

EFFECTIVE SELF-ADVOCACY

The purpose of self-advocacy is to empower you to decide what it is you want, develop a plan, carry out that plan and evaluate results. This includes learning new skills (listening, negotiation, problem solving and assertiveness) and asking people to help you when necessary.

A major goal of self-advocacy is to empower you to speak for yourself and participate in decisions affecting your life.

There are four basic steps to self-advocacy: Define the problem, develop an action plan, carry out the action plan, and evaluate the outcome.

I. Define the Problem

The first step is to define your issues and/or complaints. You need to be clear what the problems are and how you would like to resolve them. You need to know the laws, rules and policies regarding your issue or complaint.

Write down what the problems are and your desired solutions. Sometimes not all problems can be addressed all at once. Choose one or two issues that you would like to work on. Make a list of the possible solutions to your problems. Discuss the pros and cons of each solution. Choose the solution you feel most comfortable with.

II. Develop an Action Plan

After you have defined the issues and selected a solution for resolving these issues, you need to develop an action plan.

The action plan is a guide to the steps you will take to advocate for yourself. Your action plan will identify what you're going to do, how you are going to do it, a timeline for your actions, and the people who can help you. An important part of your plan should include a backup plan in case you need to change your strategy to get what you want. Sometimes you may not be able to get everything you want. Decide what issues you are willing to give in on, and the minimum you are willing to accept.

III. Carrying Out the Action Plan

The third step is carrying out the steps in your action plan. These steps may include gathering documentation and support for your solution. It may be helpful to keep a log of your activities. In this phase you may want to seek out support from your peers, family members, friends, staff members, and others who are supportive of what you want. You may need to demonstrate that your plan is workable and supported by others.

This step includes the following elements:

- i. **Negotiate:** Be prepared to negotiate with people who make decisions for or about you. Examples of these people are: staff members, your case manager, your guardian, and/or your doctor. You may want to talk to other people about effective ways to approach people in charge.

This may involve meeting with key staff persons, asking for help from an advocate, making phone calls, writing letters and/or emails. Your actions should be focused and include a clear statement of the problem and ideas about how to solve the problem.

- ii. **Timing:** Never approach a situation when you are angry. You may want someone you trust to go with you for support. They can act as a witness to what is said during the meeting and help you remain calm and stick to the facts. Do not become argumentative or overly emotional.

If you find you are becoming upset, leave the conversation and approach the situation at a later time. It is **O.K.** to let him/her know how you feel, but never use personal attacks or obscenities in your discussion. **Use statements and stick to the issues.** If he/she changes the topic, bring it back to the issue(s) you want to discuss. At the end of the meeting, thank him/her for his/her time. Ask when you can expect to hear from him/her about your issue.

- iii. **Document:** You need to make sure that you document all of your efforts. If you need help later with your issue, it will help the person assisting you to figure out what your issue is, who is involved and what you have done to try and resolve your issue.

Write down your questions before making a phone call about your issue. Be sure to have a paper and pencil handy before making the call. Write down the date, time, agency, and the person you talk to. Write down what he/she says. Send a letter or email confirming any agreements made. Also, be certain to set a timeline for achieving all agreements.

Keep all letters you receive and those you send. Get and keep copies of any forms you sign. Get and keep copies of records such as treatment plans and medical records. You have a right to have copies of these.

IV. Evaluate How You Did

The last step is the evaluation phase. Once you have gone through the steps of your action plan, you need to evaluate what happened. Review what you did; how you did it; and if you got what you wanted.

If you didn't get what you wanted, what steps do you need to take to be successful in getting what you want? If the solution you originally selected did not work out, you will want to look at accomplishing it another way, or selecting a new solution and developing a different action plan.

Don't Give Up

It is important not to give up if your first attempt to change something doesn't work out. You may have to stop your plan and try other strategies to get what you want. The important thing to remember is to keep trying until you are satisfied.

STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL DOCUMENTATION

The key to getting your problems solved to your satisfaction is to document what happened. It is easy to use the Who, What, Where, When, Why method when writing down information about your situation.

You can get what you want if you understand the system, identify supportive people to help you and understand what your rights are, ask for what you want, and keep a record of what you are told.

There are laws and regulations to protect your rights and agencies which are required to assist you in protecting them. Before you can begin to protect your rights, you need to know what they are, and who can help you protect them.

