

SRV MATTERS 14

Individual Social Advocacy

Social advocacy defines the essential elements of all advocacy. There are many forms of advocacy, Individual Advocacy being one, which draw their foundation from the elements of social advocacy.

This article explores the role of promoting valued and meaningful lives for people who are devalued, through an Individual Social Advocacy model. It draws on direct, extensive experience in advocating for marginalised individuals with intellectual disability within a relationship based, values driven social advocacy framework. This framework is underpinned by Social Role Valorisation (SRV) theory and principles.

What is Individual Social Advocacy?

Broadly speaking Advocacy is 'the process of standing alongside an individual who is disadvantaged and speaking out on their behalf in a way that represents the best interests of that person'. (Cross 1995).

More specifically we would say that:

'Advocacy is functioning (speaking, acting, writing) with minimum conflict of interest on behalf of the sincerely perceived interests of a person or group, in order to promote, protect and defend the welfare of, and justice for, either individuals or groups. Advocacy strives to be emphatic and vigorous, and/or is actually, or is likely to be, costly to the advocate.' (Wolfensberger 1992).

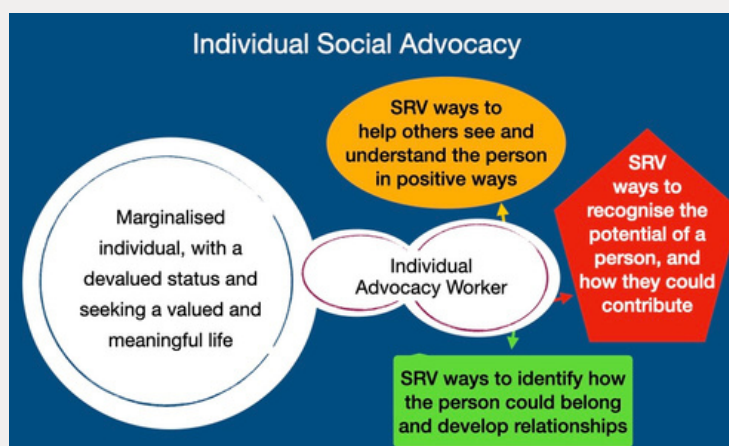
Why is Individual Social Advocacy Important in a Marginalised Person's Life?

People who are marginalised, particularly people with disability, are often made vulnerable, rejected, isolated and abused, and as a result experience significant wounding. This wounding can be inflicted by people, services and systems.

It is a given that the devalued person's family and support network, including paid staff have competing needs. If these competing needs take precedence over, or harm the marginalised person then perhaps independent assistance through social advocacy is required as a protective measure to resolve or progress any issues.

Individual Social Advocacy:

- * is an important means of generating positive change in the lives of people who are devalued
- * can challenge abuse, neglect and harm, and can act as protection from ongoing wounding and safeguard the improvements gained in a person life
- * can help build a positive understanding of the devalued person in the context of valued social roles and personal characteristics that others can identify with
- * can help identify what belonging means for the individual, what connections are meaningful in the context of that person's life and how these underpin legitimate experience



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* can promote the positive image of individuals who are devalued and can point the way for others to recognise the contributions the individual makes or the potential to make further contribution if supported and/or provided the opportunity to do so.

Judith Cross said that advocacy groups need to be clear about the vision they have of what needs to change in our society for people with disabilities. She said they need to have a vision, a direction, something they are standing and striving for, and it is this that should guide the actions of the group.

This ought to be true for all advocacy efforts. Clarity of vision for a devalued person guides and directs the actions of the advocate and how they will advocate to those who have influence in the decisions made about and on behalf of the devalued person, like the provision of services.

Building a positive understanding of a devalued person

Individual Social Advocacy can help build a positive understanding of the devalued person in the context of valued social roles and characteristics that others can identify with by:

* drawing out and identifying valued social roles and positive characteristics of the devalued person

- Sarah is the eldest of six children and she has been an active member of the Greek Orthodox church for ten years

* deliberate promotion

- Jenny is a very good sewist, she made library bags for the local kindergarten,

* identifying barriers

- Rita has difficulty with writing and needs some help to send birthday and Christmas cards to her siblings

* identifying with the devalued person as opposed to others

- being far away from family must be difficult for Anne

* leading by example

- me and Jill visited the local gardening clubs. She liked one and has the bus route to get there.

Belonging

Individual Social Advocacy can take up an important role in identifying what belonging means for the individual, what connections are meaningful in the context of that person's life and how these underpin legitimate experience by:

* knowing the person and their lived experience

- Bill went to his local primary and high school and played basketball on both school teams.



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- * thinking critically about what is presented as belonging
 - Trevor was linked in with the local volunteer clean-up crew. Trevor doesn't like getting his hands dirty, he has a cleaner at home
 - * strategic questioning
 - Bill wants to start playing basketball again and he was signed up for the sheltered workshop team. Did the support service check the local paper for local team registrations or where Bill's school team mates play now?
 - * strategic listening/observing
 - John's service provider thinks that John is at risk living alone. When John slipped in his bathroom his neighbour rang the ambulance and his girlfriend looked after his cat
 - * recognising, valuing and supporting authentic relationships
 - Ron's family don't like his neighbour Jeff. When Ron was in hospital Jeff visited every day; Bill's family didn't visit
 - * challenging what is not normative
 - Ben loves music and is taken to a congregated daytime disco once a month. The same venue hosts music events five nights a week that are very popular with Ben's generation – the latter is a more valued option.
- Contribution**
- Individual Social Advocacy can promote the positive image of individuals who are devalued and can point the way for others to recognise the contributions the individual makes or the potential to make further contribution if supported and/or provided the opportunity to do so by:
- * reframing statements
 - Andrew's disability worker said that Andrew makes nuisance calls to council
 - Andrew notices damaged roads and paths and reports them.
 - * using positive language
 - Andrew is a concerned community member.
 - * being deliberate in efforts
 - Roger worries about crime and safety in his street. Roger was introduced to his local police liaison officer and joined Neighbourhood Watch.
 - * being strategic
 - Ian has lots of worries and talks to everyone he knows about them, his staff, friends and family get annoyed about that. His advocate helped Ian work out who was best to talk to about his worries. Ian now has a list of four individuals to call who assist him with specific worries.
 - * acknowledging the benefit the observer gets from a devalued person – mutual value
 - Peter likes to go to town meetings. One of the meeting members, an elderly neighbour who lives on his own, reluctantly agreed to pick Peter up and drop him off until another arrangement could be made. After a few trips Peter found out that his neighbour was worried about falling over at home. With support Peter offered to call his neighbour every night to check that he was ok. They have become friends.

It can be seen that SRV-informed Individual Social Advocacy is highly potent in the lives of marginalised or vulnerable people.

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