

Citizen Advocacy Futures

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The central purpose of citizen advocacy is to defend the interests of devalued people by the establishment and maintenance of one-to-one, freely given relationships with valued members of the community. Most commonly, the devalued people are people with intellectual disabilities whose needs are not being met.

The current *model* of citizen advocacy is that these relationships are created and supported through the work of paid citizen advocacy staff working in independent programs according to an agreed set of principles such as advocate independence, loyalty to protégés, and program independence.

Are there alternative models for citizen advocacy that would serve its central purpose just as well as the current model? If so, exploring such models is a vital part of protecting citizen advocacy in the long term.

In looking at alternative models, I am concerned with different ways to create and maintain one-to-one, freely given relationships that defend the interests of devalued people. This does not mean paid advocacy or systems advocacy. It means citizen advocacy relationships but possibly created and maintained in different ways than by the standard model.

In the following sections, I discuss what is necessary for a society to support devalued people, models for supporting citizen advocacy programs, citizen advocacy as a social movement, and a non-program model of citizen advocacy, concluding with a few suggestions.

Supporting devalued people

For a society to support people with intellectual disabilities, at least two factors are necessary: solidarity and adequate wealth.

Solidarity is the social commitment to others that leads to members of a group being supported by others in the group. Devaluation is a sign of exclusion: others exclude the devalued person from the scope of mutual esteem and support. This exclusion is usually partial, in that a degree of support is provided part of the time. If exclusion is total, the person will likely die.

In traditional, non-industrial societies, there can be a high level of solidarity. Solidarity is also strong in close-knit groups such as religious or political sects. Historically, though, people with intellectual disabilities are often excluded from the circle of solidarity even in such communities.

The second essential factor is adequate wealth. In some nomadic societies, esteemed elders may be left to die if they become incapacitated, because the group has insufficient resources to support them. In societies with greater material wealth, care of people with disabilities is less constrained by resource limitations. (However, limited resources sometimes may be used as an *excuse* for inadequate care.)

There is a tendency for solidarity to decline as wealth increases. This is most marked in those capitalist societies where individualism is prominent. Not only is there little solidarity with co-workers or neighbors, but even family allegiance is greatly reduced. As community ties and mutual aid decline, governments may provide services and some individuals are left unsupported.

In a wealthy, high-solidarity community, members might find it natural to forge relationships with other members, including those with disabilities. In the absence of such high solidarity, citizen advocacy offers a means of building relationships that benefit those who are most devalued. These links between

individuals would be unlikely to occur otherwise. Citizen advocacy thus can be understood as a way of building solidarity, for those who need it most, in a sufficiently wealthy society.

Models of support

Within a wealthy, medium-solidarity society, how can support be provided to those who need it? Three types of support system are:

1. Welfare state
2. Corporate philanthropy
3. Mutual aid.

No society exclusively uses a single type of support system, but these types are useful for discussion.

In the welfare state, government-funded agencies provide support. Examples are unemployment payments, old age pensions and disability services. European countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands provide good examples of welfare state systems. In such countries there is a high level of citizen support for government provision of services.

Corporate philanthropy is gift-giving by corporations and rich individuals, either directly to those in need or to organizations providing services. This approach is most developed in the US, where the government is distrusted much more than in Western Europe.

Mutual aid is unpaid service. It includes visits to neighbors in need, volunteer work at charities, blood donations and unsolicited gifts (Titmuss, 1970). Mutual aid is found in all societies. It is the dominant support system only in high-solidarity, less materially wealthy societies.

Actual societies have a mixture of these support systems, which interact with each other. For example, governments often fund private charities, which also depend on volunteers. Even the most bureaucratized government department

or ruthless corporation depends on workers helping each other to make things happen.

In principle, a well-funded and well-supported welfare state can provide excellent service to those in need. In practice, there are always inadequacies, not to mention corrupt or abusive practices. Similarly, corporate philanthropy seldom measures up to its promise.

Citizen advocacy draws on and stimulates mutual aid. This is most important where state welfare and corporate philanthropy are inadequate or worse. The important point here is that citizen advocacy has the greatest affinity to a society based on mutual aid.

Citizen advocacy program support

Each type of support system has a characteristic way of supporting citizen advocacy.

1. Welfare state: programs funded entirely by government bodies.
2. Corporate philanthropy: programs funded by several corporations or wealthy individuals.
3. Mutual aid: citizen advocacy work—key office activities—done by volunteers.

In the welfare state model, government treats citizen advocacy as a type of human service: an advocacy service. This is the situation in Australia. Given that citizen advocacy in practice is very different from the human service approach, there is a risk that citizen advocacy programs will move towards direct service, which indeed has occurred in a number of cases.

