

What is Advocacy?

(excerpt from "The Kit")

Traditional meaning

Advocacy means different things to different people. Its plain English meaning is that advocacy is supporting another person's cause. This idea of people representing others has gathered strength in the last twenty years, particularly in disability areas. It has been thought that sometimes people benefit from having others speak out on their behalf.

Consumers of mental health services and carers associated with mental health services have strong cause to participate in decisions about the services and to ensure that their views about a range of related issues are expressed and heard. Sometimes, perhaps when a consumer or carer is particularly vulnerable, it is useful to have someone to speak on behalf of the person.

Mental health advocacy

Where advocacy in mental health differs substantially from the traditional definition of advocacy is that consumers and carers are not generally disabled in a way that requires someone to represent them. Rather, they are capable of representing themselves.

This growing assertion by consumers and carers that they are capable of advocating for themselves has given rise to growing activity by individuals and the development of a number of mutual support organisations to add strength to their 'voice'. The mental health system is gradually responding by providing increasing opportunities for consumers and carers to effectively participate.

Advocacy in mental health is not so much about people representing other people, but about people representing themselves. It is also about consumers representing

consumers and carers representing carers.

The aim of advocacy is to bring about beneficial outcomes in a way that enables each consumers and carer or group to retain as much control as possible over how it is carried out. The resultant expectation of consumer and carer advocacy is individual and group empowerment.

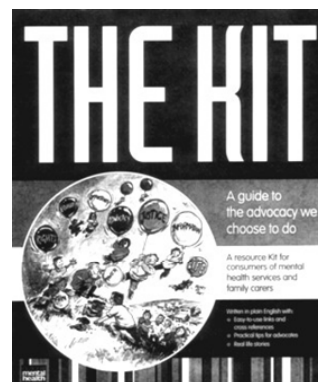
The activities of advocacy incorporate such things as improvement in justice and equity for the individual and/or the peer group, focus on systems and social change (systems advocacy), community development, community education and health professional's learning.

Advocacy in mental health is often considered to be associated with actions to redress the injustices dealt to people living with a mental illness that result from powerlessness and inequity. This can happen at a very personal level, for instance by people seeking to increase decision making of their own treatment, through to groups of people engaged in major service restructure.

Advocacy is also about seeking to influence the social and political structures that promote and sustain injustice and inequality. The case is put by some that people associated with mental health systems are similar to a range of other disenfranchised groups and that collective radical reform is necessary for positive change to occur.

Are you interested in Advocacy Training?

If you would like advocacy training for you or your organisation please phone MHACA on 8950 4600



A Resource Kit for Consumers of Mental Health Services and Family Carers

In 1998 the Australian government produced *The Kit: A Guide to the Advocacy We Choose To Do* as part of the Community Development Project funded under the 1992 National Mental Health Strategy.

The Kit is as relevant today as it was when it was first released and is an excellent resource for empowering consumers and carers through advocacy. It features a range of clear and simple 'how to' steps under the following general sections:

- ◆ advocacy and the individual
- ◆ getting organised
- ◆ some specific activities
- ◆ advocacy and organisations
- ◆ getting strategic

Some of the individual topics include:

- ◆ looking after yourself
- ◆ conflict resolution/mediation
- ◆ identifying and overcoming barriers
- ◆ gaining support from service providers
- ◆ submission writing
- ◆ starting up a group
- ◆ working with the media

The Kit is available from MHACA on (02) 6285 3100. If you would like to check out a copy please come and visit the MHACA library.