

Twenty Questions for Citizen Advocacy

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Getting right answers depends on asking right questions. In order to effectively find and support citizens who will stand by, for, and with people who need an advocate, I believe that there are a number of questions that a citizen advocacy program should ask itself. Before these questions can be asked, there needs to be at least one person (but preferably several or more) who has some understanding of the societal context in which Citizen Advocacy exists. To address these questions, it is essential to understand many of the basic issues of what is happening to people who are vulnerable. The people who are responsible for a citizen advocacy program therefore need to have a clear understanding of societal devaluation, the effects of social isolation and segregation, the value trends of society, and the increasing professionalization of a serviced society. Following are some questions that I believe are useful to ask oneself and one another:

1. What are the common life experiences of people who are devalued?

What is life like for the people for whom we are finding advocates?

Who are the people? What are the most essential issues in the protégé's life?

What is likely to happen to the protégé if we do not find an advocate?

2. What is our mission together?

Why are we here together? Why do we exist? What and who do we say that we are?

Can we say what we are in a way that is understandable?

3. What is Citizen Advocacy?

Do the staff, board, advocates, funders, citizens understand what citizen advocacy is? How can we effectively communicate what citizen advocacy is?

4. What are the citizen advocacy principles?

Why are they important? How is what we are doing consistent or inconsistent with citizen advocacy principles?

5. What is our long-term vision?

Where do we collectively want to be in ten years? Where do we want to be in terms of leadership, number and diversity of matches, and diversity of funding?

6. What are the key activities of Citizen Advocacy?

How do we conceptualize our work? Which activities do we need to improve?

7. What are our (my) strengths?

How can we build on these strengths? What should we be celebrating?

8. What are our (my) weaknesses?

What are the areas that we struggle with as a group and as individuals?

What can we do to address these weaknesses and/or compensate for them?

9. What issues do we need to address?

What are the key issues that must be faced and dealt with to insure the identity, quality, and viability of Citizen Advocacy?

10. Do I really believe that there are people who will respond?

Do I really believe that there are people who will respond vigorously—as citizen advocates, board members, financial supporters?

11. Who do we need to call?

Can I pick up the phone and go see the person? Who are we going to talk to today? How many appointments do we have this week? Who are we afraid to call?

12. How many matches did we make this month?

13. What are the ways that we avoid initiating and supporting relationships?

What are we doing instead of doing the key activities? What are the obstacles to making matches?

14. What is our image? How do we see ourselves? How do other people see us? Do we have an image? What is the image that we want to project? Who is telling our story in the community? Do some advocates have the opportunity to tell their own story?

15. Who owns the citizen advocacy program?

Who is taking responsibility? How can we develop and nurture more and deeper commitment to Citizen Advocacy?

16. Who is holding us accountable?

Who is making sure that we are doing what we said we would do?

17. How do we find, develop, and support competent citizen advocacy coordinators?

18. How does the board develop and deepen its understanding and commitment to citizen advocacy?

19. How can we develop an effective, functioning board?

20. How can we sustain the presence of Citizen Advocacy in our community?

How do we generate moral, personal, and financial support?

In the program that I work in, I figure that we are starting to address about half of these questions—with a long way to go yet. The bad news is that we all fall short of the ideal. We *all* have problems and weaknesses. The good news is that the learning never stops. I estimate that it probably takes *at least* ten years to find and learn reasonable answers to these basic questions. This assumes that the program has consciously identified what questions need to be asked and then has rigorously, planfully, and even painfully engaged in a commitment to learning, self-examination, and action. When you have answered all of these questions, you will have a strong, mature citizen advocacy program!
