



ELSEVIER

Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 10 (1998) 89-90

JOURNAL OF  
*Vocational  
Rehabilitation*

## Editorial

# Advocacy and empowerment

Most families want their child to be independent and well functioning citizens in the community and also be sufficiently empowered as they grow older to be as independent as possible. Employment, post-secondary education, recreational outlets and community living arrangements are important aspirations to hold. Persons with disabilities need to be able to establish relationships with individuals who have disabilities as well as those who don't.

With all this hope comes many fears. Families and parents are concerned that their son or daughters will be taken advantage of by individuals in the community and by service providers. Their legitimate concerns also include what happens to the grown child when they, the parents, are no longer there to take care of them. Professionals cannot hope to dispel all fears that families and parents may experience, but we can encourage families and individuals to become advocates and self-advocates, respectively.

Individuals who are *self-determined* know how to advocate for themselves and how to make choices. They know how to pursue their goals and won't allow obstacles to stop them. Self-determined individuals have good advocacy skills. They try to seek change through the support of others, by speaking up and going against the status quo. Children who have acquired self-determination know how to fight for dignity and respect as well as the right to fail and succeed. Educators and parents must work together to make self-determination and choice capabilities a reality. Families must act as advocates and speak out for their child's rights. They do this by sug-

gesting, reminding, questioning, confirming and following up on issues.

Effective educators can encourage these same types of activities by educating other professionals in and out of the human service fields. They need to help others recognize that there are a range of strengths and weaknesses in all individuals. Professionals in the human service field must model advocacy in their everyday interactions with the family and the individual with the disability. The ways in which the professional interacts and handles situations with the student with the disability will dictate to others how they should interact with that person. If the teacher shows a lack of confidence and trust in the decision that the child makes, then others view the students as not being valued in decision making process.

Besides showing how to provide good advocacy skills, effective educators can encourage individuals with disabilities and his or her family to join support groups or other advocacy organizations. They should try to coach the individual and family into being good advocates.

Consumer-driven programs are characterized by four distinct features. The first feature is the program design. The mission of the organization should reflect the desire to be flexible enough in its approach that the needs of the individual are placed above program politics and bureaucracy. The second feature is that the program must set up mechanisms to assess what it is that the individual desires. The third feature considers the consumer's ability to make decisions. The program treats the individual as an equal partner in

the process and trust the individual to make informed decisions. Supports would be available for individuals who did not feel comfortable making decisions at that time. The supports would encourage consumer empowerment and assist the individual with feeling comfortable to address issues and make decisions. The last feature is the education component: consumer-driven programs attempt to educate others on values of individualized services by the kinds of services and resources they offer.

Although advocacy activities can take place on many levels, the ultimate outcome should be encouraging an attitude of acceptance of individual differences in our society. One hopes that through advocacy activities, all people in our society will judge each other on what they can do and lend assistance on the things they can't.

*Paul Wehman*