At the heart of citizenship, from the roots of advocacy to the core of community

Reflections from a community advocate

About the author

Patsy has been an advocate all of her life. In 2022 she won a lifetime achievement award for her outstanding contribution to independent advocacy.

Patsy would like to make the following acknowledgement in creating this piece:

"I believe citizenship is at the heart of my own understanding of the purpose and power of advocacy, which has been shaped and informed over many years by the work of Simon Duffy, the Citizen Network and in particular 'Keys to Citizenship'."

https://citizen-network.org/library/keys-to-citizenship2.html.

Introduction

Advocacy is a broad concept describing a range of informal and formal practices focused on speaking up about our needs, exerting our rights and effecting change. The practice of advocacy involves taking action to inform, challenge and influence decisions that impact our lives and the lives of people in our communities.

It is a mechanism which helps a person or group to be heard and through which we can all secure our rights as equal citizens in our communities. Based on principles of equality, human rights, justice and inclusion, advocacy operates within the contexts of the self, individuals, and systems in society.

This reflection paper is informed by my experience of working in the field of advocacy and with communities for over 30 years, and by my own experience of self-advocacy as an autistic person.

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Introduction

I will explore and reflect from a personal perspective on the relevance of advocacy in my own life, in my communities, in the lives of everyone I know, and those I will never meet. My reflections here are inspired by my personal and professional experiences and by many voices* of influence in political and social advocacy, social psychology, conflict resolution, community organising and community development. These personal reflections are intended to provoke a deeper curiosity about the nature of community advocacy approaches amongst advocacy leaders, practitioners, self-advocates, community advocates and advocacy allies. I hope to encourage further critical enquiry within the advocacy industry regarding its relationships with community generated advocacy and informal advocacy models.

inspired by John O'Brien, Tom Kholer, John McKnight, Ivan Illich, Cormac Russell, focused on strengthening citizenship and relocating community power.

Introduction

In my view advocacy is fundamental to individual self-determination and collective autonomy. It is essential to realising individual citizenship based on living a valued life with equal freedoms, rights, and privileges. In recognising each person's capacity to advocate, at all stages of life, I believe we are better able to understand and celebrate the spectrum of advocacy and illuminate the impact of all its forms.

"It takes all kinds of advocacy to get our needs met and we are all born natural advocates" Marsha Sweet

Introduction

The term 'community advocacy' is widely used within the advocacy industry to describe general or 'generic' advocacy, usually focused on a specific group or community. It refers to both one to one individual advocacy relationships and group advocacy support. In this context community advocacy relates to advocacy services that are outside of statutory advocacy support (required by law).

Throughout my reflections I use the term 'community advocacy approach' to describe how advocacy uses a 'community lens' viewing people as individuals, citizens with rights, duties, needs and aspirations, in the context of their communities.

I use the term 'community generated advocacy' to describe informal, one to one and group advocacy within communities, that may or may not be linked to the advocacy industry.

Introduction

I will briefly describe a framework for community advocacy in practice which draws on a blend of advocacy models and strength-based approaches. This framework can be adapted to maximise advocacy impact within the advocacy industry and can strengthen self-advocacy, group advocacy and advocacy generated by communities. I will revisit the roots of advocacy and development of the advocacy movement over the last 70 years, reflecting on the individual as the starting point of advocacy, self powerment and citizenship.

I introduce stories of community advocacy in practice alongside a story of my own experience as an autistic advocate. I conclude with a summary of how maximising the application of community advocacy approaches can promote citizenship, inclusion and belonging, whilst amplifying and sustaining the impact of advocacy in all our lives.

The Roots of Advocacy

The Roots of Advocacy

Advocacy is rooted in a person's call to invoke a witness, to seek representation, to add voice to a cause. 'Linguistically, the word "advocacy" stems from the Latin verb "vocare" meaning "to summon," "to voice" or "to call to one's aid."

To advocate is to add a voice of support to a cause or person' (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

The Roots of Advocacy

The advocacy journey begins when an advocate and a person they are advocating with work together to identify what the person can do, what they may need an advocate to do and what the person and the advocate can do together. As a process advocacy promotes strength and support for people to speak up, to be valued, and to take part as active citizens in their lives and in their community.

