SUMMARY

People with a severe or profound learning disability, particularly those who experience problems with communication, are among the most vulnerable to social exclusion, neglect and abuse. Citizen advocacy offers a way of overcoming such extreme social disadvantage.

The BILD Citizen Advocacy Project was established to help promote and disseminate good practice in the provision of citizen advocacy for people with severe, profound and complex learning disabilities. It involves working in close collaboration with local citizen advocacy groups, and draws upon the expertise of members of local management committees, active citizen advocates and the experiences of those who have benefited from advocacy support. This Update describes the development of a new training resource which was part funded by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities as part of the Choice Initiative, and carried out by the Citizen Advocacy Project. It also illustrates a range of issues likely to affect the future development of advocacy in the UK.

BACKGROUND

The strengths of citizen advocacy lie firstly in the partnership between a person with a disability and a citizen who volunteers his or her services as an advocate. The advocate spends time with the person with a learning disability at regular intervals over an extended period of time so that they can represent that person’s interests as if they were their own, (Wolfensberger 1988). Together, they are able to ‘speak out’ in a variety of formal and informal settings so that other people - both professionals providing services and members of the public - hear and respond. Secondly it encourages local groups to utilise the resources available in their surrounding communities.

A literature search in 1997 revealed surprisingly little published material available to support the training of citizen advocates to work with people with a learning disability. The majority of training was developed and provided by local groups working independently of one another. There was considerable duplication of effort and much variation around the content of induction and training programmes.

The work described here was designed as a collaborative enterprise which would help citizen advocacy groups supporting people with a learning disability, to build a consensus about good practice and develop ways of thinking about and demonstrating ‘quality’ without compromising their independence.
THE PROJECT

The first phase of the work (1997-1999) was concerned with the development of the training resource materials which could be used in a flexible way by local advocacy groups. It involved extensive consultation with local advocacy groups, which provided an opportunity for information sharing and networking in respect of a wider range of issues.

The draft materials comprised information for those responsible for the delivery of training, as well as materials to be used by those undergoing training. They were divided into eight units which addressed the main principles and practice of citizen advocacy, together with a further nine units which consider how advocacy can be effective in different settings of particular relevance to people with a learning disability (BILD 2000).

The second phase of the work (1999-2001) will involve working with local advocacy groups to consider:
- How to improve networking among local advocacy groups
- How to increase awareness of the role of citizen advocates both locally and nationally
- What quality means in the context of citizen advocacy
- What opportunities exist to demonstrate quality to potential funders and the community at large.

THE FINDINGS

The first phase of the work revealed the need for:
- Greater security of funding
- The development of a national database of citizen advocacy groups which support advocates working with people with a learning disability and a newsletter to all contacts on the BILD database
- Meetings for representatives of local groups throughout the UK
- Networking with advocacy organisations and umbrella groups throughout the UK
- Research and development in areas such as user involvement
- The development of national guidelines on good practice for citizen advocacy groups which might be an important point of reference for local management committees, advocates, people with a learning disability in receipt of advocacy and potential funders
- The exploration of the potential benefits of voluntary links or affiliations between local groups. For example, this might create opportunities to monitor quality and provide evidence that agreed standards are being maintained without compromising the independence of management groups or citizen advocates
- Consideration of how ‘Pathways to Citizen Advocacy’ can be further developed as a training resource including its application to peer advocacy.
THE IMPLICATIONS

By working in collaboration with local citizen advocacy groups, this work has made a positive contribution by providing:

- Resource materials to promote effective training
- Support for local and national networking
- A process for agreeing national guidelines on good practice
- A forum for discussion about quality assurance.

The level of financial and voluntary support for advocacy in the coming years, and the impact of citizen advocacy on the lives of people with a learning disability will depend on many factors. Among the most important of these is the ability of local groups to:

- Make explicit what they do
- Show how advocacy contributes to improved lifestyles for people with a learning disability
- Share good practice
- Demonstrate quality, (Wiggin 2000).

Finally, it has emphasised that the Government has a key role to play. Firstly, it could help to raise the status of citizen advocacy by implementing Sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Disabled Persons Act (1986). Secondly, it could help to address the chronic shortage of funding by making a commitment to long-term financial support for local citizen advocacy groups.
Further reading:


Further information:

Draft guidelines on good practice and case studies on affiliation in citizen advocacy are available from BILD.

Anyone wishing to find out more about the project or to receive the newsletter should contact John Brooke, the project manager at BILD, Wolverhampton Road, Kidderminster, DY10 3PP; Fax 01562 851970; e-mail JohnBrooke@bild-dla.demon.co.uk

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