

Reconciling Apparent Discrepancies Between Different Definitions of Advocacy

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The point has been raised that different definitions of advocacy appear to be inconsistent with each other. For instance, various definitions of social advocacy in general (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1977, p. 19), and the advocacy definition taught by the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agentry, specify that advocacy must possess vigor. On the other hand, the CAPE manual (for the evaluation of Citizen Advocacy programs) allows for "low intensity" Citizen Advocacy relationships.

At the Training Institute, we believe that any inconsistencies are apparent rather than real, and that the resolution is based upon an understanding that advocacy should be matched to the need of the advocatee, and that therefore, because needs differ, so will advocacy. This leads to several corollaries:

1. Not everyone has high needs for advocacy. Thus, one could not require the same type or strength of advocacy from an advocate for someone with low needs as one would from an advocate for someone with high needs.
2. Some people have a long-term need for advocacy for many years—maybe for life—but for much of this time at a relatively low level in terms of urgency. These needs can often be addressed on an ongoing basis in a way that is not exceedingly demanding, and probably mostly within an expressive advocacy context.
3. However, even people with a usually low level of needs can sometimes have an episode of high need. An example might be when a child has an accident that requires emergency hospitalization, and the marshalling of advocacy forces (be these parents, other relatives, etc.) to advocate for and protect the child in the hospital. In these instances, the intensity of the advocacy needs to be increased to match the (sudden) increase in need.

4. We have always taught that it sometimes takes more than one personal advocate (as in Citizen Advocacy) to address another person's needs—even when all the advocatee's needs are relatively low-intensity, but of course much more so when they are intense. The different advocates may each address different needs, perhaps because they have different skills, resources, and contacts. It may be the very fact that there are several advocates which may prevent a high level of need from arising. Where there is more than one advocate, some may be involved more intensively in the advocatee's life than others, even though all conduct worthwhile advocacy.

Thus, the phrasing that an advocacy relationship is low-intensity should not be interpreted to mean that there would *never* be vigorous action in such an advocacy relationship.

Presumably because the merits of low-intensity Citizen Advocacy were recognized, the revised and expanded definition of Citizen Advocacy adopted October, 1990 by the International Citizen Advocacy Safeguards Group did not refer to "vigor" one way or the other. Also, this definition of Citizen Advocacy was meant as an ideal. When an advocate acts with less than ideal vigor, it is appropriate to think of this advocacy as one that is short of the ideal, but still worthwhile. In fact, even an advocacy that in its vigor falls short of the ideal can still be literally a lifesaver. On occasion, it takes relatively little in terms of advocacy vigor to obtain very major gains for an advocatee. It can still be promotive, protective, and defensive of a person's welfare and interests, and the pursuit of justice for that person, as long as the other criteria for advocacy are sufficiently met.

Wolfensberger, W. (1977). *A Multi-component Advocacy/Protection Schema*. Law & Mental Retardation Monograph Series. Toronto: NIMR.