"Citizenship is the word we use to describe what it is to be recognised by other people as an individual who is a full member of the community" Simon Duffy

The Roots of Advocacy

Advocates encourage and support their advocacy partners to speak up and participate in the advocacy process wherever possible. At times the advocate echoes and amplifies, or presents and represents the views, needs and rights of their advocacy partners to the power holders.

Advocates ask rights-based impact questions to push through resistance from others. Within the advocacy process impact questions serve as powerful tools in seeking to understand potential impacts of a course of action, in provoking reflections, and in seeking responses.

The Roots of Advocacy

I think it is essential that an advocate opens their mind, heart, and ears, to hold space and to listen without judgement. An advocate aims to walk alongside a person through a challenging experience or circumstance in their life. Advocates can share collective and relational strength in situations so that advocacy partners may feel more strengthened during those challenging times.

I believe it is fundamental to identify and understand the power balance within an advocacy partnership between a person and their advocate. Advocacy partners must remain the primary directors and influencers within the advocacy process and therefore in their own lives. Throughout the advocacy journey the advocate's actions must consistently be directed and influenced by their advocacy partner. Advocates are not 'the voice' of their advocacy partner. Advocates amplify people's views, making sure every person's voice is heard, ensuring their rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

"Be my microphone, not my voice" Dave Hingsburger

The Roots of Advocacy

During the 1960's Dr Wolf Wolfensberger developed citizen advocacy principles focused on volunteers who were 'ordinary citizens' working to safeguard justice for disabled people.

Wolfensberger's advocacy model harnessed the power of volunteers who were valued citizens within their communities. These valued citizens were independent of services and as citizen advocates, they represented the rights of people who were at risk of exclusion. Crucially these citizen advocates had access to rich networks of people and to the associations that make up community life.

Advocacy partners were introduced to community life through the rich networks of their citizen advocates.

The Roots of Advocacy

The citizen advocacy movement continued to evolve during the 1980s and beyond, with a focus on promoting caring and civic responsibility.citizen advocacy volunteers were encouraged to welcome socially excluded people as friends, as neighbours and as valued citizens in their communities. These citizen advocacy relationships usually involved long term commitments, with a focus on introducing people at risk of exclusion into social and community life. The emphasis was on supportive relationships, personal friendships between people without resources and people who had many personal and associated resources to share.

Citizen advocates offered advocacy partners introductions to people and community associations, a case of 'who, not what you know that counts.'

The Roots of Advocacy

Alongside the citizen advocacy movement, one-to-one (case-focused) advocacy grew and started to become more formalised in the UK post 1950s. One to one advocacy provided advocacy partners with support and representation, helping to safeguard their rights, amplifying their voices throughout processes usually focused on health and wellbeing. The emphasis was on the rights and autonomy of each person.

At this time group advocacy (cause-focused) also gained momentum. Group advocacy is rooted in community organising, drawing on and harnessing the collective will and power of communities to ignite social action for systemic and societal change. As advocacy continued to develop the advocacy industry embraced a range of advocacy models rooted in earlier citizen advocacy tradition.

The Roots of Advocacy

Throughout the next five decades independent advocacy practice continued to evolve, encompassing 'generic' advocacy alongside a range of advocacy specialisms around communities of identity and communities of shared circumstance or life stages. There has been a continuous movement towards standardisation of advocacy practice with the introduction of frameworks for measuring advocacy quality standards.

In 2002 Action for Advocacy (an umbrella organisation for the advocacy industry) published the Advocacy Charter and accompanying code of practice. The Advocacy Charter defines key advocacy principles, outlining a common vision of what constitutes effective advocacy. These key principles are rights based, promoting equality, focused on diverse identities and include community life.

The Roots of Advocacy

In the last two decades there have been specific developments in law regarding individual's rights to access independent advocacy in specific circumstances. The introduction of these statutory rights along with a statutory duty of local authorities to provide independent advocacy saw the landscape of the advocacy industry transform.

