

Program Independence

by Tom Doody

This is the second in a series of articles on the five core Citizen Advocacy principles which were developed from observations and evaluations of hundreds of Citizen Advocacy Programs over the past twenty five years. Experience has shown that adhering to the principles is crucial if a Citizen Advocacy program is to be effective in fostering and supporting relationships which, in turn, offer protection and advocacy to vulnerable people. As listed in CAPE, by John O'Brien and Wolf Wolfensberger, the five principles are: (1) Advocate Independence/Primary Advocate Loyalty to Protégés, (2) Program Independence, (3) Clarity of Staff Function, (4) Balanced Orientation to Protégé needs, and (5) Positive Interpretations of Handicapped people.

The five principles should serve as guides for Boards and Coordinators in making decisions about the program, so it is important that program leadership understand the principles. Others involved with Citizen Advocacy should have the chance to learn more about the principles—and to better understand the whys and hows of the Citizen Advocacy office role.

A Citizen Advocacy office has a good bit of influence on how advocates think about protégés. This is especially true when advocates are being recruited, oriented, and introduced to a person with handicaps. Even after a protégé and advocate have an established relationship, the office staff offer support which is likely to influence what the advocate and protégé do.

If the Citizen Advocacy office has such influence and our goal is for advocates to be independent and loyal to protégés, then it follows that the office should be independent of competing interests. If the Citizen Advocacy board and staff did have competing interests that shaped how they did their jobs, these competing interests would be likely to shape how they interacted with advocates—and the likelihood of advocates being genuinely loyal to protégés would decrease. So, it is important that the Citizen Advocacy program be as free from competing interests as possible—that's the program independence principle.

What would be an example of a violation of the program independence principle? Imagine the funding for a Citizen Advocacy program came through a company that also ran a group home where a protégé lives. If the advocate for that protégé becomes upset with something going on, that advocate might well question the executive staff of the company—or even the government agency which provides funding for the group home.

In such a situation, the funder or the executive staff would be likely to say something to the Citizen Advocacy program. Perhaps more subtle pressure might be brought to bear by the company executive raising serious questions about the Citizen Advocacy program's work in recruiting people and supporting relationships. Whether pressure from a competing interest is blatant or subtle—there is less likelihood of effective, independent action by advocates.

The program independence principle suggests several things for the operation of a Citizen Advocacy program.

The program's administration should be independent from organizations which provide direct services to (potential) protégés. For example, Citizen Advocacy staff should not be accountable to an agency which runs residential or work programs for protégés. Further, the governing board of the Citizen Advocacy program should not be dominated by human service workers with ties to protégés' programs.

The program's office and meeting space should be independent from office space of organizations which provide services to protégés. This is a bit more subtle, but the reasoning becomes clear if we consider how we tend to be loyal to people with whom we share an office.

The program's funding should be independent from funding sources that also fund direct services to protégés. If there are competing interests from a funding source, then the program might be leery of advocates questioning the funder—even if such questions might be in the protégé's best interests.

In cases where there is a competing interest, it is important for Citizen Advocacy program leadership—and others if they are willing—to name the issue. If a competing interest is acknowledged, then efforts can be made to minimize its impact.

If this principle is not followed, advocates are less likely to be primarily loyal to protégés, and the likelihood of effective advocacy for protégés goes down. Adhering to the principles does increase the likelihood of a Citizen Advocacy program fulfilling its purpose in supporting effective protection and advocacy.

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