



THE NEED FOR ADVOCACY

People with disabilities and their families often experience, or are at least vulnerable to, discrimination, neglect, exploitation or abuse. Their rights, whether human rights or legal rights are commonly ignored and denied. Access to ways of enforcing those rights, while readily available to many others in society, may be restricted or denied to people with disabilities. Resources necessary to ensure the honouring and equitable recognition of those rights are often not provided. Where there are no recognised rights available to assist in a struggle for justice, something more is needed.

Even where rights exist something more than the mere existence of rights is needed if those rights are to be respected, honoured, and protected. That "something more" is advocacy.

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Advocacy challenges us to take responsibility for each other, and in particular for those among us who are most vulnerable. The need for advocacy for people with disabilities arises for a number of reasons.

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THE IMPACT OF IMPAIRMENT

People who have a disability experience some degree of limitation to their physical and/or functional capacity, which can become life-shaping, and even life defining, in its impact.

Although people who have a disability grow and develop across the course of their lives, this limitation is real, life long, and often has a major impact on the person's capacity to meet their own

needs. Depending upon the degree to which the person's disability limits their competency, they will require additional supports from other people across the course of their lives in order for their needs and interests to be addressed, and sometimes even to ensure that they will live.

Some examples include:

- (a) a person with a psychological disorder who experiences episodes of severe depression may, during such an episode, lack the volition necessary to meet even their needs for food, shelter and safety.
- (b) a person with cerebral palsy may be unable to communicate their needs and wishes without significant assistance, and others may not be able to understand, or be willing to respond to, the needs of the person.
- (c) a person with an intellectual disability may be unable to see and understand an injustice to which they are subject.
- (d) a person with a physical disability may be unable to move or gain access without significant adaptation of the physical environment.

In this context, the concepts of empowerment that derive from other social movements are not the whole answer. This difference must be clearly understood and taken into account in the planning of any advocacy efforts for people with a disability, in case the outcome of the effort may expose people to more neglect, exploitation or abuse.

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THE SOCIAL SITUATION FACING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Because the person's difference is often perceived negatively by many people within our society, people with a disability are often socially devalued and degraded by the following means :

- (a) rejection, sometimes by families, neighbours, community in general, and sometimes even by the service workers whose very income derives from the person.
 - (b) isolation and segregation from people who do not have a disability and therefore from opportunities that come from being in contact with other people.
 - (c) lack of opportunities for a person's development, growth and enriching life experiences, resulting in wasted lives.
 - (d) congregation with other people with disability and/or other devalued people, in circumstances where people may have nothing more in common than their shared rejection by other people.
 - (e) as a result of segregation and congregation, people with disability are often not expected or encouraged to develop positive social roles such as partner, friend, fun lover, life enjoyer, learner etc.
 - (f) loss of control and autonomy whereby every aspect of life may be externally controlled by other people and/or the service system upon which they rely.
 - (g) material poverty which exposes people to such things as poor or no health care, inferior housing, and or homelessness thereby leading to illness, and shortened life expectancy
 - (h) loss of recognition of, and few opportunities to develop, a sense of individuality and uniqueness.
 - (i) physical and/or emotional neglect, damage or abuse from other people and the surrounding environment.
- These life experiences may, at times, be so severe and intensive that the person's whole identity may be characterised by depression, pessimism, fear, personal insecurity or rage.

EFFECTS OF HUMAN SERVICE SYSTEMS

The effect of current social values especially in times of economic and social stress Many people with a disability have a heavy reliance on formal, direct human services to meet many of their basic needs. Depending on their quality, these human services they can assist people with disabilities to live more valued and inclusive lives. Nevertheless there are a number of issues relating to human service systems and the need for advocacy that have been identified. These are as follows:

- (a) human services are imperfect and can never be made to be perfect. Therefore things will go wrong and there needs to be a number of strong safeguards in place to protect the interests of people. The more vulnerable the group of people, the stronger and more numerous the safeguards need to be.

(b) human services serve interests other than those of the individuals in whose name they have been established. Interests include the person's family, the person's advocate, the service workers, union of professional associations, funding bodies, the neighbourhood, regulating bodies, and society. In these competing interests, the individual person is the least influential and their interests are often sacrificed to the interests of the others.

(c) human services often reinforce, rather than challenge, negative stereotypes of people with disability. By the way the organisation operates and the policies it adopts subtle messages can be given. For example, if a recreation service thinks it is not a good idea for a person with a disability to attend a generic TAFE class because he/she might disrupt others then they are giving a message that people with disabilities are not able to learn or develop and cannot interact with others.

(d) human services are likely to decline over time, due to:

- inability to adapt
- changing staff
- loss of "vision"
- difficulty in embracing critical evaluations of own service

The day-to-day struggle to provide services may also lead to a 'hardness of attitude' towards those people with disability they were originally set up to serve.

(e) the service system lacks coherence and comprehensiveness. There are many gaps between services and a significant likelihood of non-responsiveness or poor co-ordination between services.

In addition many people cannot access services as the demand for services exceeds the services available. Nor is there a fair means for deciding the basis on which people receive services.

(f) Formal human services cannot meet all human needs.

Fundamental human needs for relationships, affection, security cannot be met by formal service structures but only by others acting freely and independently. The size and complexity of the human service system on the one hand and the vulnerability and powerlessness of people with a disability on the other means that the general principles of consumer, user and human rights protection are not sufficient and must be reinforced by other safeguards.

THE EFFECT OF CURRENT SOCIAL VALUES IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STRESS

Current social values include that a person's worth is measured according to health, wealth, productivity, intelligence, individualism, independence and attractiveness. These values are leading to a greater non-acceptance of, and indifference to, marginalised populations. As a result, social and economic stress is posing a greater danger nowadays to vulnerable and powerless people. On this basis, advocacy for vulnerable people may be more rather than less, needed in the future