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 created the role of the Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA) to empower and safeguard people who do not have the capacity to make certain important decisions. The right to an Independent Mental Health Advocate was introduced in 2007 under amendments to the 1983 Mental Health Act.

The Roots of Advocacy

The growth of the advocacy industry coincided with the development of the Quality Performance Mark (QPM) for Advocacy in 2008 developed by Action for Advocacy. The QPM provided a national standard to test and measure the quality of independent advocacy across the industry. Following the closure of Action for Advocacy in 2013, the Advocacy Charter, code of practice and the QPM were revised by the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi).

The Care Act 2014 introduced rights to advocacy for people who may struggle to be involved in assessments and other processes and gave new rights to carers to both assessments and support. Working with individuals and organisations across the advocacy industry, the NDTi continue to revise these industry standards to reflect changes in both legislation and developments in advocacy practice.

The Roots of Advocacy

More recent times have seen statutory advocacy dominating the advocacy industry, reflecting the current trend in commissioning of statutory advocacy and consequent decline in non-statutory, community advocacy services. This shift in local authority investment has sparked a growing interest within the advocacy sector in regaining the balance, in rediscovering our roots. High profile investigations into systemic failures of care within health and social care sectors has necessitated a closer analysis of the effectiveness of advocacy within those settings by advocacy leaders within the advocacy industry.

The Roots of Advocacy

These continuous reflections within the advocacy industry on the purpose, impact and sustainability of advocacy have sparked a growing interest in the importance of supporting the spectrum of advocacy. Advocacy organisations innovate, creating opportunities and spaces to develop community advocacy within the industry. For some this extends to working in collaboration with self-advocates and community groups to support advocacy generated by communities.

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Negative life experiences and socio-economic factors such as income, education, employment, community safety and social supports can affect self-confidence and resources needed to access personal power. Self-advocacy skills development can also be inhibited by a lack of enriching personal connections and reduced access to associational life.

Experiences of institutionalisation and isolation from communities can challenge an individual's perception of their own autonomy, assets, power, and strengths. For some people these negative factors may in themselves act as a catalyst for self-advocacy, social injustice acting as a source of power to act, to challenge, to change.

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Advocacy has a long history of supporting the development of self- confidence and advocacy skills through the process of one-to-one and group-based advocacy. Self-advocacy development is often focused on learning disabled groups and within health and mental health settings.

I believe the advocacy process begins with unlocking our own power within. We become active in decisions and processes within our lives, we become fully powered from within, in powerment. Self-advocacy is at the heart of human agency and key to being recognised as unique citizens with all our associated human rights. Throughout our lives we build our skills to self-advocate, to express our needs and exert our influence for greater autonomy. Self-determination is our goal. We draw on our agency and relational power to help shape our lives. We participate as citizens in our own lives, connected in our communities. We are valued as our true, authentic selves by our communities.

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Within our lives and across our lifespan we hold capacity to grow, learn, and achieve.

We self-advocate.

As unique individuals we experience our lives alongside the people around us, our families, friends, neighbours, and communities. These trusted connections and reciprocal relationships, hold unlimited capacity for us to experience unconditional love, support, and encouragement. Within these communities we find a listening ear, a helping hand, someone and somewhere to turn to in times of difficulty and people to share in our times of celebration.

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Reciprocal relationships, with each person contributing and receiving, are key to holding and sharing value as a citizen in our communities, with access to all that associational life offers. Our relationships with, and relationship to the many people alongside us forms the basis of and foundation for our own social assets to grow.

Family bonds, friendship circles, our networks, the sum of our personal, associational and community life can increase our personal resources and multiply the resources within our reach, strengthening our capacity to self-advocate.

For some people self-advocacy comes from a place of privilege, drawing on plentiful assets and strengthening experiences. For people with limited access to these resources, self-advocacy can be a struggle, it may be exerted out of necessity, a means of survival.

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Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Advocacy holds space for powerment through the advocacy partnership. By focusing on a person's unique skills, talents, experiences, and resources as a starting point, the advocacy partnership can help to unlock these resources, activating citizenship. Self-advocacy is a way of being, a human response, an opportunity, a set of skills. Self-advocacy can be an unconscious act, enacted without planning but always with purpose and agency.

