

Advocacy 101: Finding Your Voice

I often hear people discussing the rights of the individuals we serve, and how they wish there were more opportunities available to them. Discussion about the desire for higher wages and better benefits for those who work with them is also a hot topic. Both of these concerns are at the heart of advocacy.

Agencies like CCLS get their funding from counties who get their funding from state and federal agencies. The amount of funding an agency receives from each county depends on how much the state of Wisconsin puts into their budget for disabilities services and how the individual county is able to utilize those funds. Because employee wages are the vast majority of the CCLS budget, how much of an increase we get from the county each year typically translates directly into wage and benefits increases.

The problem arises when legislators fail to budget additional increases to disability services. Many of them have misperceptions, or don't fully understand the needs of these individuals, or the staff that work with them. In other cases, the legislator may not feel that enough of their constituents are concerned about this cause to warrant any action. This is where advocacy comes in. Letters and phone calls to your local representative can help to inform them of the needs of both our clients and staff, and can let them know that there are large numbers of people concerned about adequate funding for these needs.

Although administrators and professional advocates spend a great deal of time writing letters, making phone calls, and visiting in person, the most effective communication comes directly from direct care staff and clients themselves. Here is where the numbers make a difference. Here is where you have the opportunity to enact change for the people you serve as well as in your own career.

The first step is to determine who your representative is. You can find that out by visiting the following website: <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/w3asp/waml/waml.aspx>. Next, write them a letter explaining the following:

1. Who are you?
2. What is your Issue?
3. Why do you care?
4. Why should who you are talking to care?
5. What do you specifically want them to do about it?

See the sample letter below for more guidance.

Remember, when writing your letter, always be respectful and factual. If you are not, you can do your cause more harm than good. Don't ever feel self-conscious about writing to an elected representative. They work for you. They are your public servants. If you are unsure about what you are writing, give your letter to a supervisor to read over for you. Encourage your clients to write letters as well, and assist them if necessary.

At times, there will be specific issues that are considered "hot topics" for legislators. Writing or calling about these specific topics can be very beneficial. You can find out what the "hot topic" of the day is by checking the DAWN website (www.dawninfo.org).

Periodically, you may also get e-mails from our corporate office talking about an issue that is of particular importance to this industry as well. And finally, on the "President's Office" home page, I will post frequent legislative updates with notes as to how this could affect you and the people we serve.

Above all remember, your call, visit, or letter can make a difference. Together, we can all make a statement that individuals with disabilities, and the staff that support them, are important and deserve funding.

Sample advocacy letter to representative:

Dear Joe Representative,

My name is Jane Doe. I live in your district and I work with individuals with Developmental Disabilities. I am concerned about the cuts to funding proposed for 20xx in the Human Services budget. I work with the most vulnerable people in the county and everyday I watch dedicated, caring staff give 100% plus to the individuals they support.

We love what we do, but it isn't enough to love it when bills are hard to pay and more and more of your check each year goes to health insurance. I care about the people I work with and the turn over they experience in their lives. They just get comfortable with staff and the person moves on because they found a better wage and easier schedule. These people deserve stability and more security in their lives. In Madison, services have eroded over time and quality is hanging by a thread. These cuts compromise safety and throw quality out the window. People will lose support and regress. These cuts will mean more need and additional funding in the future.

You need to find another way to support the budget and not cut the current services to people with Developmental Disabilities. Look in the budget and find some way to keep the current funding in tact. Sit down with family members, providers and the individuals and discuss the effects in their lives. Call me and we can arrange this, so you have a better understanding of the effects.

Sincerely,

*Jane Doe
contact email address
contact phone number*