



Advocacy

Advocacy is a process of empowerment. It generally means representing the view of a person, or supporting them to secure or exercise their rights themselves. The concept is especially important where people are disadvantaged or discriminated against and are at risk of mistreatment or marginalisation. These are experiences shared by many older people. Advocacy has probably always existed within human relationships but has only recently emerged in particular forms. Older people may need different forms of advocacy at different times or indeed several forms of advocacy over the same period. Advocacy may be paid or unpaid, formal or informal. Types of advocacy may be described as follows:

Legal advocacy is perhaps the most widely known form of advocacy and is undertaken by professionally qualified lawyers on behalf of their clients.

Professional advocacy is undertaken by health and social care workers who see advocacy as part of their role. However, as these professionals are employed by a service-providing agency, conflicts of interest may arise when they attempt to advocate for clients. In some countries there is a growing number of bodies that are paid to provide a specific advocacy service independent of service provision.

Public advocacy refers to the activities of organisations that lobby and campaign on behalf of a particular group of people, but are not necessarily controlled by those they seek to serve. They often provide services as part of their role. They tend to be national bodies with local networks or branches.

Citizen advocacy is one to one ongoing partnership between a trained volunteer citizen advocate and a person who is at risk of social exclusion or other unfair treatment and is not in a good position to represent their own interests. Paid coordinating staff based in a local citizen advocacy office support these partnerships. Citizen advocacy should be independent of service provision so as to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest and that the loyalty of the advocate remains firmly with their partner.

Crisis advocacy shares the same principles as citizen advocacy but as its name implies is short term in nature. This tends to be on off involvement centered upon a particular task or specific situation with which the person needs support.

Peer advocacy takes place where one person advocates for another who has experienced similar difficulties or discrimination and draws upon this perspective in providing support.

Self-advocacy essentially means speaking up for oneself and involves a person expressing their own needs and concerns, making their own choices and decisions and representing their own interests.

Group or collective advocacy may be self-advocacy groups or organisations that offer mutual support, skill development and a common call for change at a local, national or international level.

Most older people are well able to represent their own needs and interests. Others may not have the personal or other resources to do so. The development of advocacy with older people has been influenced by a number of issues and concerns. Although the degree of dependency among older people is often overstated, more people are likely to find themselves in a more vulnerable position in later life. Some might not have family or friends to act as representatives, so need such support to be available from other sources.

The government has developed policies that emphasize rights, choices and the involvement of users of health and social services in the planning and delivery of those services. Advocacy should be an essential part of social policy and provision on this basis.

As the abuse of older people by individuals and institutions has become more widely recognized, so too has the value of advocacy as part of the response. Yet advocacy can also be useful to challenge over-protection and to support older people in their right to take risks.

Advocacy can be vital at specific times within the life of an older person. These situations might include retirement, deciding on residential care, hospital discharge, deciding about hospital treatment, and the closure or changes in the running of an institutional care setting.

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