

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF

This handbook is designed to help you to learn how to be successful in advocating for yourself and others. Most of us have some experience in advocacy. For example, as parents, we often find that we are able to be effective advocates for our children or we have helped a friend in crisis. However, we often find it difficult to be objective when dealing with issues that affect us directly.

SECTION ONE

DEFINITION OF ADVOCACY

ADVOCACY IS: Speaking up for ourselves or for others

An attempt to change **HOW THINGS WORK** in order to
change **HOW THINGS ARE.**

SELF-ADVOCACY? What does this mean to you?

YOU ARE THE ONLY PERSON WHO:

- Knows what your needs are and you are the 'expert' about your situation.
- Knows that speaking up for yourself has not always been a positive experience.
- Knows that you have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.
- Knows that you have the power within yourself to be an effective advocate for yourself and others.

SELF ADVOCACY MEANS:

- Standing up for your rights.
- Speaking or acting for yourself.
- Fighting for personal rights or against personal discrimination.
- Deciding what is right for you and taking charge of getting it.

SECTION TWO

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

There are many reasons why we often feel that we can't advocate for ourselves. Listed below are just a few reasons we tell ourselves why we cannot stand up for what we believe in or change a situation which may be unfair. Unfairness may have a negative impact on ourselves or on people we know and may cause us to let others have power over us.

I CAN'T CHANGE THINGS BECAUSE:

- I don't have control over my life.
- It is too hard to change my situation.
- Nothing I do will make a difference.
- The 'System' is just too big and powerful.
- No one cares; no one really understands me or my situation.
- I am caught in a situation not of my own making.
- I am being discriminated against because because of my culture/religion/race/gender (for example: women/First Nations people/people with disabilities/people on Welfare or Employment Insurance)

Here is a quote that illustrates what you have just read:

In order to survive the larger society, members of oppressed groups are forced to come to terms with a potent force that constantly, and in many ways, says they are no good. This is truly an impossible dilemma, and it is not surprising that people react with rage and fear, turning inward against themselves or outward against others. One of the less constructive ways people may use to cope with their situation is Learned Helplessness, which may consciously or unconsciously be adopted as a mechanism of defense.

N.I. Brill, 1990

Following is a list of destructive behaviours that will often block your ability to advocate for yourself or others. Check this list! If you select one or more of these behaviours, then it's time to STOP!!!!

- Act dumb or be over dependent; exaggerate the negative.
- Lash out.
- Withdraw; do nothing; give up.
- Put yourself down.
- Deny that you are having difficulties.
- Accept goals and solutions suggested by others, even when you know these may not be possible to achieve; give no input to the action plan.
- Blame others if you are disappointed.

SECTION THREE

SELF ADVOCACY

Reasons for taking charge of your situation and becoming a Self Advocate:

- In order for others know that you disagree with them or that your rights have been disregarded, you need to ----TELL THEM!!
- You are the expert on your life situation and what you think, feel and need. Don't wait for someone else to speak out on your behalf; it may never happen!
- The people who have the authority to make decisions in your situation will think everything is OK if you don't speak up for yourself.
- By speaking out, you may in fact be helping a lot of other people in the same or similar situations.
- You have a responsibility to yourself to take care of yourself. Speaking out will help you to keep your self-respect and dignity, even if you do not get what you want.
- Remember that policies are often rules and that these rules may not always be fair or suitable for you. You have the right to question the rules, as they may not apply in your situation.

SECTION FOUR

ASSERTIVE, NOT AGGRESSIVE

When speaking up for yourself, you need to be ASSERTIVE, not AGGRESSIVE. When you are able to present your situation assertively, others tend to listen. Assertive communication is an important way to get your point across and to be understood. Being assertive also allows you to maintain control over the situation. However, when we allow ourselves to become aggressive, we often block the ability to present our views clearly.

Assertive Communication means:

- That you stay on topic; you are consistent, brief and clear.
- That you use a reasonable tone of voice or attitude.
- That you ask for specific information when you don't understand what is being said.
- That you make sure that the other person understands what you have said and that your point of view is clear.
- That you 'keep your cool' and put your best self forward.
- That you are willing to listen politely to what the other person is saying even if you do not agree with them.

