

How to Self-Advocate: Ten Steps to Success

To Self-Advocate means:

*To speak for yourself;
to defend yourself and make your own decisions;
to make your own recommendations;
to plead your own cause.*

STEP ONE: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities

Whenever you need to access a system, it is important to know your rights and responsibilities within that system. It is YOUR JOB to learn your rights and responsibilities. In this circumstance, knowledge truly is power.

STEP TWO Learn and Understand the System

The first and best way to do this is to get information directly from the system. Here are some additional questions you may want to ask:

- What are the specific timelines within the system?
- Is an appeal process available and how can it be accessed?
- What departments are involved, who are the supervisors, and what is the chain of command?
- Is there an advocate/ombudsman within the system?

You can accomplish this step by calling on the telephone or by writing. If you call, be sure to get the name of the person(s) you talk to and take notes during the conversation. If you write, be very specific with your request and your questions, this will help you avoid getting generic information.

STEP THREE Don't Assume Anything

Whenever you are given information, do not assume that it is "absolute". Often times, the person you are dealing with is an initial contact person and may have limited knowledge. This rule should be applied when dealing with managers as well as secretaries or receptionists.

STEP FOUR Question Everything

The process of learning and understanding a system takes time; the best way to facilitate this process is to continually ask "Why?" This is not meant to be adversarial, just a natural part of your learning process.

If you need clarification about written information, be sure and have it available when asking questions about it. If you ask "Why?" and get answers like "That's just how we do it" or "It is department policy," then there is a good chance you are being given inaccurate information. Request a copy of the policy. Remember, if you don't ask, they might not tell you.

STEP FIVE Ask To Speak To A Supervisor

Just like asking questions, this step is not meant to be adversarial. But again, this may be your only means of getting all the correct information that you need. It is your RIGHT to get accurate information and your RESPONSIBILITY to take the necessary steps to get it.

STEP SIX Start the Paper Trail

Just as the system takes steps to formalize its processes, so should you. Whenever you have a contact or meeting of substance with the system, you should write a follow-up letter to summarize the information you were given. This process:

- puts your contact with the system on record;
- preserves your rights under the law;
- clarifies things in your own mind; and
- lays the groundwork for a legal complaint (or defense).

STEPSEVEN Don't Wait

Every system has some type of a timeline or time constraints – usually for good reason. If you violate those time requirements you may find yourself at the mercy of the system. Learn the time constraints and live by them.

STEPEIGHT Keep a Record of Everything

Nothing is as powerful as written documents when trying to prove a case. Make copies of all correspondence, receipts, estimates, etc. Keep a diary of everyone you speak with and include times, dates, and subject matter. Finally, if anyone needs to see your documentation, send them copies, NOT originals.

STEPNINE Appeal It

It is your right to disagree with a decision regarding your case. In some systems, the ONLY way to get victory is on appeal. In others, the appeal enables you to make your full case to an independent authority. Did you know that a majority of Medicare's denials are overturned on appeal?

STEPTEN Ask for Help

If you have thoroughly exhausted Steps One through Nine and have still not met with success, perhaps a third party can help. Sometimes those on the outside can see things more clearly, and sometimes they just have more experience to draw from. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

However, it is important to realize that no one will hold your self-interests as high as you, even if the law says they must or they are paid to do so. Therefore, you must always be your own best advocate. If you don't care enough to act with conviction to fulfill your needs, why should anyone else?

Go out and DO IT!