"Advocacy comes in many forms and is adaptable to accommodate everyone's needs. I witness individuals advocating for themselves and others every day. Most are totally unaware and would be shocked if you told them they were advocating. It is natural to them..." Marsha Sweet

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Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Self-advocacy confidence and skills can be developed through practice and participation in the advocacy process. An advocate's role is to first and foremost nurture self-confidence and advocacy skills. Advocates promote greater understanding of rights and options within areas of decision making. By supporting key skills in communication, assertiveness and negotiation, the advocacy partnership can promote self-advocacy within the advocacy partnership and beyond.

Where there is no recognised or shared mode of communication, the advocacy partner self-advocates through their presence, their being, and their actions. Advocates must discover the passions, interests, and ambitions of their advocacy partner, uncovering clues to how and where their advocacy partner is connected in trusted relationships, connected within their community, and connected in active citizenship.

Self advocacy, a process of powerment

Curiosity is key, the advocate seeks to know and understand their advocacy partner through a 'community lens'. Through observation and by listening to stories shared by people who know the advocacy partner well, the advocate views their advocacy partner as a valued citizen in the context of their community.

The advocacy partner's identity, history, relationships and community participation, their actions and expressed preferences along with their individual human rights, are all sources of influence for an advocate. The advocate uses this knowledge and influence to represent their advocacy partner, posing impact questions to those who hold power, in decision-making processes that will ultimately impact the advocacy partner's life.

Strengths based advocacy
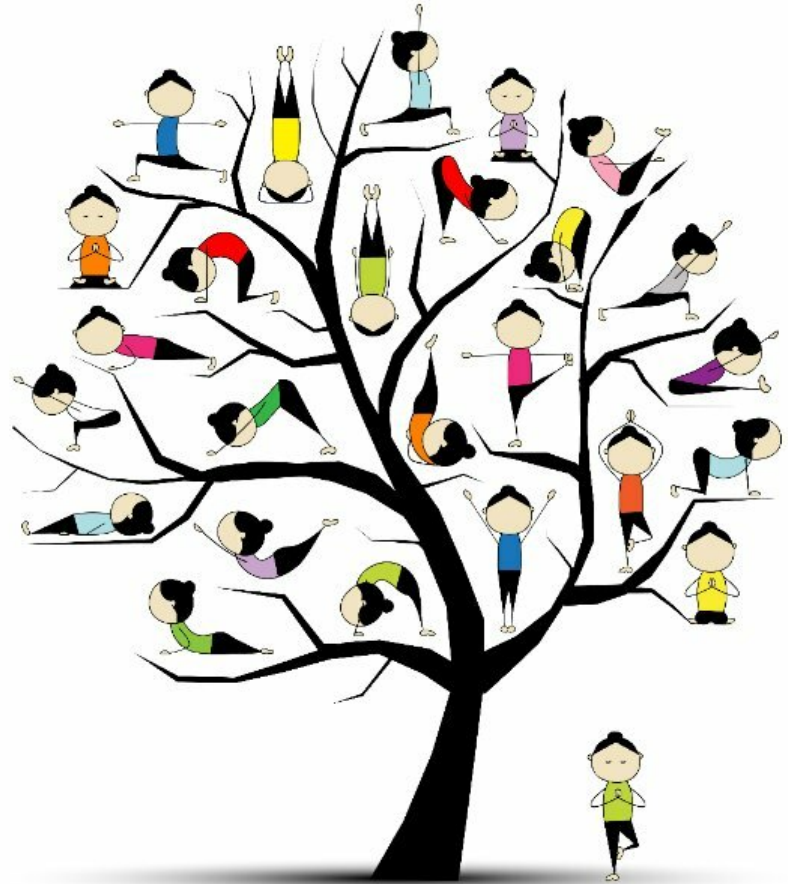
Strengths based advocacy

There is growing enthusiasm within public and community sector organisations to adopt strengths perspectives, promoting working holistically with people when providing services, care, and social supports.

