

Self-Advocacy



Tools, Tips and Strategies



VCU

Rehabilitation Research & Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention

A GUIDE TO ACTION

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Self - Advocacy: Tools, Tips and Strategies

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The Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities, Inc. takes a Self-Determination approach to protection and advocacy services. This approach incorporates self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is not intended as a substitute for legal advice. Professional advice should be sought regarding specific legal problems. Self-advocacy is a significant tool in taking a proactive role in one's own life. In the Self-Determination philosophy, personal choice cannot occur without personal responsibility. Self-advocacy is about civil rights, supporting people in speaking up for themselves, and effecting changes in policy, attitudes, and opportunities for people with disabilities. Simply - self-advocacy means that you are able to communicate to others what you need. Education in the areas of law, rights and equal justice is of critical importance to self-advocacy.

Definitions

Self-Advocacy is speaking up for yourself when you need help. Sometimes when you are seeking help, you feel you are being treated unfairly or not getting the services you need. This is another instance when self-advocacy is essential.

Self-Advocacy requires the knowledge that you have certain rights and responsibilities in almost every relationship you have with a government organization, human service organization or community provider. This is true of your relationship with Social Security, Vocational Rehabilitation, your local housing authority, the One-Stop system and other helping organizations. Often times, as you enter a program or at the point you begin receiving services, the rights you have as a beneficiary, consumer or client will be outlined in a statement that you sign. This form will remain in your file and you will be given a copy. This form establishes the rights you have as a beneficiary, consumer or client of that organization.

Resources

For more information contact the:

**FIRST Team
at the
Advocacy Center
for
Persons with
Disabilities**

800-342-0823 Toll Free
850-488-9071 VOICE
850-488-8640 FAX
800-348-4127 TDD

You always have the right to be treated politely. You also have other more specific rights relating to the program or service you are applying for or are receiving. It is important to know what those rights are.

Being an effective self-advocate requires a belief in yourself and in your right to receive thoughtful, professional services as outlined by law or program guidelines.

Being an effective self-advocate also requires a plan, some basic tools and a commitment of time to follow through as you work with the organization to achieve the results you want and need.

Basic Problem Solving Steps

First you need to follow some very basic problem solving steps.

1. Identify the Problem

State the problem in simple words. Do you need something you are not getting? Has the organization you are working with made a mistake? Do you feel you are being treated unfairly? Do you need accommodations you are not receiving? Try to write the problem down in just a few sentences. Be brief, clear and to the point.

2. Identify Who Owns the Problem

This is an important, but often overlooked step. Do you "own" this problem? Does this problem affect another individual or group of individuals? It is important for you to know who else is affected by this problem, but you must identify your specific circumstances and as a self-advocate speak to your own personal situation. There may be other opportunities to work together and advocate for a group, but as a self-advocate it is important to separate your specific circumstances and to be clear and direct about your needs.

3. Research the Problem

What rules govern the organization you are working with? Is the organization following its own rules? What rights and responsibilities do you have in this situation? Have you met your responsibilities? Is this problem just yours or do other beneficiaries, consumers and clients have this problem? If others have had this problem how has this problem been resolved in the past? What time-frames are involved in any complaints or appeal process you might want to undertake.

This information is very important. Almost every organization has rules usually established by the organizations funding the program. Sometimes these rules are established by the state or federal government. Sometimes the

rules are established by a local funding agency like the United Way or a foundation. The first step of any advocacy is to know and understand "the rules".

A second step is to know and understand the chain of command in this organization. Who should you talk to first, second, third? If this organization will not make a change is there any group that has the authority to review the decision? Often the agency that provides funding to the program or service does have a complaint/grievance procedure. What are their guidelines for accepting complaints?

A third important piece of information is the "time limits" for any grievance, complaint or appeal. In most situations there are specific time frames for these actions. If you miss the time limit you may not have access to this specific process.

It is also important to know what outside resources are available to help you with this problem. The first question is, can you do this yourself? If not, then what kind of assistance do you need? It may be that you just need a friend or family member with you or to help take notes or listen for you.

It may be that you need a professional advocate. At this point, you need to ask -- can the Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities, Inc. help me? What are the other resources available in my community?

Once you have identified the resources, you need to identify at what point to request their assistance. You may want to use them as a resource to help with your initial research and then try to work your plan on your own then come back to the professional advocate if you do not have success. Or while in discussion with the advocate you may decide to ask them to help you from the point of initial contact.

Self- Advocacy:

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4. Develop the Plan

Develop a simple list of things you will do and people you will contact to work on this problem. Record a date next to each step that needs to be completed. If someone is going to assist you with the action steps identify their names and contact information next to the action step. This will help you remain focused and in the event you are not successful, the next step will already be identified.

5. Act

Act by following your plan and focus on one step at a time. The process may seem overwhelming but you can do just one step at a time. Follow your plan as you have the time and energy.

6. Document

Document your actions. Record who you talked to, when you talked, what was said, what was agreed upon and what steps you need to take to follow up or move to the next level. Documentation is the key to advocacy of any kind. It is important to keep a concise record of the steps you have taken and of any agreements that have been made.

7. Evaluate Your Results and Progress

It is important to evaluate your results. Have you been able to speak to individuals who can make the necessary decisions you need to correct this situation? Have you completed your plan? Have you experienced success? If you have not, you might want to start back at the top of this checklist, beginning with the definition of the problem and who owns it and see if any additional information is needed or if you have missed any of the steps in your plan. If you have done all you can do on your own, it is now time to obtain additional outside resources. This might include talking to the constituent services staff of your state or federal legislator's local office, seeking out the help of a disability support organization such as the National MS Society, the ARC or others. In certain circumstances contacting the media in your local community is another viable option after you have exhausted all other avenues for getting your needs addressed.

8. Celebrate Success

Remember to congratulate yourself at the end of each step you have finished and also when your plan is completed. You have stood up for yourself and for your right to get the benefits and services you deserve and need. This is important work and you should be proud of yourself.

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Tips and Tools

- Do your homework in advance.
- Define your problem clearly.
- Identify the remedy you seek.
- Talk to a person who has the power to address your situation.
- Be courteous but firm in your discussions.
- Keep a record of all letters, documents and conversations.
- If you do not get satisfaction from one contact, always ask the individual you are meeting with to define the next step.
- Follow-through with each contact until you get what you need or understand why this is not possible.
- Get outside help when you need it.

My Action Plan

Name: _____ Date: _____

My problem is (be specific but try to keep this clear and simple).

Things I need to know -- What rules does this organization work under? (Social Security Administration, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Department of Education, Department of Labor, local housing authority or other organization).

Where can I get information regarding these rules and my rights in this program?

What are the timeframes that apply to my situation?

What help do I need?

What resources are available? (friends, family, WIPA, The Advocacy Center, other groups)

What actions do I need to take?

INITIAL CONTACT

Support if needed: _____

Individuals to contact: _____

Phone Number: _____ Best time to call: _____

Purpose of call: _____

FOLLOW-UP MEETING/CALL

Support if needed: _____

Meeting with: _____ Date: _____

Location: _____

Purpose of meeting: _____

Special Instructions/Directions: _____

NEXT STEPS

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