In the corporate philanthropy model, funding of citizen advocacy programs is a type of private welfare. Given that the level of corporate donations varies with the state of the economy and the personal interests of top executives, it can require considerable effort to ensure adequate funding, with the consequent risk of becoming oriented to fundraising. US citizen advocacy

programs are nearest to this model, though many of them also receive substantial government funding.

Citizen advocacy was set up in the US and reflects its tradition of generous corporate philanthropy (compared to other countries, at least) and limited welfare state. The funding model most highly rated by CAPE thus reflects the US context.

In a mutual aid model based on citizen advocacy programs, volunteers would carry out the key office activities. The staff in a program would be unpaid for this work but in most other respects the operation would run like other citizen advocacy programs.

Though there are no programs perfectly fitting this description, elements of it can be found. For example, some steering committees—unable to attract funding—have gone ahead to establish relationships. Occasionally board members do the work of coordinators, without pay. Finally, many coordinators do far more work than they are paid for. This altruistic extra work could be considered to be a form of mutual aid.

(Employees are willing to accept lower pay when the work is socially responsible (Frank 1996).)

Finally, some relationships are established “naturally,” without citizen advocacy programs being involved. These are the sorts of relationships that are sometimes

“blessed” (endorsed and supported) by citizen advocacy programs, though undoubtedly most such naturally occurring relationships remain unknown to people in citizen advocacy.

What social changes could make mutual aid a greater prospect? One possibility is a guaranteed annual income (Murray, 1997). This would replace a range of welfare schemes and ideally would provide a foundation for everyone to make a contribution to society. If introduced, it would provide an ideal basis for citizen advocacy

programs, since all that would be required would be committed individuals willing to work at the guaranteed income, plus some fundraising for operating expenses and salary supplementation if needed. A guaranteed annual income would provide the foundation for a state-based gift economy.

However, the trend in the past couple of decades has been contrary to a guaranteed annual income or other welfare state supports and instead towards a commercial, competitive ethos. This has proceeded the furthest in the US where withdrawal of welfare services is linked to homelessness, poverty and imprisonment.

Citizen advocacy as a social movement

Citizen advocacy is both a social movement and a social institution. As a movement, it mobilizes adherents to bring about changes in social structures, practices and beliefs. Advocate-protégé relationships can be considered to be the front line in a movement to change the way people relate to each other. As an institution, citizen advocacy programs follow formal plans to obtain clear outcomes, as well as obtaining resources (especially funding) from the society. The curious feature of citizen advocacy as an institution is that it was established to redress failures of institutions, namely of human services.

As a social movement, citizen advocacy is highly structured compared to others such as environmental, feminist, peace, antiracist and human rights movements. These movements are diverse and changing and contain strongly conflicting directions and belief systems. For example, some environmentalists focus on influencing government policy while others use direct action against practices harmful to the environment. Some groups such as Greenpeace have a centralized decision-making structure whereas others such as Friends of the Earth allow

local groups great autonomy.

By comparison, the citizen advocacy model is quite formalized and directive. This is both a strength and a weakness. One of the dangers for loosely structured movements is cooption: members of the movement, especially leaders, compromise their principles in order to gain influence. When environmental groups accept government funding, they often become reluctant to criticize the government. Citizen advocacy's clearly specified principles provide protection against cooption.

On the other hand, citizen advocacy's organizational structure is decentralized. There is no central body to ensure adherence to principles. Local programs can fall away from good practice without serious penalty, except for reduced performance in creating and maintaining good relationships.

For social movements, falling away from principles is a common weakness. For example, churches set up on Christian principles later became establishments serving the rich and failing to speak out about injustice. Social democratic political parties over time have ended up managing capitalism just like their opponents. The Indian government claims to support Gandhian principles but actually goes in an opposite direction.

Social movements have varied ways of adapting to changed circumstances. The loosely structured movements, such the environmental and feminist movements, adapt through the waxing and waning of different groups and campaigns. As energy and interest shifts, change occurs without any central direction. This gives great flexibility but leaves the movement susceptible to outside pressures such as government policy and media attention.

For other social movements, change occurs more

through revisions to doctrine made by respected leaders. Examples are some churches, some political parties, and the sarvodaya movement under Gandhi and his immediate successors. This would be the pattern for citizen advocacy if, for example, a revised CAPE manual is produced and endorsed by key individuals.

Many social movement organizations use high-level planning or coordination as a means of combining direction and flexibility. Amnesty International is tightly organized structurally—it uses what might be called a franchise model for local group—but its top-level council allows the organization to stake out new campaigns and directions. Friends of the Earth, in contrast, is very loosely organized; its international meetings allow national groups to share insights and coordinate campaigns on a voluntary basis. Citizen advocacy, though, has no formal peak body or mechanism to develop directions, strategies or campaigns.