Strength-based approaches are rooted in Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), an approach to sustainable community-driven development developed in the early 1990s by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann. The ABCD approach rejects traditional needs-oriented solutions from a deficit-based perspective in favour of capacity focused perspectives. According to ABCD pioneers, needs orientated services which focus on deficits within individuals and communities will create cultures of dependency, perpetuating reliance on services whilst ignoring the abundant social supports available within communities. To fully realise the capacity held within and by communities it is essential to "start with what's strong, not what's wrong" Cormac Russell.

Strengths based advocacy

Within both traditional asset-based approaches and emerging strengths perspectives, strengths and potentials are referred to as 'assets' within individuals and communities.

Strengths perspectives are based on the belief that everyone has gifts and talents (assets) to contribute and share including resources and associations available to them. Active citizenship, reciprocal relationships and inclusion are core principle of strengths perspectives. Strengths perspectives within advocacy focus on connecting the advocacy partner's assets (including their skills, associations, and universal resources available to them) with the skills and assets available within the advocacy industry.

Through the advocacy process people have access to clear information, knowledge, and support to exercise their rights. Advocacy partners can draw on abundant advocacy resources to enhance their own personal, interpersonal, and social power.

Strengths based advocacy

'Asset framing', a strengths approach developed by Trabian Shorters and Benjamin Evans transforms narrative from deficit to asset based. People are defined first by strengths and the ensuing narrative is shaped by these definitions. "It is defining people by their aspirations and contributions before you get to their challenges. So, whatever is going on in someone's life, you don't ignore it, but you don't define them by the worst moment or the worst experience or the worst potential" (Trabian Shorters).

Reframing narratives is key to identifying and addressing the agents of systemic conflict that perpetuate deficit-based narratives.

"If we recognize that inner-city children still aspire, if we recognize that poor kids still contribute, then we would look for ways to move the systemic obstacles to their abilities to do so"
Trabian Shorters

Strengths based advocacy

Words matter, the language we use can anchor people to their strengths, framing them in the context of their communities rather than their needs. Services all too often perpetuate stigma by understanding and describing people in terms of needs, disabilities, and challenging experiences. Asset framing starts with us. It is an approach based on the belief that all people should be recognised and defined by our unique identities, contributions, and aspirations first and foremost. This approach does not ignore each person's challenges, rather it frames these challenges as experiences and circumstances. Furthermore, we are better able to locate the systemic nature of issues and challenges that people are facing.

Strengths based advocacy

By adopting an asset framing approach within advocacy, we start from a position of compassion and respect, asking who a person is, what a person can do, what a person's hopes and ambitions are and what resources a person has.

We identify people by strengths and aspirations not by their labels, challenges and needs alone.

"Defining people by their challenges is the definition of stigmatising them" Trabian Shorters

Strengths based advocacy - in practice

Strength based approaches are at the heart of advocacy practice. Advocates work alongside advocacy partners to address issues and challenge sources of disempowerment.

Strengths-based practice is holistic, promoting powerment and providing a platform for achieving personal, interpersonal, and social power.

At the heart of advocacy is a belief that each person belongs at the centre of the services and systems that enable them to live the life they want. It is essential to avoid mindsets and actions that seek to 'rescue' people from their circumstances and indeed from their lives. Advocacy promotes policies that supports systems change for independence and inclusion based on inherent rights, directed, and influenced by advocacy partners.

Strengths based advocacy - in practice

Advocates hold responsibility for ensuring the balance of power throughout the advocacy journey is actively maintained and citizen power is driving the process.

Person focused approach – promotes strengths-based perspectives:

- Recognising people according to their identity, contributions, and aspirations (strengths) first and foremost whilst considering, not ignoring the challenges they experience
- checks and maintains the balance of power within the advocacy relationship and advocacy processes throughout the journey
- advocates by instruction and by influence, amplifying the views of and advocating (pushing) for the rights of advocacy partners.

Person centred approach – ensures the person is at the centre of:

- Directing the advocacy journey (instructed advocacy)
- Participating in decision-making processes (self-advocacy)
- Influencing the direction of both (non-instructed advocacy).

