Systems Advocacy: What It Is and How to Do It

Presenter: **Joseph A. Rogers**
*Executive Director*
*National Mental Health Consumers’ Self-Help Clearinghouse*

Co-Presenter: **Annette Williams**
*Recovery Specialist*
*Thresholds*
Advocacy is:

- The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea or policy.

- Finding your voice: From the Latin *ad* (to) and *vocare* (to call, to vocalize for, or to give evidence).
Three kinds of advocacy:

- Self-advocacy
- Individual advocacy
- Systems advocacy
Similar tactics for all three:

- Decide what you want.
- Get the facts.
- Plan your strategy.
- Gather your support.
- Be firm and persistent.
- Maintain your credibility.
Systems advocacy is:

- Attempting to change government, organization or agency:
  - Policies
  - Rules
  - Laws
Grassroots organizing brings people together

- Society only recognizes the rights of people when they stand up and speak in one voice.
- Organize to gather people together and help them raise that voice.
Grassroots organizing:

- Helps people take power.
- Is continuous.
- Is an investment.
- Alters the relations of power.
Find others who . . .

- . . . are experiencing the same problem you are.
- . . . agree on the nature of the problem.
- . . . are committed to an effort to change the situation.

The group does not need to be large – at least at the beginning.
A small core group can involve others later.
To keep members involved:

- Make it easy for people to get involved.
- Create a sense of purpose.
- Define clear and specific goals:
  - ... that are achievable in a reasonable time period.
  - ... whose achievement will improve people's lives.
Effective online networking:

- Gather e-mail addresses.
- Establish broadcast e-mail lists:
  - Send action alerts.
  - Inform your membership.
- Establish discussion lists.
- Create a Web site.
Prioritize goals:

- Start with the goal that has the greatest potential for achievement:
  - Success will bind the group.
  - Success will create motivation for continued efforts.
  - Stick with it: Never give up.
Gather information:

- Who has authority to make needed changes?
- What laws, rules and policies are in place that affect the situation?
- What rights and complaint procedures exist?
- What facts support the need for change?
How are changes made?

- Who has power?
- How would those in power benefit by the change?
- Create positive incentives that make the change attractive to those in power.
Knowledge Is Power

- Learn as much as you can about the government/non-government organization or agency you are trying to change.
- Attend meetings, public hearings and conferences.
- Acquaint yourself with staff.
Create an advocacy plan

- Determine your goal.
- Frame your goal in positive terms.
- Research what it will take to achieve your goal.
Be ready to negotiate

- Study the offer.
- Don’t accept an initially offered solution too quickly.
  - It may be designed to appease rather than create real change.
- Be ready to suggest an alternative.
- Consider accepting the offer on a trial basis:
  - Establish criteria to assess success.
  - Establish a time frame for reviewing outcomes.
Strategy development (1)

- What do you want?
  - Long-term goals? Short-term goals?
  - Content goals (e.g., policy change)?
  - Process goals (building community among participants)?
Strategy Development (2)

- Who can give it to you?
  - Those with formal authority (legislators)
  - Those who can influence the policymakers:
    - Key aides
    - The media
    - Key constituencies
Strategy development (3)

What do they need to hear?
- Tailor message to audience.
  - Put a “human face” on the issue.
- Two components:
  - Appeal to what is right.
  - Appeal to audience’s self-interest.
Strategy development (4)

- Who do they need to hear it from?
  - Experts
  - “Authentic voices”

- How can we get them to hear it?
  - Phone calls
  - Letters
  - Meetings
  - Letters to the editor and op-eds
  - Direct action
Strategy development (5)

- What are our resources?
  - Related past advocacy work
  - Existing alliances
  - Staff and volunteers
  - Media
  - Information and acumen

- What are the gaps? Perhaps:
  - Alliances that have yet to be developed
  - Media
  - Research
Strategy development (6)

- How do we begin?
  - Develop achievable goals to build constituency.
  - Lay groundwork.

- How can we tell if it’s working?
  - Evaluate what we’ve done.
  - Make mid-course strategy corrections.
Increase your group’s visibility

- Join forces with like-minded organizations in a coalition effort.
- Use the Internet.
- Use the media.
Do be:

- Prepared
- Brief and concise
- Clear
- Honest
- Accurate
- Polite
- Persuasive
- Timely
- Persistent
- Grateful
Say “thank you” before “please.”

- Create an “affirmation sandwich”: 
  - Begin with praise, even if it’s only for agreeing to a meeting or accepting a phone call.
  - Continue with expressing your goals.
  - End with thanks.
Don’t:

- Don’t be argumentative.
- Don’t be demanding.
- Don’t bluff.
- Don’t promise rewards.
- Don’t knock the opposition.
Before making the first call:

- Write down a description of your problem or need:
  - Include only the most important facts and details.

- Gather background information:
  - Include the rationale for your request.
  - Know the counter-arguments so you can respond.

- Target your efforts:
  - Identify the right agency and person to talk to.
Making the call:

- Give the following information:
  - Your name, address, contact info
  - The issue that prompted your call
  - What action you are asking for
More about phone calls:

- Write down:
  - Name of person you spoke to
  - Date and time of call

- Express yourself clearly.

- Assert yourself calmly.