KEEP A RECORD OF YOUR SITUATION

- Keep all letters you receive and a copy of the letters you send.
- When you sign forms you have a right to a copy. This will establish a record of what you have agreed to.
- Do not sign a blank form.

HOW TO KEEP A RECORD: Write Down:

- **Who:** Who you contacted -- name, phone number, address and title.
- **When:** Date and time of contact.
- **What you want:** What you want in a word or two -- vocational training, change of medication, treatment complaint, change in education plan, a reasonable accommodation, etc.
- **What they said:** What you were told.

Example of a note:

- Who: Dr. Jones
- When: 4-11-2015; 9 a.m.
- What you want: Change of meds - told the Dr. I was shaking from the meds.
- What they said: He said he would evaluate me before the end of the day.

or

- Who: Mrs. Mary Smith, evaluator at Social Security Office.
- When: 4-11-2015; 3:30 p.m.
- What you want: SSI check not received.
- What they said: Computer foul up. I was incorrectly cut off from my SSI check. I should receive my check in 10-15 working days.

If you don't get what they said you would get, then you will have to contact another person and make another note. If you still don't get satisfaction you can call Nevada Disability Advocacy & Law Center for assistance in Las Vegas at 702-257-8150, Reno at 775-333-7878 or Elko at 775-777-1590.

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR SITUATION

By keeping a record and writing letters or emails **you will be able to take control of the situation to help you get what you want.** If you are still unable to get what you want, your documentation will be important when you go to get advocacy services. Documentation will help the advocate figure out what the facts are, who is involved, and when you were told that something would happen. If your information is complete and written down, an advocate will be better able to assist you to get what you want.

This publication is for informational purposes only; it is not intended to be legal advice. If you have questions about a specific situation please contact NDALC or a private attorney.

BLANK FORM TO USE

WHO:

WHEN:

WHAT:

WHAT YOU WERE TOLD:

WHO:

WHEN:

WHAT:

WHAT YOU WERE TOLD:

WHO:

WHEN:

WHAT:

WHAT YOU WERE TOLD:

SELF-ADVOCACY GUIDELINE

I. DEFINE YOUR PROBLEMS AND IDENTIFY THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

1. What exactly is the problem?

2. How often does the problem occur?

3. Have I tried to resolve this problem before, and what was the result?

4. Do other people share my problem?

5. Has anybody else tried to solve a similar problem?

6. What has worked in the past?

7. What has not worked in the past?

8. What are the laws that would address my problems?

9. Do I know: Who, What, Where, When, Why?

Who: _____

What: _____

Where: _____

When: _____

Why: _____

10. Who are some contacts and/or resources that could help me?

II. ORGANIZE AND DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

1. Who will you approach?

Target Date _____

2. How will you approach that person? (Telephone, in-person meeting, letter, email)

Target Date _____

3. Who is supportive of your efforts?

4. Research your legal rights?

5. What are the benefits for you and others?

6. What are the facts that support your solution?

7. What is some other important information?

8. What exactly do you want and what are some possible solutions?

9. Who are some people that would help you role-play your presentation of your case with others? When could you arrange to do them? Date _____

III. ACTION STAGE

A. Set your plan in motion

1. Make an appointment, or set a time that is convenient for everyone to meet.

B. Keep your presentation simple

1. Start with the most important facts and arguments that will be most convincing.
2. Say only the important things about the problem.
3. Keep it short.
4. Say what you have to say and then stop and listen.

C. Be willing to listen

1. He or she may be willing to give you what you want under certain conditions.
2. Ask politely about his/her reaction to what you say.
3. Address the problems he/she raises and show why your solution is better.
4. Try to think of reasons why he/she would want to help you get what you want.
5. Be willing to compromise if necessary.

D. Make Agreements

1. State what you are willing to do.
2. State your understanding of what the other person is willing to do.
3. Set a timeline for achieving these agreements.
4. After the meeting or phone call, send a letter confirming all agreements that were made and the timeline for achieving these agreements.

E. Document your efforts. Keep a record of all phone calls.

After completing your negotiation, or whatever approach you chose, you are ready for the last step, evaluation. This is very important so you can know what went right and what went wrong, and use your experience for your next advocacy effort.

PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHEET

ISSUE/PROBLEM:

STATEMENT OF FACTS

WHAT HAPPENED?

WHO IS INVOLVED?

WHERE DID IT HAPPEN?

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?
