The Program Evaluation Process in Citizen Advocacy: A Need to Clarify and Safeguard

by Katherine Alexander

Introduction

A lot of attention has been given over the years to safeguarding Citizen Advocacy principles and practice. The purpose of the principles is to set a standard by which the essence and integrity of this unique form of protection and advocacy can be commonly understood, acted upon, and preserved. *CAPE* (Citizen Advocacy Program Evaluation) by John O'Brien and Wolf Wolfensberger and *LFCAP* (Learning From Citizen Advocacy Programs) by John O'Brien are two tools that have been developed to help assess how a given program adheres to these standards. What has not yet been adequately safeguarded are these assessment forms. There are certain implicit standards of conducting an external evaluation of a Citizen Advocacy program; however, no explicit guidelines have been established. This seems to be an important next step, especially as the Citizen Advocacy movement grows and more programs begin to develop. Just as each program is at risk all the time of compromising the principles, deviating from sound practices and doing something other than what they set out to do, so are the evaluation methods at risk of being used in ways that compromise their purpose and diminish the value of objective, independent review.

This article is not an attempt to develop guidelines for CAPE or LFCAP assessments. Perhaps this is a task to be done as the CAPE manual is revised at some time in the future. However, it does seem appropriate to discuss the individual aspects of planning and conducting an external assessment in order to highlight the need to be as vigorous about how these evaluations are planned and conducted as we are about how Citizen Advocacy is practiced.

Team Leadership

Unfortunately, there are not many experienced and qualified team leaders at this time. Hopefully over the next few years, this may begin to change, slowly and cautiously. The question of what qualifies one to be a team leader is one of those things that has not been made explicit. Given the need for team leaders, it would probably be a good time to discuss some potential qualifications. Certainly a team leader is someone who should have a great deal of experience with Citizen Advocacy programs, preferably having had a variety of roles. In addition, the person should have experience with team leadership as an assistant on an assessment team, or perhaps as team leader of a PASSING team or some other form of team evaluation. Both a strong values orientation and a strong understanding of Citizen Advocacy are necessary.

In choosing a team leader for a given program, it is useful to think about the strengths of individual team leaders and decide who may have the best understanding of what a particular program is currently struggling with. The experience is enhanced if there is a fit between the team leader's knowledge and skills and the particular issues faced by the program.

Team Size and Composition

The number of team members needed to conduct a credible assessment will vary depending on the size of the program and the scope of work needed to be done. The purpose of the assessment is not to have team members work long hours with few breaks, but rather to get the work done. It is essential, therefore to have enough team members to get the work done without draining the resources of individual members to the extent that their input and their learning is compromised. There is no magic number although most teams of established Citizen Advocacy programs are made up of five or six people including the team leader.

In addition to the number of team members, it is important to consider who the team members are and what each will bring to the evaluation process. In general, teams are made up of a diverse group of people whose experiences range from "learners" who are very new to Citizen Advocacy to people in leadership roles with many years of experience and knowledge. One way to characterize team members is as:

1) "learners" — people who are very new to Citizen Advocacy, who have minimal understanding of principles and practice, or people who have not been on an assessment team;

2) people with some beginning experience on assessment teams and some experience as coordinators or board members;

3) people with a high level of understanding of Citizen Advocacy principles and practice as a result of many years involvement with Citizen Advocacy programs and participation on more than a few assessment teams.

This diversity is a very important factor in designing a credible assessment.

It is widely acknowledged that the best way for someone to learn about Citizen Advocacy is by participating on an assessment team. Usually it takes two or three CAPE experiences before things begin to gel. It seems, therefore, that there is a responsibility to include spaces on assessment teams for people who are there to learn, both as novice learners and as people expanding on their introductory assessment experience(s). It is the team leader's role to distinguish between participative and observing team members. There will be instances where a team's process can be ruined by the overactive participation of someone whose primary role on the team is to learn. Team leaders should specify the level of participation they expect from each member privately and at the first team meeting. These levels will range from little or no participation ("observer") to some or high participation. Certainly learners on a team must have opportunities to ask questions and clarify new or unfamiliar ideas; however, they should not necessarily be adding to the conversation in terms of offering their own experience or ideas about Citizen Advocacy principles and practice.

It is good to have at least one very experienced team member, in addition to the team leader, to provide a back-up and safeguard to the team leader. Having a broad range of experiences and expertise on a team adds to the richness of what can be observed in a program, and subsequently what can be offered in terms of feedback and recommendations. If a team is somewhat homogeneous in terms of having people with similar experiences and expertise, or even having people from the same program or who have similar ways of understanding and doing Citizen Advocacy, then something important is given up. It is very useful to include on a team someone who has been or is a coordinator of a Citizen Advocacy program, someone who has been or is a board member of a Citizen Advocacy program, someone who is involved in values-based training such as SRV, and someone who is an advocate or a protégé.

An adequate number of team members with diverse experience and skills is perhaps one of the best and most important ways to safeguard the process of evaluation. While it may not always be possible to develop a team of optimum size and diversity, it is essential not to make so many compromises in this area that the validity of the evaluation is jeopardized.

