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Abstract

Citizen advocacy programs are focused on arranging and supporting relationships among people who would otherwise not meet. This paper by John O'Brien (who has been involved in advocacy for people with disability for many years, focusing on assisting organisations respond effectively to the needs of individuals) provides the key ideas about citizen advocacy and shows the many ways citizen advocacy can begin and support a variety of such relationships.

Keyword: Advocacy

citizen advocacy is important because...

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Citizen advocacy programmes are focused on arranging and supporting relationships among people who otherwise would not meet.

key ideas

a valued* citizen
who is unpaid and independent of
human services
creates a relationship with
a person who is at risk of social exclusion
and chooses one or several of many ways
to understand, respond to, and represent
that person's interests as if they were the
advocates own
thus bringing their partner's gifts and
concerns
into the circles of ordinary life.

Of course these vital relationships occur naturally and flourish without outside support. But the widespread practice of segregating people into professionally controlled settings on the basis of prejudices about disability greatly decreases the chances of people who are

* A 'valued person is someone who is richly connected to the networks of people and associations that make up community life and willing and able to act with - and perhaps for - another person. CA experience shows that people are rich in these valuable capacities regardless of social class, race, sex, and level of formal education.

not disabled knowing a person with a disability.

Citizen advocacy programmes are focused on arranging and supporting relationships among people who otherwise would not meet.

citizen advocacy is important because...

Good intentions and prejudice have combined to separate many people with handicaps into professionally controlled environments. Institutions, nursing homes, many board and care homes, and too many community residences, workshops, activity programmes and special education programmes segregate people - not for short periods of effective treatment but for years. Someone who is nothing but a client leads a constrained life, handicapped by being cut off from essential social and civic resources:

relationships

Friends a person can count on to do and talk about things, share joys and sorrows, and exchange personal support. A mentor who takes a personal interest helping another person discover and develop skills and talents. An assistant who chooses to help out with practical things. An ally stands with a person to help the person get what he wants. A protector stands up for a person who is vulnerable to abuse or incompetent treatment.** Someone with very few good relationships will feel lonely and vulnerable.

** Writing in straight lines creates a trap because most actual relationships can't be neatly classified. Mentors can be friends. Friends can be protectors. Assistants can be mentors. The list is just a way to suggest that there are many ways to be in a relationship. A CA programme doesn't exist to choose among them but to begin and support a variety of different types of relationships.

contacts

Contacts with networks of people who share common interests and exchange information, access to other people, tools, favours, influence, and assistance. People enlist others to join their cause, solicit donations, get advice about the best doctor, discover new trends, locate a place to buy at a discount, borrow a hammer, and find job leads and business prospects from among their network of contacts. Someone without contacts is likely to be ill informed, and ineffective since he has to do things in the least efficient, most expensive way.

membership

Membership in formal and informal associations - neighbourhood associations, political clubs, churches and church groups, civic organisations, sporting teams, and the people who hang around together at the local cafe. Being a member offers group support for one's interests, status, and the possibility of civic and political influence. Someone with no memberships is likely to be isolated and powerless and to seem a stranger to others.

positive roles in the local economy

Because of the way services are designed many people with handicaps are reduced to commodities: they are valuable because other people have jobs housing them and looking after them. Few people who rely very much on services have these everyday roles available to them: renter, home-owner, worker, business person, investor, volunteer doing useful work, or student preparing for a 'real job'. Most Americans who rely upon services very much are cash and asset poor by public policy: publicly funded services are usually arranged to make people with assets ineligible, to pauperize people who enter services with assets, to discourage people from earning, and to offer people a level of cash payment well below a living wage. Someone without positive roles in the local economy is

likely to have little money, limited security in housing, few opportunities to contribute, and diminished standing in negotiating conflicts because of the prejudices summed up in '**beggars can't be choosers**'.

CA responds to people's exclusion by making and supporting personal relationships between people with very few resources and people with many resources which have their roots outside the human service system. Citizen advocates can contribute in a variety of ways: they offer the benefits of personal relationship, provide introductions to new people, help a person make contacts or use their network of contacts on the person's behalf, enlist the support of community associations, and sponsor a person's membership in community associations. They can build a variety of bridges.

Exclusion of people with handicaps diminishes community in at least four ways: local people, associations, and enterprises are deprived of the energy, skills, knowledge and other gifts a person with a disability can bring; the help that a person with a disability may need can become excessively costly as the human service system implements 'all or nothing' service arrangements instead of applying its resources to support the people who care for and include a person; many ordinary people don't develop or use their competencies for caring and conclude that only professionals know how; and, people separate from one another to hide the human realities of imperfection, dependency, fallibility, and suffering, rather than gathering together to learn their lessons. CA encourages people to welcome people with handicaps as friends, neighbours, and citizens who may need extra help or accommodation. It appeals to people's neighbourliness, common sense, everyday skills, and human courage rather than to professionalised solutions. It is one way to build community competence.

Many people with disabilities are handicapped by rejection and unfair treatment which is justified by prejudiced beliefs. Prejudices remain undisturbed as long as people remain apart. CA is one way to bring people together and dissolve prejudices.

Many people with handicaps rely on human services that deal with them as one of a group and make few allowances for their individual differences unless a person has an ally. Human services often have confusing requirements and procedures and sometimes withhold important information. An outsider's eye and voice can make an important difference. Some human services are neglectful and some abuse people. Although an independent person with no special authority can seldom reform such settings, she may make official systems for protecting people work better and some advocates have simply taken people away from abusive places. CA is one way to make services do better what they are able to do.

A growing number of people believe that people with handicaps are at risk of a powerful, and largely hidden social process Wolf Wolfensberger has named deathmaking.* Under these conditions only strong personal commitments by courageous people can hope to protect vulnerable individuals. CA is one way to form such commitments.

There are many ways to encourage caring and civic responsibility, bring people with handicaps together with other citizens, and protect and promote the interests of people with handicaps.

* Everyone concerned with people with handicaps should give Wolfensberger's analysis of deathmaking careful study. The Scrapbook section of **learning from citizen advocacy** includes a brief statement, but the full argument is best available in a workshop presented occasionally by the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, 805 South Crouse Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210.

Each way can make a real contribution. Each has limitations. CA is one clear, direct approach: the formation and support of responsible personal relationships. Its worth does not depend on being the best solution for everyone or beating out other ways but on its distinctive contribution to community life.

John O'Brien has spent August addressing a number of seminars/workshops in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, and Northern New South Wales, on citizen advocacy, personal futures planning, deinstitutionalisation, self advocacy, exemplary services, change agency, supported employment, accommodation and integration facilitation. Once again his input of enthusiasm and expertise into the field of intellectual disability has been greatly appreciated by those who participated.