

## Dear Students of Social Work,

Advocacy is certainly one of the key values that social work adheres to. It is part and parcel of the mission of social work which is to right the wrong or address social injustice or to uplift the disadvantaged and work towards a level playing field. It is about working towards a society where one's opportunities to improve one's life is not determined by where you are born and your socio-economic status. Advocacy is very tied up with the social work role of being a change agent. There are generally two types of advocacy that social work is more involved in. One is case advocacy and the other is cause advocacy.



### Case Advocacy

Case advocacy is acting on behalf of a client (individual, family or group) in order to access needed resources, services, or to influence policy change. Case reports often play the role of case advocacy as social workers put up a case on behalf of a client to seek consideration for the circumstances of a client or to provide a form of affirmative action for the client. In advocating, it is a good practice to involve the client in the process. By doing so, there is client empowerment and assertiveness taught through modeling. As social workers, we generally work with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, and we advocate at the systems level, at the community level and at the individual and family level.

Advocacy falls along a continuum of involvement and commitment.

So when then does advocacy start to raise awareness and attract attention? It is usually when it is about social issues and resources. In these situations, the stakes go up and tensions and competition start. Equilibrium is shaken and attention rises. Advocacy by itself is neutral. It is the framing of the issue and the approach which oftentimes determine the outcome. In advocacy, context matters for constructive discussions and negotiation, be it of values, resources or timing.

Advocacy is a good skill to develop. It is a skill that we are trained in in the family, in the school and later in adult life at the workplace. Some may not call it advocacy but we know that it is about advancing a cause or a theory for change through raising awareness which may or may not result in action. It is a skill worth sharpening as a poor skill in advocacy can cause more harm than good. It can cause tensions that can have destructive repercussions.

One important conceptual misunderstanding about advocacy is that it has to be contentious and be about giving up of ideological positions. This would be a wrong starting point for any advocacy work. It is not about being in agreement and having everyone agree on being the same and agreeing to the same things. It does however involve listening and being respectful of differing and divergent views. It is about understanding an issue in great depth and deliberate thought.

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### Cause Advocacy



To some extent we can say that case advocacy is about a change for the individual and cause advocacy is about a change in the system and raising awareness of a cause. So when does case advocacy moves into cause advocacy? *It happens when the client has experiences that reveal the need for systems to change.* This happens when the larger system of organizational, community, and societal policies and practices have adversely affected the functioning of a group of clients. By advocating, practice then helps to inform policy.

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Cause advocacy may be, but is rarely about large systems change through class action lawsuits and successful policy reform. This can scare most people. However, case to cause advocacy is and should be in our daily social work practice with clients, influencing change in the agencies in which we work, the staff with whom we work, the record keeping we often lament, the training and professional development offered, and the forms we develop.

Let's take a seemingly mundane activity of comparing intake forms from various agencies. Begin to ask why you ask those intake questions and how they are posed to clients. When you start to do this, you will soon realize the assumptions that we have and how we operate our programs and organizations. We should always be checking our assumptions and reasons for them. When we have collected the data, we should analyze and distill the data. We do this so that the data can be used to advocate for improvements and changes such as advocating for additional staff at peak demand hours or developing an outreach program for the hours and times of the week when demand falls short. One set of data that is often used in advocating for services is the number and type of cases that are turned away or sometimes called "referrals denied data". The same data can be used to advocate for the community to play a role or for donors to fill the gap which is an unmet need.

Another current issue that intrigues many is the admission criteria for patients for social care or long term care. Admissions are often denied for patients who require additional equipment to support the care (eg lifting equipment, bed size and ancillary equipment). This could lead to a study about cases with such requirements that cannot find a placement. The study should also consider how struggling home health care can benefit from such a support and how to organize players and resources to meet this service gap. This too, is a form of progression from case to cause advocacy.

At the systems level, social workers must always keep in mind the impact of policy and policy changes on individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. Participating in these forums and platforms is strategic for social work practice to influence the framing of issues and approaches. We do participate but there is room to have a direct consumer representation on task forces, needs assessment projects, and policy evaluation. The current form of consumer participation when it happens is in the form of focus group discussions. Although social workers are increasingly represented in task forces and we may provide both the practitioner and consumer perspectives in such platforms, we must not come to accept that we are the consumer voice. We are not, and we may want to advocate for direct consumer representation in some instances.

Case advocacy is not solely the place for direct service staff and cause advocacy is not solely something that only the executive leadership, administrators and policy discussants can initiate. Social workers as change agents can be effective case and cause advocates. As social workers we can see the data, opportunities, questions, trends, and unmet needs. We evaluate and ask for evaluations and these reveal the impact of a policy or program on the client system. As social workers, we are educated and trained to have the skills and abilities to advocate and bring about improvements.

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