Another factor to consider in team composition is conflict of interest or loyalty issues. It is necessary to examine the relationship between team members themselves, and their relationships to the program being evaluated, to ensure that conflicting loyalties do not hinder the validity, objectivity, or acceptance of the findings.

Time

After the pre-assessment scheduling and arrangements are completed, a CAPE or LFCAP assessment usually involves one evening of team organization, two days of gathering information, one full day of analysis and a day (or half a day) for developing and presenting verbal feedback. Most of the time a total of five days is required, including time for participants to travel to and from the assessment site. Each of the components of conducting a credible assessment are important. If adequate time is not allotted then something will be compromised and the entire evaluation changes. It is important to make sure enough time is planned for each phase of the evaluation to be attended to adequately.

Coordinator and Board Preparation

A key component of an assessment is the planning and preparation done by the coordinator and the board ahead of time. The program leadership is responsible to make sure that any written documentation is readily available, arrange interviews with advocates, protégés, and board members according to a workable and logical schedule, prepare written directions to interviews conducted outside of the office, and provide hospitality for team members meeting in the Citizen Advocacy office. Most of these tasks should be done with the guidance of the team leader who will be particularly involved in developing the format for the schedule of interviews. The more prepared a program is the more efficient the team's work can be. A team leader must be sure that the necessary preparations have been made and documentation is available before the team arrives to conduct the assessment.

Having board members involved in the planning stages of an evaluation can have great impact on how feedback is received and acted upon. One possibility is to hold a meeting prior to the actual evaluation to explain the evaluation tool to board members, asking them to articulate answers to questions such as: What do you hope will be gained from the evaluation? What do you fear will result from the evaluation? What steps will the board take to process and respond to the feedback? What roles are board members willing to play in helping the coordinator with necessary preparations? Questions such as these coupled with information about evaluation methods and purposes can lead to important discussions about the value and importance of the evaluation and will serve to strengthen people's interest in the outcome.

Board members should contribute in a variety of ways to help plan an assessment. Primarily board members must take responsibility for ensuring that adequate preparation is being done by the coordinator and providing assistance as needed. In addition board members can provide hospitality to the assessment team. This may include offering a place for a team member to stay or simply providing snacks for the team during the evaluation. Some boards put on a pot luck supper at the end of the evaluation which allows them to spend time with team members and the team leader talking about specific issues of the evaluation or perhaps just learning more about the experience of team members themselves. Board members can also be responsible for writing a history of the program, obtaining local maps of the area, and helping with transportation to and from the airport or train station if necessary. The involvement of the board members will assist in their investment in the process and possibly enhance the likelihood that feedback will be taken seriously.

Scheduling and Conducting Interviews

A few key points are worth making related to scheduling interviews for a review team with advocates, protégés, and Board members. First of all advocates and proteges should not be interviewed by more than two people. Team members need to be instructed as to how interviews should be conducted in order to minimize advocate's and protégé's discomfort. It is vital to emphasize that the program's work is being assessed and *not* the relationships. Respect and natural curiosity are usually helpful guidelines. Some key board members, or others in significant leadership roles, may be interviewed by the whole team with the team leader asking most of the questions. Interviews should be arranged in places where advocates, protégés and board members are most comfortable. In interviewing advocates and protégés it is helpful for team members to have the chance to see where a representative sample of protégés live and/or work. When interviewing a small group of "core group" members, some programs have arranged for the team to meet with the group over a meal or a snack in order to make the situation as comfortable as possible.

In all the interviews it is most useful to members of the assessment team and the interviewer to adopt the position of learner. This is to say that in conducting an interview the point is not to uncover some deep dark secrets but to really learn how the individual staff member, advocate, protégé, or board member is thinking about Citizen Advocacy. If the team makes certain assumptions from interviewing the coordinator or board members it is valid and valuable to have follow-up interviews in which these assumptions might be explored further. It is essential to not just get information for the sake of completing the evaluation but to really try to understand the program, the staff, and the board as much as possible.

Verbal Feedback

At the end of an evaluation, a short verbal feedback is offered to the program leadership before the team leaves. It is understood that verbal feedback is intended to be a brief summary of the major issues the team identified during their analysis. Verbal feedback is not intended to be a complete overview of what will be found in a written report, although it is done in preparation of the written report. Preparation of the verbal feedback is often a process in which the entire team looks at the broader issues or themes identified, assists the team leader to synthesize the analysis into broad categories, and then prioritizes these issues in order to offer a short presentation of the team's major findings.

It is important that verbal feedback be both honest and manageable in terms of the coordinator's and board members' ability to absorb a lot of information all at once. Only the most pressing issues should be discussed briefly and succinctly so that the program leaders have a chance to reflect and prepare for further explanation and discussion of the issues. It is expected that the feedback session will be planned so as to accommodate the attendance of as many board members as possible, and certainly the coordinator of a program should always be present. Many programs have found it useful to tape the verbal feedback and have the tape immediately transcribed. This does not replace the written report, but can have an impact in terms of giving the board something concrete to consider while they await a final report.

