Advocacy Skills in Action
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Historically people with disabilities have been denied fair treatment and respect in a wide variety of public situations. These include education, employment, housing, transportation, and access to public buildings and activities. By becoming involved in organizations that advocate for change in public situations, persons with disabilities can gain fair treatment and respect. They can influence decisions that affect their lives.

Many citizens are concerned about a broad range of issues, but few, unfortunately, know how to take effective action on those issues. Persons with disabilities generally have not acquired advocacy skills nor learned to generate ideas about how to influence decision makers. Independent Living Center (ILC) consumers, staff, and board members, and community development experts nationwide have commented on the need for methods and materials to help organize advocacy groups and teach advocacy procedures.

The Independent Living movement provides an excellent context for organized groups to advocate for community improvements. Independent living means control over one's life. Involvement in organized advocacy groups is one way to exert and extend that control. Moreover, although almost every community needs IL development activities, there are neither enough funds nor enough professionals for each community to have its own ILC.

Organizations can have substantial local impact, however, even if there is not an ILC. An advocacy group can identify important local issues, design projects to improve community conditions, and use available local resources to implement its projects.

Advocacy groups operate by assigning individuals to monitor community events and report relevant issues back to the group. The group then holds meetings to analyze issues, plan appropriate actions, stimulate commitment for implementing projects, and review the results of their efforts.

Issues can involve both positive and negative events. In general, there are five types of issues monitors might observe:

- **Positive changes in services, policies, budget allocations, and potentially beneficial proposals.** Noting these kinds of improvements helps the group decide whether to support, compliment, encourage, facilitate, or honor a change in service or policy.
- **Complex issues, rumors, incomplete or confusing information.** Not all reports about issues are clear or concise. Potential issues may need to be studied and clarified so they can be understood by all group members.
- **Unmet needs.** Identifying persistent obstacles, unfair treatment, or lack of support are traditional advocacy issues. Such information provides groups with

ammunition to request new programs from decision makers or encourages them to develop programs of their own.

- **Unresponsive, offensive acts or discrimination.** If people ignore your group's recommendations on a particular issue or even treat group members disrespectfully, they may do so again on another issue. It is important that your group receive a response to its suggestions or proposals. Pressure on those who ignore you helps protect your reputation for effectiveness. In addition, uncovering cases of offensive language and discrimination provides an opportunity to take action to eliminate or reverse such situations.
- **Negative changes in services, policies, budget allocations, and potentially harmful proposals.** These situations provide an opportunity for the group to avoid, eliminate, reverse, or prevent negative conditions.

Each issue type implies certain goals for a group. For example, if a member uncovers a potentially beneficial proposal, such as a proposal by a development firm to build an accessible park for the city, the group may want to support the proposal. After discussing the issue, the group may set the goal of facilitating and supporting the project. Then, it can select specific activities to accomplish this goal and assign individual responsibilities.

A long tradition of citizen involvement has produced a wide range of techniques to achieve advocacy goals. We have identified 35 important techniques that advocacy groups have used successfully. These include such actions as: publicly supporting favorable actions, arranging celebrations, conducting studies, developing proposals, filing formal complaints, initiating legal action, seeking the enactment of new laws, and organizing public demonstrations.

What follows is a brief description of what can happen when several group members follow the RTCIL manual *Consumer Involvement in Advocacy Organizations: Rehabilitating Communities for Independent.*

Example: After minutes from the previous meeting had been read and approved, the agenda completed, and a brief announcement made, the chairperson began the business portion of the meeting. The first item was a report on a proposed recreation center. A member reported that she had heard from a recreation therapist that the new recreation center was being planned for "special populations." The member argued that such a facility addressed an unmet need for recreation that affected many disabled persons in the community. She felt it was a potentially beneficial proposal that addressed the need for recreation. She suggested the group verify the report and write a letter of support to the building committee and to the editors of the local paper.

The chairperson acknowledged the report and asked for any questions or comments. A lively discussion followed on whether such a proposal facilitated independent living or segregated disabled people from the community. One member noted that it would be nice to have something supportive to say to the local newspapers to show the city that the group wasn't always just criticizing. No one disagreed. The chairperson took a vote that unanimously affirmed writing the letter. She then asked the person reporting the issue to draft a letter and review it with her. The secretary recorded the motion, the vote, and noted those responsible for taking action.

The chairperson summarized the conversation by saying, "It sounds to me that we're saying we'd like to support the idea of accessible recreation but prevent this project from becoming a segregated program." Everyone agreed with this goal.

Next, the chairperson led the group in developing an action strategy that resulted in two decisions. First, the group would write a letter to the newspaper outlining the group's support for accessible recreation but its opposition to segregated programs. Second, the group would contact the project planners and ask to be involved in planning development. The chairperson also assigned two outspoken members to contact the project planners.

Two other issues were raised during the meeting. One involved the fire safety of disabled people in the community. Another focused on attendant care problems. Two committees resulted from this discussion. One, the life safety task force, was charged with contacting the fire and police departments, local apartment complexes for disabled and elderly residents, and the fire chief to organize a task force to address fire and safety planning.

The second committee was charged with investigating problems with the attendant care system. It was also suggested the attendant care committee attend a state meeting of the Home and Community Based Care System (HCBC) to introduce themselves and make contacts. At the end of the meeting, the secretary summarized the decisions of the group and reminded those who had volunteered about their commitments.

The letter and direct contacts about the recreation center led to a new goal and name for the proposed project. The recreation center would be accessible but not solely for use by "special" groups. The goal of integrating all city recreation programs was publicly reiterated by the planners. The life safety task force became a reality and developed some media attention on the issue. This coincided with a proposal by the fire- fighters' union to the city commission to fund an automatic life-safety system. The task force's support helped encourage the com mission to fund a portion of the cost.

The attendant care committee began the easy task of documenting problems with the attendant care system and the tough task of developing methods to improve those difficulties. Committee members attended the state HCBC meeting, made two friendly contacts, and surprised others by being there.