Strengths based advocacy - in practice

Community lens approach – ensures the person is perceived in the context of their identity and community:

- recognising the personal and unique identity of each person
- understanding and respecting an individual's cultural identity
- identifying a person in the context of their identity, community connections and associational life rather than by their issues.

Advocates are focused on people and driven by tasks, directed, and influenced by advocacy partners, advocating with, not for. There is a temptation to view an advocate as a fixer, someone who can sort out problems and issues for people in our communities. 'A problem shared is a problem halved' as the saying goes. An advocate cannot share a person's problem any more than an advocate can fix a person's problem. The purpose of advocacy is to extend and expand empathy, to amplify a person's voice, to make a difference in someone's life.

Strengths based advocacy - in practice

Involvement by right, by status, by design.

Within the advocacy industry, organisations and services continue to grow around identified needs, supported by legislation, and financed by local authorities or grant making bodies. This deficit-based premise on which the advocacy industry is maintained risks minoritising and 'othering' advocacy partners within the systems and processes of advocacy and in their lives as valued citizens.

People have the right to make choices in life and the right to expect people to listen. Throughout the advocacy movement people campaign to be heard not spoken for"Nothing about us without us!"

Involving advocacy partners in designing the advocacy journey from the start can determine the quality of the process itself and can impact on the outcomes themselves. A social, cultural and financial shift in planning, commissioning, and delivering advocacy supports must include greater emphasis on community advocacy approaches and advocacy initiatives generated by communities.

Perspectives on community models & community advocacy models

Perspectives on community models

The concept of community is nebulous in both definition and representation. Encompassing notions of belonging or exclusion, of identity and interest, of capacity and deprivation, community can be localised, internalised, and capitalised.

Community is context-specific and can describe a place, a sense or feeling of connection, a shared identity, interest, experience, and collective action for social change.

Perspectives on community models

A person can belong to different communities:

Communities of purpose

Community of Interest: ➡️ People who share interests or passions.

Community for Action: ➡️ People aiming to bring about change.

Community by Place: ➡️ People brought together by location.

Community of Practice: ➡️ People who undertake similar activities.

Community of Circumstances: ➡️ People brought together by events.

Communities of Identity

People with shared labels, histories, connections and lived experiences.

Community advocacy approaches

An increasing focus on provision of statutory advocacy services which requires advocates to hold professional qualifications has contributed to the increasing 'professionalisation' of advocacy. The roles of generic advocates and volunteers within advocacy were at risk of becoming marginalised as organisations directed resources towards specialisms held by qualified advocates.

Meanwhile advocates and advocacy organisations became increasingly frustrated with constraints of statutory advocacy, focusing on specific needs of a person, promoting task focused rather than person focused cultures. Community advocacy models have continued to emerge from the gaps within statutory advocacy dominated cultures.

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A framework for community advocacy approaches

In presenting this framework, I propose the necessity to adopt and adapt a blended community advocacy approach across the advocacy industry. I believe a fluid approach to implementing a citizen-based, community advocacy model will help to further embed citizenship and community belonging within existing practice.

The aim of this framework is to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of advocacy and ultimately maximise the impact of advocacy in the everyday lives of people and in communities.

Informal	Self, family, friends, peers, neighbours, colleagues, allies.	Informal support, listening, reflecting, signposting. ranging from occasional to longer term support
Formal	Volunteers Peers	Support and representation related to advocacy issues, elements of generic and specialist advocacy tasks.
Professional	Generic advocates. Community advocates	Support focused on individual and systemic issues.
Embedded	Specialist advocates. Advocacy networks. Community organising networks Community and neighbourhood groups	Case focused support using community lens within advocacy role and process. Advocacy development, principles, and guidance. Cause-focused issues. Cause-focused, issue-based Community action. Share power and resources. Collaborate to address systemic advocacy issues
Associational	Advocacy networks. CVSE sector Education sector	Share power and resources, collaborate to address systemic advocacy issues. Nurture and develop skills

Community advocacy approaches

Informal

Family, friends, neighbours, and peers provide advocacy supports in everyday situations including championing, listening, finding information, at times representing the person.

