



Florida Center for INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Advocating for Yourself & Others: Public Policy Advocacy to Improve the Quality of Lives of People with Developmental Disabilities

Advocacy is about influencing change. Being an advocate often focuses on changing public policies that impact people with developmental disabilities. Advocating for change usually starts with getting excited, being riled, or feeling worried about something that may be detrimental to yourself or others.

Deciding to put your time and energy into advocacy is not to be taken lightly. It takes commitment, passion, and persistence. Advocates work in favor of a cause and have to stick with it long enough to see success. You will work, sometimes in the face of opposition, for things that matter. Most importantly, you have to be prepared to hang in there until the job is done. Public policy advocacy usually involves getting government, business, schools, or some other large establishment to correct an unfair or harmful situation affecting people.

Advocacy is necessary to support effective systems change. Good advocates know they must think very hard about any barriers that may occur. That's one reason for careful planning. Even if an issue seems crystal clear and your choice of actions seems obvious, several ingredients will make your advocacy more effective including:

- ◇ The magnitude of the cause.
- ◇ The passion and persistence of the advocates.
- ◇ The thoroughness with which the advocates research the issue, the challenges, and the solutions.

"How wonderful that no one need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." -Anne Frank

What Works?

Understanding the Issue or Problem

It's important to have a clear understanding of all aspects surrounding the issue by gathering information such as:

- ◇ Who is being impacted?
- ◇ What are the pros and cons of the issue?
- ◇ What caused the problem you are addressing?
- ◇ Why should a decision-maker care other than "It's the right thing to do"?
- ◇ What forces might be influencing decision-makers?
- ◇ Who are your allies and opponents?
- ◇ What it will take for decision makers to support your goals?

Defining the Issue

Keep it simple and specific. A critical part in being effective is being very clear about what is the issue and what you feel should be done about it.

The decision makers, who are often legislators, may not be aware of all aspects of an issue, and therefore may not see it a priority. Your issue is just one of the thousands of messages to which the decision makers hear every day. Stating the broad issue in one or two simple sentences and then giving specific real people stories is the best approach. Some ways to really make issue clear is to present statistics to help decision makers understand how people are being affected.

Example:

ISSUE: The legislature proposed cuts to the Home and Community Based Services Medicaid Waiver budget and services have been proposed. These cuts will cause harm to people with developmental disabilities who want to live in the community. You are advocating for an increase in funding to maintain the services of 35,000 individuals currently on the waiver and to serve 15,000 people on the waiting list.

GOAL: Supports and services for individuals with developmental disabilities who live and work in the community.

Developing Solutions

When you're advocating, it's always best to have a specific solution to propose to the decision makers.

The best way to come up with solutions is to develop them through a collaborative process. By working with many stakeholders to create solutions, you can present a unified voice. Your solutions can set the tone and boundaries of discussion over the issue and ensure that critical elements are included in whatever is finally adopted.

The process for developing solutions should follow a simple process that ensures credibility and stakeholder ownership and encourages acceptance by everyone. It will also increase the chances that the solution you create will actually work, because it draws on the knowledge and experience of a broad range of people. Just follow these simple steps:

- ◇ Assemble a planning team that includes individuals, families,

and groups affected, credible experts, and other advocates.

- ◇ Work together to gather important research and data.
- ◇ Develop solutions specific and easy to understand.
- ◇ Create a very simple and specific one page handout of that includes the issue, a real story, important statistics, and the proposed solutions.

Presenting the Issue

Present the issue and advocate early and often.

- ◇ **TIMING:** The timing involved in presenting your solutions is very important. If you're focusing on legislators or other officials, then it's best to start before an election, the beginning of the annual budget process, or when legislators are in the home district are crucial times. Although you may be targeting an agency or organization, it's usually better to focus on one individual who has a lot of power. For example, you might plan to change the thinking of one elected official or agency head. Also, legislative aides are a very important and direct link to legislators.
- ◇ **SPOKESPERSON:** It is critical that a well-respected person act as spokesperson to present the issue and solutions. It can be one person or a small group of people who have credibility with the decision makers. There may be one advocate who has done much of the work behind the scenes and even though they may not be right one to take the role of spokesperson. Choosing

the wrong spokesperson—someone the decision makers view as actively hostile—can jeopardized the overall success of the advocacy effort.

- ◇ **FOLLOW-UP:** After the issues and solutions have been shared with the decision makers, it is crucial that as many people as possible follow-up in variety of ways to get the word out. Use a variety of methods: personal emails, hand written letters, personal visits, and phone calls. Expect to have to continue working to get the message accepted over the long term and don't ever give up!

Remember!

Be passionate and persistent. It's important to have the passion and persistence that lead to positive outcomes for all.

- ◇ Passion is important because it can help sway undecided people to your viewpoint and it helps you focus on your goals.
- ◇ Persistence helps you follow through on commitments, and keeps your opponents scrambling to keep up with your kind of dedication.

Resources

- ◇ Alinsky, S.D. (1971). *Rules for radicals*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- ◇ Bobo, K., Kendall, J., Max, S. (1991). *Organizing for social change: a manual for activists in the 1990s*. Minneapolis, MN: Seven Locks Press.
- ◇ *Community Tool Box*, Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS: <http://ctb.ku.edu>
- ◇ *The Center for Community Change*, <http://www.communitychange.org/default.asp>