

Help and Tips for being an effective advocate

ON LINE RESOURCES

No 2 in the series

Briefing and Debriefing

Preparation and organisation are two of the keys to successful advocacy and participation. It is essential that all people who make the decision to be involved in advocacy work (whether paid or unpaid) give some thought to how they can protect themselves from being totally swamped by the political, economic and social realities which may surround them. The fire of personal experience often drives those who are involved in advocacy.

Briefing

Consumer and carer participants, in whatever capacity and whether paid or unpaid, should have adequate, clear information about their role.

If you have been invited to sit on a committee, you need to be fully informed about the purposes, powers and responsibilities of that committee. You should receive relevant information in plenty of time before meetings so you have time to consider the topics for discussion. If at all possible, seek a pre-meeting briefing from the chair or organisation. It is also important to have a 'collective view' for matters being discussed and this means speaking broadly on behalf of consumers or carers, rather than perhaps expressing personal experiences, unless this has been expressly requested of you.

Adequate briefing includes administrative detail such as:

- Can you get your travelling expenses reimbursed? How? Can you have a taxi voucher?
- When and where will you meet?
- What others will be there and what positions do they hold?
- How do you get paid, and when?
- Ask what are the main issues?
- Ask what might be any major areas of controversy or debate. Although your perspective may be different, remember that's what you are there for, at least you gain some idea of the agenda.
- If there are other consumers or carers involved, go through the papers together prior to the meeting.
- It is a good idea to attend any social activities arranged in conjunction with the event. These can be opportunities for a great deal of informal decision making.

In some situations you may not get your briefing papers until the last minute. It is a good idea to speak to the person responsible and give a polite reminder of the difficulties created by their late receipt. Sometime people working in big organisations forget that consumers and carers may not have easy access to fax or email facilities.

It is always important that unless asked otherwise, speak with a collective voice, ie not self issues. It is also important to decide when is the appropriate time to speak, to put your perspective to the group or committee.

Debriefing

One of the most important pieces of wisdom to come out of the consumer and carer movement is the need for debriefing. Debriefing involves talking through things you have done, heard, seen, and experienced with the purpose of clarifying your thoughts and feelings about them.

It is very important to develop pathways of support and this is about not being alone and being able to share in a safe and comfortable setting. Personal support can come from almost anyone, sometimes it is about talking through the issues, and sometimes it is about being in the right environment that enables you to feel good about yourself.

One of the best types of support can be provided by a 'buddy'. This is a fellow consumer or carer whom you trust implicitly that all information you share about yourself will be kept confidential.

Public speaking can be a difficult experience for anyone but for consumers and carers particularly when they are invited to tell their story in public, may feel emotionally empty or overly stimulated. Many describe the experience of 'feeling alright at the time, but it was later that I started to feel sick'.

However in many situations, it is the personal story which brings better understanding of the issues to others and is often the most powerful. Use the personal story when requested or when you feel it is appropriate and helpful.

A further point to consider. Are you required to provide feedback to another consumer or carer body, this might be a consumer and carer advisory committee. If so, pull out key themes and be mindful of matters which have been specifically delegated as confidential and not relay the content.

Disclaimer:

The Network acknowledges the source of material for this resource as The Kit, the advocacy we choose to do. A resource kit for consumers of mental health services and family carers published by the Australian Government in June 1998. While the Network has taken care in the development of the content, it is not responsible for any action taken in response to it. Consumers of the resource are advised to seek help from their GP, mental health support worker or Lifeline if they are distressed by the contents.

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