A non-program model of citizen advocacy

Wolfensberger and Peters (2002) say that it is important to have paid citizen advocacy staff. They argue that staff people who are unpaid would not do enough work and would not develop enough skills. They say it would be difficult to find unpaid people to do adequate advocate orientation, follow-along and support.

These arguments sound plausible but sit uncomfortably with the concept of citizen advocacy as unpaid advocacy. If unpaid citizens are capable of providing high-quality advocacy, then why shouldn't unpaid citizens be capable of carrying out the key office activities?

The sticking point seems to be the amount of time and skill development required. An advocate needs to find enough time to support just one person, namely their protégé. That can be a significant commitment but seldom averages

more than an hour per day. A staff person is expected to carry out the key office activities on behalf of many relationships, perhaps dozens, something difficult to imagine on less than a full-time basis.

But there is a way around this dilemma. It requires questioning the assumption that citizen advocacy is promoted only through programs. The alternative is to imagine citizen advocacy staff skills being developed and used independently of programs.

In many areas of life, it is now commonplace for citizens to rely less on professionals and instead to seek information and support for themselves. For example, people with breast cancer or AIDS seek out information, often via the Internet, and meet together to share insights and experiences. Collectively, they take over many of the functions previously provided by medical professionals. Similarly, it is possible to develop skills in a range of areas, from dancing to astronomy, through publicly available information sources and networks of amateur practitioners, sometimes supported by professionals. It is possible to develop sophisticated skills in an area of personal interest even while working full-time in a completely different occupation.

This same process could be applied to citizen advocacy. Committed individuals could, in their spare time, develop high-level skills in protégé recruitment, advocate recruitment and so forth. This would be more attractive if others were doing the same thing. For example, a group of individuals could seek to develop their skills so that each member of the group could create and support one or two relationships. The group might be friends living in a neighborhood but might also be geographically dispersed, held together by telephone or email contact.

In this way, citizen advocacy could spread much

more widely because funding is less of an obstacle. This has been the pattern for the most successful social movements, such as the feminist and environmental movements. There are some paid staff in these movements but most of the work is done by volunteers. When the movement becomes really successful, it becomes part of everyday consciousness.

Unpaid collaboration can produce results of the highest quality. Open source software is produced by volunteers, yet it compares favorably with commercial software.

There are several things necessary for citizen advocacy to expand in a non-program mode. Among them are:

- * Readily available and easily understood information about how to set up and support relationships.
- * A network of volunteer practitioners who provide mutual support for their efforts in carrying out citizen advocacy work.
- * A significant core of people committed to spreading the non-program mode of citizen advocacy.
- * Tools that can be used to judge the effectiveness of citizen advocacy initiatives.

CAPE is the tool for program-based citizen advocacy, but something different would be needed for citizen advocacy not based around programs. Relevant tools need to be developed.

A key reason why the open source movement is successful is because computer code is public and open to scrutiny. Perhaps key elements of citizen advocacy practice need to be open for public scrutiny, thereby encouraging best practice and exposing poor performance.

In my view, promotion of citizen advocacy

outside of program structures is the most promising way of fostering a large expansion of citizen advocacy. If this occurs, it is likely to *increase* the number of paid staff. But the new workers would be involved mostly in training citizens to carry out the tasks now done by citizen advocacy program staff. This would be analogous to the way that expansion of amateur music creates a demand for paid music teachers.

Suggestions

This sketchy overview of social systems and social movements is intended to suggest questions rather than provide answers. Citizen advocacy has done many good things but its future is uncertain. It is worth exploring options. Here are a few suggestions growing out the pointed raised here.

- * Options should be explored for promoting citizen advocacy with unpaid staff, possibly in a non-program mode. This would be a move towards the mutual aid model. One reason for exploring this option is to protect citizen advocacy from future cutbacks. It can also be argued that using unpaid staff is more consistent with citizen advocacy's emphasis on freely given relationships. But exploring this option should not be a pretext to cut financial support for current programs.
- * The citizen advocacy movement should create a capacity for strategic planning on national and international levels. One of the first tasks would be to come up with a model for strategic planning most suitable for citizen advocacy! Goals, methods, alliances and decision-making systems should all be considered. Involving the "grassroots" of the citizen advocacy movement is an important consideration in any planning process.
- * Alliances with sympathetic movements or

groups should be considered, beyond current links with the disability movement. Especially useful would be alliances with groups seeking to change the way society is "designed" such as cooperatives, appropriate technology advocates or conflict resolution groups. Citizen advocacy, in the broadest sense, is about creating a different pattern of relationships and support in society. By linking with others who are thinking about desirable ways for people to relate to each other, the citizen advocacy movement can both learn and provide inspiration.

References

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