocacy programme is run by a local Committee of Management, which is independent of and separate from the human service system.

Basic Principles

As Citizen Advocacy has its roots in the community each programme is different and unique, reflecting the community from which it has grown and the needs of those whom it supports. However, they all share a common commitment to four basic non-negotiable principles.

1. The focus of all the energy available for the programme is on creating and supporting a variety of responsible, personal relationships that encourage identification with and active representation of the interests of the person with a disability; that bring the person with a disability into social and community life; and usually involve long term commitments.
2. Citizen Advocates freely choose to enter a relationship which is independent of the human service system and not controlled by the Citizen Advocacy programme. Citizen Advocacy relationships are voluntary, but advocates are not "volunteers" to an agency. They find direction in their relationship, not from an outside supervisor.
3. The Citizen Advocacy programme itself is a model of positive interactions and interpretations of people with disabilities.
4. The programme defines its identity and develops its supports in the community; is able to act independently of the human service system; and is not identified with the human service system.

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The Citizen Advocacy programme itself does not do individual advocacy; does not get involved in broader issues concerning people with disabilities, though people in citizen advocacy relationships may choose to; nor does it set up or sponsor self-advocacy or family advocacy groups, though people in citizen advocacy relationships may choose to do so.

The Citizen Advocacy programme purposely seeks diversity and involves people from many parts of the community and reaches out to people with disabilities of different ages, different abilities, and in different living situations.

Citizen Advocacy - Sunbury and Districts

Citizen Advocacy - Sunbury and Districts is unique because it was initially established to cater exclusively for residents of Caloola Training Centre - a large residential institution. It has since developed to include the natural community around Sunbury, which encompasses several small towns and a large rural area. It is also unique in its development, with the main impetus coming from community people and not professionals in the disability field.

The township of Sunbury has developed around the institution. The original "Hill Wards" were built in 1865 and over the past century have been used as a school for delinquent children, a Lunatic Asylum and finally a Training Centre for the intellectually disabled. It has been associated with socially devalued people for well over a century and because of that stigma, the current residents are seen as second class citizens. That attitude has been perpetuated by the insular nature of the institution and the community. Continuing generations of families have worked there and disadvantaged people have been the main source of employment and the cornerstone of the town economy.

Over the past 15 years the local population has dramatically increased with an influx of first home owners and young families. This new generation of community people are having their view of disability strongly influenced by the prevailing community attitude. It is therefore an important and integral part of Citizen Advocacy to present disabled people in a positive and dignified way and to educate the community to acceptance of disability. Citizen Advocacy strengthens our community, not by theories or politics imposed from outside, but by partnerships in ordinary situations, in direct speaking and actions, one with one.

From a Personal Viewpoint

Helen Sims is the Chairperson of the Committee of Management and is also an advocate. She says, "I had been impressed by an article in a newspaper about a woman's personal involvement and commitment to a severely disabled boy and her efforts to improve the quality of his life. Citizen advocacy came to my attention shortly after that and struck a similar cord. I thought that it was about time that I did something and not just talk about it.

Since then I have learnt that there is a great deal of prejudice and ignorance about the disabled and their right to live a valued life. I have learnt how important personal relationships are, especially to people who have been deprived of them. The lives of many disabled people are completely desolate - no experiences or memories outside their immediate environment. Memories are what is left of experiences and there is a great

deal of satisfaction in reflecting and sharing them. I have also learnt that there are many very caring people in our community who are willing to change this.

I believe that by getting the community actively and personally involved with disabled people, Citizen Advocacy can be effective in making it more tolerant and accepting of a wide range of people. It is our personal responsibility to work towards building a better and more just society, especially in the communities in which we live.

One of the difficulties in Citizen Advocacy is dealing with the expectations placed on you by becoming an advocate. Sometimes people expect more than you are willing or able to offer. I find it difficult to achieve a balance between commitment to my family, to myself and to Dorothy whom I advocate for. The officialness of the title Citizen Advocate - creates expectations. It is legalistic terminology and sometimes discourages people from becoming involved. This is reinforced by the institution and their need to fit everything into a bureaucratic system. The informal and personal nature of Citizen Advocacy does not fit "the System".

From my involvement with Dorothy, my whole family have come in contact with and accept disability. Initially my young son and Dorothy were competing for my attention, but now they relate to each other much better. She still finds it difficult to understand the needs of a child and expects him to behave like an adult. He treats her like any other adult. My husband finds it an extra drain on available time. However, when we do something with Dorothy he says we should do it more often - it isn't difficult. General pressures of my life - work, study and home - limit the amount of time I spend with Dorothy. But, even with that limited contact, we have become Dorothy's family, her experiences and her memories.

