

Self-Advocacy: A Vehicle for Positive Change

Robert J. Gregory and Mark Cahill

School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

KEY WORDS: Advocacy; social change; people with disabilities; self-advocacy

ABSTRACT Advocacy is an art in which a person intervenes on the side of the powerless, in a power struggle between someone with power and another without power. People with disabilities are often in situations where they have relatively little power. By designing a curriculum, then teaching and training individuals who happen to have disabilities, about advocacy, an educational project generated a potentially strong effort to redress the situation of people with disabilities for the longer term.

SELF-ADVOCACY: A VEHICLE FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

Disabled Persons Assembly (New Zealand) Inc. (DPA) formed in 1983 from an amalgam of Rehabilitation International, the New Zealand Co-ordinating Council on the Disabled, and the then newly emerging Disabled Persons International. From the onset, all involved recognized that people with disabilities needed to extend their own awareness of disability issues and to obtain advocacy skills to advance both personally and politically. By obtaining training, people with disabilities could gain ideas and experience needed to become more assertive, to advocate for themselves, and to develop new skills to change society. Over the past decade, hundreds of individuals have gained strengths through their participation, hard work, and involvement in DPA and its regional assemblies.

The idea to develop a training project in disability awareness and self advocacy lay dormant for several years, but an opportunity for funding emerged in 1991. A pilot training project, in discussion for a long time, was formally proposed. A number of individuals contributed to the background, conceptual framework, and planning for this project.

The New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, well aware of the special needs of people with disabilities, responded to the inquiries, and

granted sufficient funding to set up a project, complete with a director and plans to design and build modules for training. They set requirements to hold training events to test training modules when developed, and assess the potential for extending of training, across the country.

DPA, pleased to obtain the funding, set up a supervisory committee, hired a project director, and eventually located the project at Massey University within the Department of Psychology. The resources available at the university, the strength and past advocacy experiences of members of the Palmerston North regional Disabled Persons Assembly, and a variety of other strong disability oriented organizations and agencies made this location favorable.

The project director and co-author of this report, was an advanced student in the Social Work/Social Policy programme at Massey. When working for the Department of Health, he prepared training modules on Equal Employment Opportunity for people with disabilities. The director has a disability himself, dyslexia, and identified strongly with the disability movement. This was an important factor in the acceptance of the training modules developed, as well as in overall project support.

The task of curriculum development put together ideas and information into specific training modules. Some of the ideas and information were derived from the literature in various fields, including social work, psychology, education, and political science. Other ideas came from people in the disability rights movement, and their direct experiences with life-situations. These modules, when drafted, were reviewed and added to by the members of a committee, critiqued by selected outside reviewers, and were then set up for use in training events.

The initial training event was spread out over several weeks, with about 15 chosen participants spending Saturdays in Palmerston North, New

Zealand by going through the exercises, reading the materials, doing the suggested and required homework, and eventually critiquing both the process and product. A second event was held in Christchurch, New Zealand. Participants were selected from throughout the country for this programme. Several other events were held subsequently in a variety of locales. After each presentation, modification of the materials was made to incorporate new suggestions and learning.

WHAT IS THE PROGRAMME LIKE?

The awareness and advocacy course is about building and expanding conceptual frameworks, sharpening skills, and preparing for putting ideas into action. Presentations enable participants to look at the range of tools that can be used on a personal level, when advocating for another person, and on a macro level with political advocacy. The design of the training is solution oriented, with small group work, planning activities, and participation. Twelve two hour modules cover almost everything one needs to know about advocacy and acting as an advocate.

An outline of some of the major topic areas included would note the following:

- self esteem
- assertiveness
- society and disability
- skills required in meetings
- education and the media, and
- legal issues and use of the law.

The modules provide frameworks, information, readings, activities that can be carried out to insure learning, and that teach how to engage in action. Participants are enabled to share, gain information, and build skills as they work through the materials.

Some of the comments people wrote on their evaluation forms after participating in the training sessions were revealing:

“We can say what we want to say!”

“We are the experts!”

“I appreciate this effort - it has gone a long way to help the disabled become stronger.”

“I have enjoyed the learning process.”

“I have learned a lot from the good suggestions.”

“Love the humor, good for the soul.”

“Well presented . . . great, great, great . . .”

For those who attend, do the home work required, and participate throughout, a certificate is offered at the conclusion. Opportunities to use the training in local communities, and to further advance in skills, are discussed at the final sessions of the training events.

As with other endeavours, it would be simple if everyone had all the requisite skills to accomplish everything required immediately and well. However, running a project takes some imagination and some individualization of procedures, a lot of processes, and the building of appropriate working arrangements. Writing modules in English at the appropriate level and in good style is not a simple matter, particularly if materials are prepared that must be suitable for people who are blind, or deaf, or who are still recovering from physically and emotionally difficult circumstances.

As ideas were roughed out into module format, a part-time free-lance writer took the drafts, sharpened them up, and facilitated preparation of the training manual. As the committee met, disagreements and differences in directions were apparent at times, but with the assistance of the Secretariat of Disabled Persons Assembly (New Zealand) Inc., the teething problems were ironed out and more than a semblance of agreement was reached.

The contents of the training package include materials specifically relevant to New Zealand - context, style, and content including awareness and advocacy as well as general for all advocacy efforts. Consequently the sharp focus on local and national issues, within a larger context, make this package unique and valuable for our country. People of other countries may find useful ideas and procedures, but the focus is directed here, not there.

Now that the package has been developed, those involved have been seeking ways to expand. If and when the current hopes for finding additional financial support for future cycles of the project are achieved, more training events will take place over the coming years based on the materials developed. This will train a larger number of people, continue to spread the word, locate and train individuals who can become trainers in the future, and consolidate the materials. The goal of advocacy training is to create a strong social impact, in which the climate

of the society changes through activities that people with disabilities carry out. Of course, this is a two-way street, and people without disabilities can also have input and involvement.

Many social changes have taken place in New Zealand during the past decade, and these changes have impacted on this project in a number of ways. The initial idealistic goal of providing ongoing training to increasing numbers of people was not reached. The modules, though completed, tried out, and finalized, were not able to be adequately promoted nationally. Nevertheless, the materials are available through the Disabled Persons Assembly (NZ) Inc. and the many individuals who did complete the training exercises have already "stirred the pot" by advocating and

creating social changes to their benefit.

CONCLUSION

One of the real questions of many social advocates these days, which is emerging around the world, is whether or not continued efforts to integrate should be made, or to pursue the formation of another culture - a minority culture of people with disabilities. In either case, awareness of disability, self advocacy, and advocacy for others are essential to the future.

REFERENCE

- Gregory, Robert J. and Mark Cahill 1993. "Advocacy in Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 13 (3): 32-33.