Formal

Volunteers provide much needed advocacy support in our communities, in place of 'generic' advocacy.

Volunteers provide holistic 'wrap-around' advocacy support, focusing on tasks that are important to the advocacy partner which are not part of the statutory advocacy remit.

Whilst working towards completing the requisite qualifications volunteers work alongside statutory advocates and contribute elements of statutory and non-statutory advocacy support.

Community advocacy approaches

Professional

Effective, impactful advocacy is 'more than the sum of its parts', maintaining curiosity about the advocacy partner, their potential, their life journey is an essential 'part' of the advocate role.

Advocacy processes consistently default back to the 'community lens', advocates maintain a person-focused approach.

Advocacy partner voices and experiences are harnessed to effect influence on the strategic direction of the advocacy organisation and to effect influence and change on services and supports in their communities.

Embedded

Advocacy principles are essential to all roles that provide social supports and are not exclusive to the advocacy industry.

Community advocacy is not exclusively located within an advocacy specialism in the advocacy industry but is a built-in approach to generating valued citizenship within civil society.

Community advocacy approaches

Associational

Emphasis on the development of advocacy confidence and skills is needed within education, health, and social care sectors.

Starting with the aim of citizenship and community belonging, embedding community advocacy within services and supports in communities helps to relocate individual and community power for greater impact and sustainability.

Community advocacy in practice

Today there are many examples of community advocacy in practice which continue to draw on the values and legacy of the citizen advocacy movement. However, the advocacy industry remains dominated by the provision of statutory advocacy in line with current legislation and statutory duties of local authorities. Statutory advocacy services risk becoming output focused, as funding focuses on tasks related to the statutory elements of the provision of health and social care. It is increasingly important to reflect on realigning the true purpose of advocacy in our communities.

Community advocacy in practice

Relationships are key within the advocacy process, starting with the partnership between advocates and advocacy partners. Community advocacy-based relationships both model and act as a catalyst for self-advocacy and deepening citizenship. The advocacy partnership can spark the growth of social capital and support community connectedness, reducing a potential reliance on formal advocacy.

Too often advocacy tasks are defined in terms of statutory or health and social care processes where advocacy is enlisted to help include a person in processes about them, happening to them, around them.

Community advocacy in practice

Community advocacy starts from a position of strengths, in a process where both advocate, and advocacy partner explore and discover the strengths, skills, talents, and resources that can be shared between them. It is essential to start an advocacy partnership by understanding a person's identity in terms of their strengths and aspirations and identifying the challenges they experience. An advocacy plan flows from the identified actions needed to address these challenges.

Advocacy is person-focused, using the advocacy partner's strengths and assets first, and task-driven, using a human rights lens, moving towards their goals and aspirations.

Community advocacy in practice

A story of John and Sarah's community advocacy partnership

A local advocacy organisation received a referral from a social worker, to provide advocacy support for Sarah who was seeking support to move into a flat and to live independently.

Sarah was not currently eligible for any of the local statutory services.   John volunteers his time with his local advocacy service as a community advocate.

John met Sarah and they planned the advocacy journey together.

Community advocacy in practice

John supported Sarah throughout the process to raise issues, ask questions and share her views with her social worker and other professionals.

Advocacy involvement transformed discussions from 'let's wait and see' to 'how do we make this happen?'

John supported Sarah to understand the bidding process and systems used by local authority to allocate housing. Once an allocation of housing was confirmed, John supported Sarah to explore the new area she would be living in, particularly focusing on what is available in relation to Sarah's interests and preferences. Together John and Sarah mapped the new community in terms of locality and associational life.

Community advocacy in practice

Before moving home, Sarah was in possession of her own keys. John supported Sarah to find out how to set up her new home so she could ensure her finances were organised.

By this point Sarah was stepping forward more, self-advocating more, making phone calls, following up queries. John started to step back and helped Sarah to plan and map her circle of support and allies going forward. John checked in with Sarah a few more times before the advocacy partnership reached a conclusion. John reflected on the learning, what worked well and what may be useful next time with a new advocacy partner.