Aggressive Communication means:

- That you may shout or yell to get your point across.
- That you may use verbal abuse, swearing, or threats to get your point across.
- That you may interrupt the other person.
- That you may not listen to the other person.
- That you may walk out on the conversation.

Remember that HOW you communicate is often as important as WHAT you communicate, and that your METHOD of communication may often determine whether you get what you want. You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!!

SECTION FIVE

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

The act of advocacy or self-advocacy is one whereby you want to influence people, agencies, and sometimes policies. This may seem to be more of a challenge than you want to attempt. But--- what do you have to lose? You may be afraid that if you speak out about your situation that things may become more difficult or that you will be looked as a 'problem'. Again, if you don't let people know what your situation is and how you want it improved, things will stay the same.

TIPS, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

- No matter how upset you may be or how badly you have been treated, try to stay calm. It may be helpful to talk with a friend about what happened to upset you. Your friend(s) can offer support and advice.
- Don't give up once you have started. Remember that you have the right to ask for what you want or need.
- You don't have to go it alone. There are many agencies which may be able to help you with your situation by saving you some steps and by speeding up the process. Agencies which may be able to help are listed in this booklet on page?
- Remember that if you decide to contact an agency to help you with your case, it may be necessary to sign a release of information before an agency representative can speak on your behalf. A sample release of information form is in this booklet on page ?
- Remember that you have the right to :
 - speak to someone who has the authority to make decisions.
 - be treated as a competent individual.
- Remember that you have the responsibility to:
 - request to see a supervisor if you want to do so.
 - be honest with the agencies you are dealing with and to tell them the whole story, even if some of the story shows you in a bad light (for example: your electricity may have been cut off because you didn't pay your bill on time).

SECTION SIX

DOCUMENTING (KEEPING A RECORD)

One of the most important things you will want to do once you have decided to present your situation/case is to make accurate notes of **WHAT HAPPENED**, **WHEN** and **WHO WAS PRESENT**. This will ensure that you have all the details and facts. It's never a good idea to depend on your memory, as you may forget details, dates, etc., especially if a lot of time passes during your case. Also, if there should be disagreements, you will make a stronger case if you have recorded all the details as they happen. If you can't make notes yourself, it is always OK to take a friend with you to help with this job. Make sure you or your friend has a pad of paper and a pen and let the person you are meeting with know you are making a record of the conversation, in order to help your memory. There should not be an objection to this.

Important things to record:

Conversations- In person or by phone:

- The name of the person you talked with
- What was said
- Date and time the conversation took place (and the place if the conversation was in person)

Actions:

- What action did the other person take? (for example, did the official or agency representative get you to fill out a form?)
- What action did you say you would take? (for example, to get a letter from your doctor regarding a medical condition)
- Will it be necessary for you to follow up or to call back? What date and time?
- Will someone be contacting you? What day and time?

It is usually a good idea to check with the person you are meeting with as to the accuracy of the information you (or your friend) have written down before you leave the meeting place (or end the telephone conversation).

SECTION SEVEN

DEALING WITH GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Sometimes, it may be necessary for you to contact a government agency (for example, the local office of Human Resources and Employment, which takes care of SFI (Supports for Independence, or Welfare). Here are some tips to make this experience easier and more productive:

- Keep in mind that the person you speak to is not likely to be the person who makes decisions or policy.
- If the first person you contact regarding your case (for example, your SFI caseworker) does not seem to be hearing you or helping you, ask for their supervisor's name and phone number. **It is your right to speak to a supervisor.** Before ending the conversation, thank them for their time and record what was said.
- The next step is to contact the supervisor. You will often need to leave voice mail message, with your name and phone number, and the date and time you left your message. Don't go into details of your case in the message. Expect that it may take several days for the supervisor to get back to you, but if you do not hear in a week, call again and refer to your previous message. (If it seems a long time since you left your message, it is often useful to press '0' at the end of the supervisor's greeting on the voice mail. This will take you back to the 'front desk', and you can ask if the person you are trying to reach is perhaps away from the office for a time period. If this is the case, you can ask who is covering for the absent person, and ask to be connected. This way, you can save yourself repeated phone calls and also some resentment at having your messages neglected!)
- Once you have made contact with the supervisor, it may be a good idea to ask to meet in person to discuss your case. Remember that you have the right to take someone with you as an advocate, a witness, a translator, or just as a supportive friend.

