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The Citizen Advocacy Response

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

As I fly the flag for Citizen Advocacy, I am forever grateful for those who have gone before and forged the way. Learning from them, I put together this instalment of SRV Matters on Citizen Advocacy.

Why pursue Citizen Advocacy?

Foundational to the Citizen Advocacy response is the innate value of each human being, no matter what impairments or status, and that when someone is in need of help, there will be others willing to do so (or who ought to). It is typical and ordinary that you would support someone you are concerned about whenever the need

presents.

Wolfensberger realised that to elicit such freely given help or protection in a more enduring way for people who are vulnerable, some careful facilitation is needed.

Consequently, Citizen Advocacy was formed, with the first program appearing in 1969.

So how does Citizen Advocacy work?

The Citizen Advocacy office program staff become aware of a person with impairments in



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Citizen Advocacy is one of the most culturally normative service forms there is, in that it strives to embed people into natural relationships ...'

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the community who is highly vulnerable. They get to know the person's background, interests, needs and whether having a citizen advocate would be of interest and is an appropriate response. The person is known as a protégé, as they are provided promotion, status, value and protection from someone more established in life (and who has access to the good things of life), that is, the advocate. The program staff (and Management Committee) utilise their connections to find a competent citizen who matches the protégé in ways that make sense.

Program staff approach the potential citizen drawing attention to the needs of the vulnerable person and thus opening the door to the opportunity to help. They do this with the positive expectation that the citizen will have the mindset to help and be there for this person as the decent thing to do. Efforts are made to enable the advocate to see the protégé as 'like them', so unconsciously or consciously the advocate is willing to represent the protégé's needs as if they were their own.

The advocate is independent of the Citizen Advocacy program. What they do, how much they become involved, how the relationship develops is organic. The advocate 'acts and reacts intuitively and informally to the protégé's circumstances' (M. Peters, 1996). The advocate utilises their own connections, resources and skills to support, defend, encourage, and do what it takes to make life better for the protégé.

One by one, I've witnessed advocates save lives; organise housing, work, schooling; be by their side as they have come out of prison; protect their rights; help mend family relationships; welcome them into their own families; become a true friend – being there in ordinary ways just like culturally typical freely-given relationships. These relationships have had a positive impact for both parties.

'... Citizen Advocacy is a helping form in which an unpaid, competent volunteer citizen, with the support of an independent Citizen Advocacy office, represents the interests of usually no more than one impaired person as if these interests were his/her own.'

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