Community advocacy in practice

From advocacy to community action, creating deep social change

With its roots in advocacy, Grapevine started as a small charity in Coventry working with people with learning disabilities to achieve greater social justice and inclusion. Working at the core of community for many years, Grapevine gained knowledge, understanding, and experience in working together with people to harness citizen and community power.

Over the last decade Grapevine has evolved to become a catalyst for social change. By recognising capacity of communities, building on strengths, skills and opportunities, Grapevine maximises the impact of their work with communities in their locality and beyond. "Grapevine strengthens people, sparks action and shifts power across services" (Grapevine).

Community advocacy in practice

A story of my personal experience, on discovering my autistic identity

Advocacy has always been a consistent part of my life in one form or another, embodied by my justice-seeking values, in the compassionate nature of people around me, in my learning as a Peace Studies graduate, in my professional life and in every corner of my community. Throughout these times I had taken advocacy for granted.

In recent years on discovering my autistic identity, I gained a new perspective and understanding of the significance of advocacy in my own life. As a newly discovered autistic person, I was forced to face and challenge the often deficit-focused narrative and associated stigma surrounding autism. Initially I experienced some difficulty in confidently expressing my autistic identity both in my personal life and within my professional advocacy role.

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Community advocacy in practice

In gaining a better understanding of what autism means for me I could begin to reconcile the struggles of living in a neurotypical dominated environment with the remarkable aspects of living my autistic life. After a 12-month long period of anxiety-filled self-analysis, then reflection and contemplation, I rediscovered self-advocacy in its basic form, presenting my authentic self without fear. In order to continue advocating with others, I needed to advocate first and foremost for myself as an autistic person.

"Advocacy isn't always about representing another person. Often as advocates we must sit with ourselves and listen to our own inner voice. What helps us? How did we unlearn that? An advocate must be able to reflect on their own experience, and how that impacts the people they are standing up for. The most radical thing an advocate can do, however, is to unlearn the systemic lies that society has drilled into us since birth" (David Gray-Hammond).

Community advocacy in practice

My personal advocacy journey continues on as I gain deeper understanding, learning from autistic voices, whilst unlearning the damaging, deficit-only narratives that currently dominate our society. It is worth remembering that though we may become accustomed to exerting self-advocacy skills with confidence in our daily lives, we also frequently draw on the support of our trusted networks and at times we may all need to tap into more formal advocacy supports. Life events, circumstances, changes within ourselves, our lives and in our environments may all trigger the need for a stronger advocacy presence in our lives.

Conclusion

Conclusion

There undoubtedly remains a clear role for specialised forms of advocacy providing a range of supports and representation. However, I believe that in pushing for greater social justice and deeper sustainability, the advocacy industry must work together to shift the balance away from formal, service-orientated advocacy towards greater community generated advocacy.

Advocates must remain focused on their advocacy partners, driven by advocacy tasks, encompassing the rights, needs and ambitions of advocacy partners. I believe the advocacy industry can best serve our diverse communities by maximizing the use of community-based models within the spectrum of advocacy. Starting with asset-framing, strength-based advocacy, advocates are better able to assist their advocacy partners to realise active citizenship, greater autonomy, and inclusion within communities.

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Conclusion

Throughout the advocacy journey advocates are informed, instructed, and influenced by their advocacy partners. Advocacy partners are the directors and influencers of the advocacy journey and within their lives as unique, valued, active citizens. "Inclusion exists at the intersection of belongingness and value in uniqueness" (Lynn Shore). Only where uniqueness and differences are valued, and where people create the culture together, will inclusion become embedded in the culture.

I believe further discussion, critical reflection, and evidence-based practice is needed to realise the potential for community advocacy approaches to promote citizenship, inclusion and belonging, whilst amplifying and sustaining the impact of advocacy in all our lives.

Patsy Corcoran (April 2022)

Further information:

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Simon Duffy, Keys to Citizenship

Dave Hingsburger, Open Future Learning

L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann

Cormac Russell

Trabian Shorters

John O'Brien

Tom Kohler

Ivan Illich

Grapevine

David Gray Hammond

Thank you for reading. Please return to the e-learning for the next section of learning