

Reflections on Protégé Recruitment

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What do you think of the ways these protégés were recruited?

1. Chris, coordinator at Stellar Citizen Advocacy, was contacted by someone at a nearby institution for profoundly disabled children, who recommended that a boy there, Paul, would benefit from having an advocate. Even though this was a referral from a human service, Chris decided to recruit Paul since he obviously had major unmet needs for protection.
2. Chris gave a talk about citizen advocacy at a Rotary club. One of the people attending told Chris about an elderly woman, Helen, who might benefit from advocacy. Chris investigated and found that Helen was intellectually disabled, isolated, lonely and in need of friendship, and recruited her as a protégé. She fitted into Stellar's recruitment plan.
3. Chris spent time in street shelters for teenagers, came across a disabled teenage boy, Fred, who had been severely abused and neglected, and recruited him into Stellar's program.
4. Joan, a 40-year old woman, arrived at the program office one morning and said that she would like an advocate. She had been told about citizen advocacy by someone who knew a protégé. Chris did an assessment and decided that Joan, who was mildly intellectually disabled and had ongoing clashes with accommodation and employment services, would make a suitable protégé.

Which of these types of protégé recruitment is the best model for good citizen advocacy practice? Should any of them be ruled out entirely?

One way to seek answers is to look at section R21 of the CAPE manual, "Vision and creativity of protégé recruitment." It says that protégé recruitment should not be restricted to a narrow group of people and should not be passive in relying on human services. It gives points for

seeking protégés with a wide variety of needs, drawn from diverse settings (including some restrictive ones such as jails), found using both aggressive and creative outreach by staff, spelling out protégé needs in accordance with a written plan that is updated annually and reviewed by the board.

If Stellar Citizen Advocacy relied entirely on referrals from human services, such as in example 1, this would not rate highly according to R21, since protégés would probably have similar needs, they would not be found in different settings and no protégés would be recruited using "aggressive outreach by advocacy office staff." But what if only some protégés are recruited as a result of referrals? Is that still to be avoided?

There are actually many different types of referral or non-referral, including the following:

- Referral initiated by a human service.
- Referral initiated by a parent.
- Self-referral (referral initiated by a potential protégé).
- Referral initiated by a community member such as a friend, neighbour or observer of the potential protégé.
- Being told of someone as a result of directly approaching an organisation (school, hospital, refuge, etc.) and asking.
- Being told of someone as a result of sending out feelers via board members, current advocates, acquaintances, etc.
- Going out and seeing (no referral or prior knowledge).

Generally speaking, the recruitment methods at the bottom of this list are more "active" and those at the top are more "passive." The passive methods are more likely to lead to recruitment of protégés who reflect someone else's agenda. The danger is that people with certain sorts of needs will be overlooked. Being active thus ensures that people with all sorts of needs and from diverse settings will be recruited, at least if the protégé recruitment plan is sound.

Some of these referrals actually may be a result of active efforts by the program to gain visibility for citizen advocacy, for example guest speaker presentations, displays and networking in the community. In case 2, Chris was referred to a potential protégé as a result of giving a talk at Rotary. This could be considered a referral triggered by active program initiatives and thus a combination of passive and active recruitment.

Finding someone, with or without referral, is just one part of the recruitment process. Another crucial part is determining the person's needs and assessing whether they would be an appropriate protégé. If a human service provides the referral, it usually has already done the assessment. That leaves little for the program to do. On the other hand, in all the other types of referrals, including parent referral, self-referral and community referral, the program determines the person's needs. Therefore, referrals from those who are not directly involved in disability services are less likely to constrain the overall effectiveness of protégé recruitment.

So far we have looked at protégé recruitment according to CAPE standards. However, there is a risk in focusing on ratings since, by paying attention to specifics, the overall purpose of recruitment is missed. So let's step back a bit and ask how protégé recruitment fits into a wider picture.

The philosophy of citizen advocacy is to help devalued people, especially those with the greatest needs, through freely given advocacy by ordinary members of the community. If Chris knew a great deal about the needs of every single person in the community served by Stellar Citizen Advocacy, then it would be possible to select those who had the greatest needs. But of course this is impossible. Chris might know about the needs of dozens or even hundreds of people, but beyond this no individual can possibly proceed unassisted. Therefore, it's necessary to rely on others to find those in greatest need. It is this reliance on others that causes a potential problem.

Imagine a highly enlightened community in which everyone is familiar with social role valorisation and is concerned about devaluation. In this hypothetical community, in which citizen advocacy recruitment plans are published in the newspaper, referrals would be an excellent method of recruitment. This is not entirely fanciful. A human service worker who is familiar with SRV and a citizen advocacy program's recruitment plan could provide excellent referrals. Possible but not likely!

Actual communities are a long way from this enlightened community, so relying on others for referrals has pitfalls. The danger is that the agenda for the program may be set by people who are not attentive to those with greatest need. The potential problems are familiar. There is a temptation to concentrate on protégés who are appealing to potential advocates because they are the same age, can reciprocate or have pleasant personalities, so others are neglected. There is a risk that individuals who are out of the public eye, for example restricted by overprotective parents, will not be found. The greater the problems due to devaluation in the community and the lower the awareness of these problems, the more important it is for programs to stick to their own plans, to limit the number of referrals and to recruit protégés using energetic outreach.

The key thing is to pay attention to how protégés are recruited, with special scrutiny of all types of referrals. A reasonable short-term goal of a program is to aim to use more active forms of protégé recruitment. A long-term goal is to improve awareness in the community so that there are many eyes, ears and hearts in tune with citizen advocacy principles and assisting the program to achieve its highest goals.

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