



# ADVOCACY

## Advocacy History

For many of those that work or participate in the social service field, advocacy and advocating are just part of what we do. However, advocacy as we know it is a rather recent phenomenon. As recent as the 1920's, the United States Supreme Court condoned the force sterilization of a woman dubbed as 'feebleminded.' This and other serious violations of basic constitutional and human rights sadly took place during the early half of the 20th century.

Even in the latter half of the 1900's, families with children with disabilities had to fight for acceptance in their home communities and faced overwhelming prejudicial attitudes. Adults with disabilities were often placed in large group settings isolated from their home communities and families. There was significantly inadequate protection from abuse and neglect. It was not until 1977 that California passed what would be called the Lanterman Act to provide basic rights and protection for individuals with disabilities. Today, this measure serves as the foundation for the support and advocacy services now available through the



## ADVOCACY TODAY

Against this bleak backdrop two aspects of advocacy become especially clear. First advocacy means we as caregivers take on the responsibility of using our own voice and action to support people who have historically had their voice ignored or invalidated. Secondly, the role of an advocate is to proactively uncover creative and engaging ways to actively return decision making power to those who have had their freedom taken from them. We also use our actions to create a place where people with disabilities can speak for themselves

Another dimension of advocacy is self-advocacy. This means, people with disabilities must also be able to act as self-advocates—that is—exercising their rights of basic personhood and citizenship by speaking and standing up for themselves. People must have a voice in decision-making in all areas of their daily life and in public policy decisions affecting them because they know their own circumstances best.

## ADVOCACY BALANCE

Advocacy can be a bit of a balancing act. We need to have a good understanding of the boundaries of advocacy so we can pull off the balance successfully. At times, advocates may need to use our own voices to ensure that a client's voice is heard and treated seriously. Other times, our role as an advocate may be to listen and keep quiet while someone finds his or her own voice. The advocacy balance beam takes practice and success comes with time.

On one side, our balance can be lost with a lack of advocacy. This is when the needs or decisions of those we serve are not fully expressed. To avoid losing balance on this end, we must increase our skill and ability to facilitate for our clients an environment where they are able to maximize their own self-expression and decision making. Balance can just as easily be lost on the other side of the beam. This side represents over-advocacy. This is when as staff we work so hard to make sure the client's voice is heard, we end up confusing our own version of the client's voice for his or her own. Even though we started with the client in mind, our advocacy ends up stepping in for the client, rather creating a place where he or she can step out independently. Regaining balance here looks like taking a step back. We must be proactive enough to provide supports that make a



## ADVOCACY PRACTICE

Here are a few practical ways you can increase your advocacy credibility. Be intentional to build your own advocacy CRED.

**Community:** People who use services are often excluded from having active roles in their communities. The advocate can support their partner to explore ‘who they are’ and help others to find ways of building valued roles for them in their community. The Advocate can ...

1. Help clients find opportunities to be more involved in their community.
2. Make sure others take action to support the client in their efforts.

**Relationships:** Advocates need to listen to their partner and other people who know them to find out who is important in their lives. A good way to do this is to listen and make a diagram. The Advocate can ...

1. Understand who is important, and tell others about these important people.
2. Identify which relationships can be strengthened and devise an action step.

**Evaluate:** Writing down what is working and not working in someone’s life helps everyone to understand more clearly. It also makes sure that the things that are going well continue to happen. The Advocate can ...

1. Understand what needs to change for the client, and help create a plan of action.
2. Make sure others on the team understand what needs to change.

**Dreaming:** Some people take active steps to work towards dreams and for others achieving the dream is not so important but they enjoy thinking about it. They may give us drive and something to aim for. The Advocate can ...

1. Help clients find creative ways to express their dreams or work toward an easily attainable part.
2. Ensure others do not diminish the dream, or the importance of the dream.

PRACTICE

### Sources:

- 1 Major portions of this section have been taken from the article “History” from the website for Protection & Advocacy for People with Disabilities, Inc. <http://pandasc.org/about/history/>
- 2 Major portions of this section have been taken from the article “Advocacy” from the website for The Arc. <http://www.thearc.org/page.aspx?pid=2349>
- 3 Adapted slightly from the article “The Best of Both Voices: Person Centred Thinking and Advocacy” by Julie Lunk and Jonathon Bassett. From the Learning Community website <http://www.learningcommunity.us/documents/TBOBV.pdf>