THE MEETING:

You will need to know:

- The location of the agency or government office.
- The opening and closing times and if it closes for the lunch hour.
- If there is a bus stop nearby.
- If there is parking available.
- If you have children, try to arrange care for them while you are at the meeting. It is not usually a good idea to take them with you.

Take with you:

- Any notes you have made from previous meetings or telephone conversations.
- Any documentation that may be important to your case, such as a letter from your doctor.
- Any official documents, such as your Social Insurance Number or Health Care number, driver's license or any other picture I.D. you may have.

During the meeting:

- Always get the name and title of the person you are talking to.
- Always remain polite, no matter how frustrated you are or how urgent or unfair the situation may be. This also goes for the friend or advocate you bring with you!
- State the problem or situation clearly. Refer to your previous notes to make sure you haven't forgotten anything important to your case.
- If documentation is asked for (such as a doctor's letter), never hand over original copies. Give them a copy, if you have one. Otherwise, ask the person to make a copy and make sure you take your original back!
- Remember that the person you are talking to must respect the confidentiality of what you are saying to them. They may not pass on to anyone else any of the information you give them without your permission!
- You may have to sign a Release of Information form, so that the person you are talking to is able to go to another agency or government department on your behalf. A sample form is at the back of this booklet.
- Take notes as you go, or have your friend or advocate take the notes.
- Be clear as to what you want to have happen. Is your problem an emergency? (for example, if you need housing in a hurry)
- What will happen if your situation is not resolved? (for example, if you do not get help with this month's rent, will you and your children be evicted?)
- Can the person you are speaking with suggest another agency or department which can help you?
- At the end of the meeting, always thank the person you spoke to for their time and for listening to you, even if the situation is not resolved.

After an unsuccessful meeting:

- Note why you were refused your request. Be exact. If you need to go back with more documentation, do that as soon as possible and make sure you schedule another meeting with the person you spoke to earlier.
- Consider if you need to look elsewhere for the service or solution: another agency or another department of a government office.
- Make a list of the other agencies or government departments, together with contact names and phone numbers.
- What was the outcome? Document your efforts.
- You may find solutions by talking to other people in similar situations, or you may not

At this point, review the work you have done and read over your notes. Even if you haven't resolved the situation, give yourself a pat on the back! Now you have a record of the efforts you have made, and this information can be helpful in moving forward to finding alternative solutions.

SECTION EIGHT

PRESENTING YOUR CASE BY LETTER

Instead of arranging a meeting, you may want to present your case by letter. Here are some tips for writing a successful letter:

- Make sure your letter is readable. If your handwriting is hard to read, you may want to ask a friend or an agency representative to type the letter for you.
- You may also type the letter yourself, using a computer at the library. There is no charge, but you may have to pay for paper and for making copies of your letter.
- Keep the letter short and to the point, no more than one or two pages, and start a new paragraph for each new idea.
- State the facts of your case and what you would like to happen to resolve the situation.
- State the names of people or agencies you have already contacted, and what the outcome was.

Here is a sample letter for you to follow:

Sample letter to Agency or Government Program

Date

Name of Agency or Government Program

Address (include postal code)

Dear (Name of Person) OR To Whom It May Concern:(if you don't know who will get this letter)

I am writing to make a request. I am currently receiving SFI, and I am pregnant with my first child. I understand that I may be eligible for an extra amount on each monthly SFI payment to cover the cost of an enhanced diet during my pregnancy. I have a letter from my doctor, stating that I am pregnant, and giving the estimated due date. The appropriate referral number in the SFI Manual is: SFI-01-02-01.

