



KEY ELEMENTS OF ADVOCACY

There are a number of key elements of advocacy. To briefly explain the elements of advocacy we have identified the following 6 as the predominant key elements.

1. Functioning by speaking out, acting or writing

Advocacy is active. It involves doing something. It may be writing letters to politicians, raising issues of concern to organisations or services, being with a person when they are confronted with situations they find difficult, being with a person where they could be taken advantage of or fighting for a person's right to live a more fulfilling life.

2. Minimal conflict of interest

This issue lies at the core of advocacy and is one of the hardest, most important issues to come to grips with. In any situation there will be more than one person or groups' interests that will be in conflict or competition with the interest of a person with a disability.

When you are in an advocacy role, you need to be clear as to how your interest and needs may be in conflict with the person for whom you are advocating. As an advocate you must identify and attempt to reduce conflicts of interest or, at least, be prepared to acknowledge your limitations as an advocate.

3. Sincerely perceived interests

This issue is one of the most complex and difficult issues for advocates to address. The advocate does not just speak up for what a person may want or what a person may be interested in. Advocates will be faced with making decisions about a person with disability's life and wellbeing and may be the only individual in that person's life who has a positive vision for that person's future in the long term. When what a person says they want is different from what seems to be in their best interests, advocates are faced with a difficult dilemma.

Identifying what is in a person's interests, what they need versus what they want is a difficult process.

4. Promotion of person's welfare, wellbeing and justice.

As an advocate you do this precisely because the wellbeing of, and justice for, disadvantaged, devalued people is often at risk. Things we take for granted are often not available for people with disabilities. Devalued people are apt to be treated as

sub-human with all the degrading, inhumane treatment that accompanies such notions of devalued people and people with disability in particular.

For example, people with disabilities have been placed in cages, left unattended on toilets for long periods of time, bathrooms and toilets often do not have doors fitted. Little attempt is made to ensure privacy and dignity for the person.

One must be convinced that the dynamics of oppression are a constant reality in these people's lives, so that our advocacy efforts are aimed at enhancing and protecting the value, the competencies and the image of the person for whom we are advocating, as opposed to promoting devalued social roles and images. Unless we are highly conscious and convinced of the devaluing structures and processes that operate with in the lives of devalued persons, we can actually assist and tacitly engage in, those destructive processes.

5. Vigour of action

Advocacy requires:

- fervour and depth of feeling in advancing the cause or interest of another
- taking a lead, initiating
- sense of urgency
- doing more than what is done routinely
- challenging the community

As an advocate you need to be prepared to bend over backwards to pursue and achieve even small, ordinary gains. Instead of only writing a letter to the editor, it may require you to also ring your local politician; instead of complaining once about an unacceptable situation, it may require you to complain weekly.

6. Costs

Advocacy can involve costs to the advocate and to the person needing advocacy and these costs must be considered.

To say that advocacy costs, is not to say that people with disability are costly to be with. The cost element of advocacy reflects the demands of all strong advocacy, whether for people with disability or advocacy for another purpose, for example, environmental causes. Recognising that advocacy costs, helps advocates to prepare and understand what may happen to them when they do advocacy. People with disability need advocates who are prepared and able to be there for the long haul.

Costs to the advocate

The potential costs to the advocate include one or many of the following at various times:

- Time or other resources that the advocate may rather spend on something or someone else such as time with your family, going to the movies.
- Emotional wear and tear that arise from the highs and lows of advocacy.
- Not being able to adequately meet bodily demands such as having time to sleep, rest, eat a leisurely dinner.
- Social rejection and ridicule that you may experience. Often by being an advocate you may suffer some of the same things devalued person or group experiences – exclusion, ridicule, rejection by your peers, work colleagues, friends.
- self-esteem and self-certainty may be attached. Often people who rock the boat are labelled troublemaker, eccentric, do gooder and are treated accordingly. This may cause you to lose faith in yourself and your actions.
- Financial security and livelihood may be lessened. Your actions as an advocate may lead to the loss of promotional or job opportunities, the loss of existing job, or the cost of litigation.
- Physical health, safety and in some countries your life can be threatened as a result of strong advocacy efforts.

Costs to person needing advocacy

When you make decisions or take actions that affect the person with the disability you need to be aware of the implications of your actions. You can achieve this by asking yourself the following questions.

- Will my advocacy efforts have the potential to cause more harm than good?
- If I do not take action how serious will be the potential outcome be?

If there is a potential cost to the person with a disability you must also warn them as to what that might be. For example, you may be advocating for a person to have visitors when they wish. Firstly, you must consider how your actions could negatively affect the person. If it is likely the person could be penalised in small ways, such as being served last at dinner, you may decide to go ahead in this situation. If the consequence could be the person being singled out by staff and made fun of in front of everyone you might decide the cost is too great. However, if you were making complaints to a service because of suspected physical and sexual abuse, the potential costs of being made fun of will almost certainly be worth stopping the abuse.

Other key elements of Advocacy

There are other key elements of advocacy that are implied by the definition, they are:

1. Being on the side of the disadvantaged party

Advocacy is biased; it does not claim to be neutral. It is not about mediating, facilitating or negotiating on behalf of someone. It means placing yourself

fundamentally on the side of the person with a disability. If you are advocating for – then you will be advocating against as well. There is no middle road. It does not mean you will have to be aggressive or confrontational although some situations may warrant that. It simply means clearly, consistently, and firmly acting and speaking on behalf of one person or group of people.

2. Fidelity / Stick-to-it-ness

Advocacy involves being there over the long run. This may involve making commitment to be in someone's life for a long time or making a commitment to see a particular situation through to its end. Some people with a disability, particularly those who are dependent on services, have little continuous contact with people. Residential care officers, mental health workers, social workers, case managers often come and go. Hence it is important to make a realistic commitment to be there.

3. Emphasis on major needs

As an advocate you need to concentrate on a person's fundamental needs first. A person's need for a home of their own, enduring relationships, to be free from abuse, to be healthy and safe may take priority over encouraging a person to attend personal development courses or even having work.

4. Mindful of parties even more needy than the person you are advocating for

There may be other parties whose needs must be considered. For example, the child of parents who lack competence is more vulnerable than those parents. Advocates for the parents must bear in mind the needs of the vulnerable child and at least arrange independent advocacy for the child.