

training

& advocacy

Collective Advocacy: Making the World Better for All Children

By Kristin Stenhagen



Parents of children with special needs often become well-practiced at speaking up to obtain services to ensure a child's educational, quality of life, and medical needs are met. Many eventually move from individual advocacy — worrying about the day-to-day issues affecting their child's care — to collective advocacy, which considers the bigger question of “How can I be sure these services will be available for all families?”

Parents of children with special needs are in a unique position to educate policymakers by sharing personal experiences. “The parents who came before us were responsible for so many of the programs that now benefit our children,” says Jane Anthony, an experienced advocate who worked to keep training centers a viable option, bring services to communities, and guarantee choice, oversight and quality throughout systems of care. “We must insure the future by continuing to push hard to get the necessary programs and funding. Advocacy is what parents can do to help make the world better for their child and children like them.”

Affecting change locally, statewide and nationally often involves contacting elected officials to share viewpoints on a particular issue. To find contact information for Virginia legislators, visit www.legis.state.va.us to find Senate and House of Delegates representatives. By typing your home address under the Quick Link - Who is My Legislator section, you can find contact, district, committee and personal information for legislators from your locality and a link to send an e-mail. This site also features information about the Virginia General Assembly, a bill tracking section, and advice for testifying and visiting the General Assembly Building (including accommodation information for those with disabilities). If you do not have computer access, another option is to call your county clerk's office. To find similar information on U.S. Senators and Members of the House of Representatives, visit www.congress.org.

Voices for Virginia's Children, a non-profit organization that advocates on behalf of all children and youth in Virginia, provides a variety of useful information that can help when planning advocacy efforts. Their new publication *Advocacy Guide: Best Practices in How to be a*

Citizen Advocate, has everything from educational information on the legislative process to practical advice for public testimony and working with elected officials and the media. Their “Basic Rules” for effective communication with policymakers focus on being:

Personal: Visits are better than letters/e-mails. Personal letters/e-mails are better than form letters. Use your visit or letter/e-mail to share your personal experience and concerns. If you're going to educate your legislator about issues within the behavioral health system, for example, use personal stories about your family's experiences with the system. When you meet with your legislator, ask him/her if s/he prefers e-mail, fax or postal mail. Be sure to communicate using the preferred method and refer to your district if you are a constituent.

Persistent: Building a relationship with your legislator takes time.

Patient: Many times it will take several years to pass legislation.

This free advocacy guide will be available on line (www.vakids.org) and in hard copy in January 2006. For more information or to obtain a copy contact Mary Dunne Stewart, policy analyst for Voices for Virginia's Children at 804-649-0184 or mds@vakids.org.

Many of the organizations listed in the Resources Section of this publication have specialists who are experienced with advocating on a legislative level. They may already be advocating for issues you are interested in and may be able to offer assistance or support. Anthony recommends getting active in local and statewide groups — which can make it easier for busy parents to track legislative happenings — and also to get familiar with national issues: “What gets 'fixed' at the top is less likely needed to be dealt with at the state level,” she says.

In general, working together creates a stronger voice for policies that ensure needs are met from birth through adult services. “Advocacy is key,” says Anthony. “Analysis of national data comparing states reveals that it's the willingness of citizens to advocate, rather than wealth, education or other factors that explains the difference among state levels of funding for necessary disability services.” ■