I understand also that I will be eligible for the Natal Benefit to pay for items needed for the baby. Can you tell me when and how I can apply for this benefit also?

I look forward to a return letter or call so that we can discuss this matter. I can be reached at (your phone number) most days in the morning/afternoon OR You can leave a message for me at (phone number of a friend or agency, if you don't have a phone)

Sincerely,

_____ (Your signature)

SECTION NINE

APPEAL OR COMPLAINT PROCESS

If you have not resolved your situation by following the steps in Section Seven, you may need to consider an appeal process or even making an official complaint.

APPEALS:

- There is an appeal process for SFI and AISH cases. Find out if there is an appeal process in place for other types of requests. Is there a complaints line you can call?
- Check that you have all the facts of your situation. Use the notes made by you or your friend. Make sure you have all the names, times, dates, locations and what was said.
- Will you need someone to advocate on your behalf? Find out where you can get advocacy.
- Are there laws or policies that apply to your case? What are your rights and entitlements? Write down the section numbers and pages where these laws, policies, rights or entitlements may be written (for example, in the Alberta Supports for Independence Manual). If you need help with this, turn to page _____ in this booklet for a list of agencies in Calgary, which may have the information you need, and which may also be able to supply advocates to help you.
- If there is an appeal form, find out where to get it and line up someone to help you to fill it in (perhaps an advocate).
- Find out if timelines apply, and, if so, make sure to get your appeal in to the correct place on time!
- Try not to feel intimidated by the idea of appealing. Remember that this is your right!
- If you are making an appeal to the SFI office, always indicate that you would like an internal review first, before going to an appeal tribunal. A supervisor can often resolve a situation without even needing to proceed with an official appeal.

Self- advocacy requires persistence! Don't stop when you find out that you may have to appeal in order to resolve the situation. You have nothing to lose, so GO FOR IT!!

COMPLAINTS:

At this point, you may be thinking that, if you appeal and 'make a fuss', you may cause further problems. You may be afraid of some form of retaliation. In general, this should not happen, as most agencies and government departments have strict policies in place to prevent retaliation from happening.

If retaliation does happen, here are some suggestions:

- Bring it out in the open.
- State your concerns in a positive way.
- State the facts, but do not make accusations against the person you dealt with or against the organization itself.
- As a consumer of services or products, you have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, and many organizations and government departments will state this right at the beginning of their manual or policy document. (Note that this is the case in the Alberta Supports for Independence Manual) You are just as important as the person on the other side of the desk or counter!

If you feel that you have not been listened to or that your rights have not been respected, here are some ways to deal with your issue:

- Contact your local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly in Edmonton- the provincial government). Even if the Legislative Assembly is in session, and your MLA has to be in Edmonton during the week, most MLA's will be in their constituency office on Fridays, so it is worth phoning early in the week to make an appointment for Friday. You will likely talk to an assistant.
- Contact the Human Rights Commission in Edmonton or Calgary.
- Go to the media.

If you decide to go to the media to try to get some publicity for your case, it would be a good idea to have the support of a sympathetic agency or advocacy group. Be sure to be very well prepared before talking to a radio or TV station or the local newspaper. Always remember that the media may have their own agenda, which may not help your case.

NOTE: We will need a list of names and phone numbers of people or agencies who can help your clients with a variety of needs. Whoever comes from the Calgary SFI office should bring a list of relevant names and numbers in the Department. We would also like to include a sample release of information form at the back of the booklet. We could either use one from Womanspace or one from the Red Cross.

We will also bring some sample application and appeal forms for SFI or AISH, or the person from SFI can bring them. Our SFI contact usually brings them. We are hoping to meet the SFI contact at our meeting in Calgary at the end of April.

If you like, this booklet can be half letter size, folded and stapled, with a card cover. Some graphics and/or cartoons will 'jazz it up'. I assume it will also need a title page for the cover. Should there also be an index page?

Finally, can you let us know as soon as possible if you want changes made to this information, so that we have time to complete them.

Thanks,
Dorothy and Vedna