The Written Report

The most important thing to say about the written report is that it must be done, and the sooner the better! Program coordinators and board members eagerly await this document and often feel that they cannot begin to make plans in response to the evaluation until the written report is received. This makes it especially important for the report to be delivered in a timely fashion. If the report is not written at all, or not written within a few weeks of the assessment, then the credibility of the assessment and the hard work of the team is in jeopardy. If it is important enough to do an assessment, then the feedback is equally important and this should be conveyed in the timeliness and quality of the written report. Not writing a report (or writing it long after the actual assessment) sends a message that the information is not really all that pressing and analysis and recommendations need not really be heeded and addressed. This is a very unfortunate message and has impact not only on individual assessments but on the evaluation process as a whole.

Sometimes a person other than the team leader is asked to write the report. This is done for primarily two reasons. First, the team leader may not be able to write the report promptly, and therefore finds someone else who can do it right away. Second, writing an assessment report can be a way for a very experienced individual to begin to develop skills needed to become a team leader or simply to further their understanding of Citizen Advocacy. Once again, this aspect of the assessment process should not be taken lightly. It should not be assumed that any team member can write a report, nor should it be assumed that if someone has been on three or four assessment teams they are qualified to write a report. Often written reports require in depth discussion of some of the more subtle issues related to both principles and practices of Citizen Advocacy. A lot of experience and deep understanding of these issues, both in theory and in practice, is required.

Furthermore, when someone other than the team leader is writing a report, it is understood that the team leader ultimately has responsibility for the quality of the report and therefore has full editorial license. A team leader who asks someone to write a report must take this responsibility very seriously. Fortunately, there are some individuals who have great skill in report writing and are available to take on this task as needed. An individual writing a report for the first time, however, should be considered a learner, should probably not receive compensation for the task, and should be closely supervised by the team leader. Writing a report can be an excellent way to develop skills related to team leading and deepening one's understanding of the many issues that arise in Citizen Advocacy programs. It does, however, require a certain level of expertise and experience to begin with, and should be a task taken on (as with all other aspects of Citizen Advocacy activities) with humility and grace.

Follow-up Meeting

The practice of having some kind of follow-up meeting after a coordinator and board have received and read the written report has not been done very much, if at all. Therefore this idea is offered here as an untried suggestion, the effect of which has not been demonstrated. Many coordinators and board members have expressed interest, however, in such a forum as a way of processing the external evaluation and thus making it even more meaningful. The purpose of the follow-up meeting would be to clarify misunderstandings, share additional information, discuss program priorities, and begin to plan strategies to address major concerns.

Often when an assessment is conducted, a lot of work, time, and effort go into the entire process by many people, the verbal feedback is given, and the team leaves; four to six weeks later when a written report comes in the mail, the coordinator and board members read the report and are either confused, feeling misunderstood, are at a loss for how to address the major issues, or have moved on to other things and just don't get around to dealing with the content of the assessment at all. Sometimes these reports, and so the work that went into producing them, are not taken at all seriously and are not used as a real growth opportunity for the program. These are unfortunate outcomes given the amount that we must all learn about how to do Citizen Advocacy.

The idea of having a follow-up meeting would involve arranging for the team leader, and perhaps one other team member, to return to the program for a consultation visit a few months after the actual assessment has taken place. This may be instrumental in increasing the likelihood that the program will actually benefit and learn from the assessment. During the assessment itself the team members invariably learn a great deal as a result of the many conversations that take place during the four to six days of interviews, analysis, and conciliation. The program staff and board do not have the benefit of these in-depth conversations. What they get is the final word—the end result. There is likely to be a great deal more benefit and perhaps hope if the program staff and board members also have a chance to engage in a more meaningful discussion about the issues facing the program. This is most likely to occur when it is planned ahead of time and when the team leader is present to act as teacher and facilitator.

In order for this type of meeting to be fruitful it would be critical that all the board members and staff have thoroughly read the final report and have prepared for the follow-up by outlining specific questions, concerns, or plans to be reviewed.

It is possible, but not proven, that if this type of meeting is incorporated into the assessment process and if it results in programs seriously addressing programmatic issues which inhibit or decrease adherence to Citizen Advocacy principles and practice, the need for annual or even bi-annual assessments may be decreased and programs could have assessments every other year or every three years.

Conclusion

In conclusion there is a bottom line in all aspects of Citizen Advocacy and the bottom line is *loyalty to vulnerable people*. This bottom line also applies to the evaluation process, in which it must be clear that the assessment team is primarily responsible to people who are vulnerable and wounded who are dependent on the program to find advocates to address needs and issues in their lives. The evaluation team needs to make sure that in both the process and the outcome of the evaluation this loyalty is made explicit. This is what allows an evaluation team to say difficult things, to be truthful, and to be humble in the face of others' struggle to do good Citizen Advocacy work.

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Editor's note: Comments on the CAPE process, team leadership issues, and other issues raised in this article are welcome for possible publication in the Citizen Advocacy Forum.