- Follow up:
  - Call back once or twice a week until you have achieved the desired action or set up a meeting to discuss your goals further.
Writing letters (1)

- A very effective way to express your opinion.
- Identify the issue clearly.
- State your position and why you care.
- State how the issue will affect you and/or others.
- Tell the decision-maker what you would like him or her to do.
Writing letters (2)

- KISS (Keep It Short and Simple)
- Type letter on letterhead.
- Send copies to other advocates, legislators, or others you want to inform. (Put “cc:” with the list of these people at the bottom.)
- Keep a copy for your records.
- Follow up with phone calls or another letter.
Face-to-Face Meetings (1)

- Be organized:
  - Practice what you plan to say.
- Bring others with you if that would help:
  - Make sure everyone in the group is prepared.
- Dress neatly.
- Be on time.
Face-to-Face Meetings (2)

- Look the person in the eye.
- Shake hands firmly.
- Call the person by name.
- Use positive body language.
Face-to-Face Meetings (3)

- Prepare anecdotes to illustrate your points.
- Rehearse: If you are going as a group, agree in advance on each person’s role and the order in which they will speak.
- If you are part of a coalition, make sure everyone agrees on the message and what you would like the person you are meeting with to do.
Face-to-Face Meetings (4)

- State your message clearly and simply.
- Don’t be argumentative; be reasonable.
- Politely answer questions and concerns.
- If you disagree, make your point and move on.
Face-to-Face Meetings (5)

- If you don’t know the answer to a question:
  - Say so, and promise to find out the answer.
  - Get back with the answer in a reasonable time period.
Face-to-Face Meetings (6)

- Don’t do all the talking.
  - Give the policy maker time to ask questions or express his or her opinions.
  - Listen to what the other person is saying.
  - If you don’t understand something, ask questions to clarify.
Avoid jargon and acronyms.

Ask for the policymaker’s support.

Thank the policymaker for their support, or at least for their time.

Follow up with a note thanking the policymaker and summarizing the main points of the meeting.
Face-to-Face Meetings (8)

Bring a packet to leave behind:

- Fact sheets
- Newspaper clippings
- Your contact information
If you are unsatisfied:

- Ask why the person can’t help you.
- Ask for another person or agency who might be able to help you.
- Remain calm and respectful.
Continue relationships by:

- Keeping in touch, especially with key staff.
- Involving policy makers in celebrating your accomplishments.
- Inviting policy makers to public forums.
- Helping policy makers get credit when it’s due.
Systems advocacy involves the art of compromise:

- You may not achieve everything you want, but you can achieve some of what you want and use that to build on.
Self-advocacy: A good start

- Clearinghouse taught self-advocacy skills to Thresholds members in Chicago.

- Annette Williams, a Recovery Specialist at Thresholds in Chicago, will talk about what she learned.
Annette Williams:

Using self-advocacy skills in everyday life makes recovery work even better.
I learned better communication:

- I learned that I have the right to speak up for myself.
In my family:

- My mother used to say anything she wanted to me.
  - I began to speak up for myself and told my mother that she shouldn’t treat me like a child anymore.

- My son used to make me feel guilty about not babysitting more often.
  - I spoke up about seeing my grandchildren when I can, rather than whenever he wants me to.
With the system:

- I had to spend $486 a month before insurance would cover my medication.
- I advocated for myself:
  - I talked with case manager: No help.
  - I talked with psychiatrist: He told me about Wal-Mart prescription program for $4 each.
    - Didn’t cover psych meds.
  - Found free psych meds program on Internet.
Apply your self-advocacy skills daily:

- **Self-advocacy:**
  - Helps you regain power.
  - Puts you on the path to recovery.

- **If you believe you have power:**
  - Your positive self-image will let others know they need to respect you.
On the job, for example:

- Speak to your supervisor about problems.
- If you don’t, this can stress you out and lead to:
  - Depression
  - Anger
    - You might burst out at the wrong time.
To help you self-advocate:

- Affirmation will help you build hope and faith in yourself.
- Every day, say two or three affirmations to yourself in the mirror.
  - You will start loving and believing in yourself.
  - You will start to speak up for yourself.
  - People will notice you and respect you.
Speaking up for yourself:

- Can make good things happen for yourself.
- First learn to advocate for yourself; then you can advocate to change the system.

*To conclude the Webinar, I’d like to turn it back over to Joseph Rogers.*
Two “last words”:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

--Margaret Mead (1901-1978)

“One person can make a difference, and every person must try.”

– President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)

. . . Please see resources, bibliography, and presenters’ contact information on the following slides.
Resources:

- **Google:**
  - 72,000 Web sites for “Advocacy tips” in a tenth of a second
  - Not all of the sites will be useful, but many will. (See slides 54-60 for some useful sites.)

- National Mental Health Consumers’ Self-Help Clearinghouse (215-553-4539)

- Public library
Bibliography (1)

Bibliography (2)

“Legislative Advocacy Tips,” Substance Abuse and Addiction Recovery Alliance of Virginia:
http://www.saara.org/docs/2007/Legislative%20Advocacy%20Tips%202007.doc

“Engaging Supporters as Advocates and Activists Through Grassroots Organizing,” American Arts Alliance:
http://www.americanartsalliance.org/americanartsalliance/grassroots_organizing_tips.html
Bibliography (3)

Administration on Aging Media Advocacy Toolkit:
http://www.aoa.gov/press/Media_Advocacy/Media_Advocacy.asp

National Peace Corps Association Advocacy Manual,
http://www.rpcv.org/pages/sitepage.cfm?id=552

Bibliography (5)


Presenter: Joseph Rogers

Joseph A. Rogers, Executive Director
National Mental Health Consumers’ Self-Help Clearinghouse (http://www.mhselfhelp.org)
and
President for Policy and Advocacy
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania (http://www.mhasp.org)
1211 Chestnut Street, 11th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19107
800-688-4226, ext. 273
jrogers@mhasp.org
Co-Presenter: Annette Williams

Annette Williams, Recovery Specialist
Thresholds Southwest (http://www.thresholds.org)
3108 West 63rd Street
Chicago, IL 60629
773-471-3750
awilliams@thresholds.org