I hope that by my involvement with Dorothy and the Citizen Advocacy programme my son will grow up appreciating people for who and what they are, regardless of their abilities or disabilities."

John Franze - "I have always believed that people have the right to achieve that which they are capable of. People who are handicapped through no fault of their own need a fair go and won't get it unless other people are willing to do something. I have always been so involved living my own life, I have resisted getting involved. I have strong views on most issues, but have never done anything for anyone else. My views weren't compatible with my actions and finally I decided I had to "put up or shut up".

Being involved with Citizen Advocacy and Elaine has made me think more about things and to understand myself more. I have had to put aside a certain amount of time that is not materially beneficial to myself. I do not feel a moral obligation to do this, so I have had to think deeply about my motivation and the justification for it. It has made me question myself and in doing so come to understand myself more and realise some of my own limitations. It has also increased my understanding of other people. I have learnt that if you get to know a person beyond the exterior you find that even the most severely disabled person, given the appropriate individual attention could be living a more useful and productive life.

My family has been very supportive and involved. It is beneficial for my children because it gives them the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of the world by their contact with a disabled person.

I wouldn't normally have a relationship with a 52 year old woman and share common interests. In that way I don't think that I am the most appropriate advocate for Elaine. I am not naturally a gregarious person and I think maybe Elaine would be able to relate better to a different personality. We don't have a great deal to say to each other and communication is difficult. I don't know Elaine well enough yet to know whether it's a problem for her. I can't do many things for her, especially meet her physical needs. It would be embarrassing to her, as well as to me. I have to try harder to make this relationship work than I do with others. I am not the ideal advocate for Elaine, but I am here and will do what I can.

I think Elaine is much more intelligent than the staff at Caloola give her credit for. She is also very strong willed. I think she could communicate better if she tried harder, but I think she has learnt that its no use because no one tries to understand.

I mainly talk about Elaine to my immediate family and occasionally to a close friend. My parents wouldn't understand. They would think that I am just a "do-gooder".

Elaine Rogers - "I like John; I like the children and like to visit his place. I had no-one to visit me before John.

It is very good. I am very happy.

I would like to move out of Caloola, live in a house and learn to do more things for myself. John could help with somethings and also find someone who could help me with others.

I like to talk to John. It is easier with more practise."

Helen Nish - "When I first became involved in Citizen Advocacy I thought that it was a way to fill some of the gaps in the lives of disabled people. Gaps left by professional services, gaps left by lack of families and by a rejecting society. I thought that Citizen Advocacy was only for disabled people.

After 2 years as a co-ordinator I now know that Citizen Advocacy is much more than that. Citizen Advocacy is a way of creating opportunities for people to act; to take responsibility; to make their community a better place to live.

Citizen Advocacy is a way of encouraging people to take control of their lives and be responsible. Our professionalised society demands that we turn over that responsibility to experts. Citizen Advocacy gives people the opportunity to be the expert in their own life; the opportunity to know and acknowledge their own skills, ability, worth and contribution.

For me personally, Citizen Advocacy constantly renews my belief in people. There are a lot of good people, doing good things and Citizen Advocacy is one of them.

Citizen Advocacy is having faith in people, trusting that they will act in the best interests of their partner. Citizen Advocacy is the excitement of not knowing exactly what people will do together, where these relationships will lead them and what the future holds. Citizen Advocacy is surprises, uncertainty, joy, sadness, pain - LIFE. Citizen Advocacy is not "desired outcomes".

There is a continual questioning in Citizen Advocacy, advocates question - "Why am I here?" "What effect am I having?" "Does she/he like me?" "Am I taking too much control?"

There are no correct answers. Citizen Advocacy is a personal response to a personal need. Advocates apply their own natural sense of justice to a situation; put themselves into that situation and ask, "Would I like this happening to me?"

I question - "What is advocacy?" "What is friendship?" "Can you be a Citizen Advocate without a close personal relationship?" "At what point in a relationship is a person considered to be an advocate?"

I thought as time went by and I became more experienced in Citizen Advocacy it would all become so much easier. However, these questions challenge us not to become complacent, not to deceive ourselves into thinking that we know all the right answers.

Citizen Advocacy is not always being right."