

# Questions About Short-Term Citizen Advocacy Relationships As Distinguished From Crisis Citizen Advocacies

by Wolf Wolfensberger

Dimity Peter from Australia encountered a practice of "short-term" Citizen Advocacy relationships, i.e., Citizen Advocacy relationships of a non-crisis but intentionally short-term nature. She posed the following five questions:

1. Is short-term advocacy sometimes valid, and why?
2. How do you see the distinction between short-term advocacy and crisis advocacy?
3. Relatedly, what guidelines can you give a program as to when is short-term advocacy a valid option? Could you please speak to the wound of the relationship circus in your reply?
4. What proportion of relationships within a Citizen Advocacy program could/should be of a short-term nature?
5. What safeguards could a program undertake to ensure that short-term advocacy is not taken on as a quick fix to a complex problem?

With the assistance of Susan Thomas, I sent her the following reply.

As far as I know, there has not been anything written that distinguishes short-term from crisis advocacy, and making such a distinction more clear might require some discussion within the Citizen Advocacy leadership; but to me, crisis implies an emergency that involves a rather important issue that has suddenly arisen, such as life or death, having been evicted, having just been arrested, etc. In contrast, short-term advocacy implies to me a focus on an event that can be expected to be time-limited, and that has no—or few—crisis elements.

The idea that there might be a need for only short-term advocacy has always been around since the beginning of Citizen Advocacy—though apparently not explicitly spelled out in writing—in the sense that there had always been awareness that there might conceivably be an issue that only needed

limited address and that might be very time-bound. One of the best examples is a guardianship *ad litem* which is not necessarily of a crisis nature (though some are), but which, *by definition*, is time-limited. Of course, a long-term citizen advocate could also be a short-term guardian *ad litem*, but this need not necessarily be the case, and a person might be recruited as a citizen advocate only to be the guardian *ad litem* for this one person for this one issue that is at stake before a court.

Another extremely useful role for a short-term advocate would be as a co-advocate to a long-term advocate, helping the long-term advocate to address a specific issue. I have long bemoaned the fact that co-advocacy has been almost ignored in Citizen Advocacy even though a lot of people really need it, or could benefit from it. Of course, for practical reasons, Citizen Advocacy offices are loathe to recruit two advocates for one needy person and none for another.

Short-term advocacies will probably revolve around an instrumental issue in most cases, though it is also possible that the expressive need is foremost. This latter might be the case on the occasion of a loss when a person needs love and consolation more than problem-solving. This kind of situation might arise where a person is temporarily out of the context of his/her family, as when a child has been kidnapped or has run away, but is eventually reunited with family.

If one can think of protégé classes other than mentally retarded ones, the concept of short-term advocates may also become more clearly visible as a legitimate one. For instance, some otherwise quite competent elderly people may need short-term advocacy with any number of potential problem situations that may come up.

However, a Citizen Advocacy program that focuses excessively or entirely on short-term advocates probably has something fundamentally wrong because it would be difficult to find wounded people who have narrow, clearly-defined needs that can be resolved by short-term advocacy. Thus, intentional short-term advocacy should never become a significant issue in any Citizen Advocacy office. A Citizen

Advocacy office need not have any short-term advocacies in order to be a legitimate and quality Citizen Advocacy service, nor should any Citizen Advocacy office have a major emphasis on short-term advocacies.

Thankfully, until recently, one hardly ever heard of a Citizen Advocacy office intentionally trying to recruit more than an occasional short-term advocate, but of course in practice, one has found frequently in the history of Citizen Advocacy that faulty thinking or practices have resulted in Citizen Advocacy offices recruiting, matching, and (not) following along advocates in such a fashion that the match did not endure. Thus, there have been an awful lot of *de facto* short-term advocacies, even where the respective Citizen Advocacy office would have liked for them to be enduring, but did not do all the right things to maximize the likelihood that they would.

Should it happen that for a good reason, a person is recruited as a short-term advocate, then it could also happen that once engaged, such an advocate might be open to becoming an open-ended advocate. In most instances, this should be encouraged, keeping in mind that in such cases, the instrumental-expressive balance may change, as perhaps from a mostly intense instrumental one to a low-intensity expressive one. Again, there would probably be something wrong if a Citizen Advocacy office tried to terminate such a relationship when the advocate or both parties would gladly continue it.

Trying to understand why a Citizen Advocacy program would want to intentionally recruit a lot of short-term advocates, two answers occurred to us as hypotheses.

1. There are many people who will need advocacy all their lives, but whose advocacy needs come in ebbs and flows, up and downs, and in a pattern with little predictability. This is the situation with many people who are mildly retarded, or have periodic mental instability. A Citizen Advocacy office—especially if its staff is clinically unsophisticated or inexperienced—may be looking only at the downs of these people's lives, and not at the long-term pattern. What such people need is an advocate who is expressive most of the time and ready to spring into instrumental action when the downs occur, rather than a revolving-door pattern of 30 different short term (and occasionally crisis) advocates over a period of decades.

2. Advocacy circles have been infected lately—especially in and from Britain—with a radical independence and autonomy virus known to strike at the brain. This includes a “let them die with their rights on” attitude, i.e., let even profoundly mentally retarded people do what they want, and never impose any restrictions or directions on them. In the presence of such an attitude, the presence of an enduring Citizen Advocacy relationship may be seen as paternalistic, degrading, autonomy-diminishing, etc. This could in turn lead to an attitude of “let’s do one advocacy issue at a time,” and phase out the advocate the moment a problem seems to be in hand.

These are only speculations as to motives, and further help on this would be appreciated.

By the way, I would not say as a matter of Citizen Advocacy dogma that all crisis advocates have to be recruited before a crisis occurs. Conceivably, at the very moment of crisis, a Citizen Advocacy coordinator may happen to run across somebody who is very suited to take on the crisis situation.

Also by the way, it would be important to clearly distinguish short-term advocacy (such as assisting with an instrumental problem) from other short-term things that are not of an advocacy nature.

Here concludes my reply. The above thoughts do not answer all of Ms. Peter's questions, and are here offered as an invitation to further elaboration or debate. □