



Self-Advocacy

Rules and Tips



The old saying that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" is a true comment on complaining and human nature, but squeaks can be annoying, and, if too loud, may not be helpful. Nevertheless, firm advocacy is necessary when you are working with providers and other bureaucracies.

We suggest five general rules for addressing grievances, poor quality or inadequate services, and discrimination. Overall, you need to be persistent!

Rule #1: After clearly defining the problem, identify possible solutions that will resolve the problem effectively. In other words, be clear with what you want before you begin to advocate for yourself.

Advocacy Tip: How you say what you want is often as important as what you are complaining about. You should be firm but calm, and focus on getting a fair result. Try your best to leave your emotions out of the discussion.

It may help to recognize that the staff or agency point of view may be valid. Although you must hold your ground, starting out by acknowledging the difficulty the agency faces, will go a long way to softening up any reluctance to assist you. Also, if the issue is resolved, maintaining friendly terms with the staff can decrease any hard feelings by the people who will likely be carrying out the solution. Remember to be hard on the problem and soft on the person. You may have to deal with them in the future.

Rule #2: Prepare your case and know the facts. Talk to organizations and individuals who are familiar with the issues you are trying to address. Do your homework ahead of time to make sure you can get what you want. Be sure the solution you ask for is something the agency can do.

Advocacy Tip: Facts must be stated accurately to be taken seriously. Prepare something that expresses your concerns simply and clearly. Your facts need to be correct or you might lose credibility.

Always remember, **YOU are your own best advocate.** Be prepared by knowing what you are advocating for and what you will accept as a resolution.

Rule #3: Always start at the lowest level in the decision chain. This will allow you to learn how the other side is thinking and give you a chance to solve the problem at a higher level if the first approach does not work.

Advocacy Tip: If you get a "no" from someone at a lower level, there are higher authorities you can seek a "yes" from. However, if you go to the highest authority first and get a "no" you have limited your options for appeal. It also provides an answer to the almost certain question: "Have you talked to 'so and so' at the lower level?"

You should also check to see if the agency you are facing has a formal or informal appeal process, or in some cases, you may want to file a complaint. You may request a copy of the appeal or complaint process before proceeding with your complaint.

Rule #4: Be prepared to ask for help.

Advocacy Tip: There is always the danger that going outside an agency may cause bad feelings. Nevertheless, in an appropriate situation, when nothing else appears to work, outside pressure might turn up the heat and produce a solution. It is important to understand the pros and cons of using outside pressure.

Rule #5: If you should "lose" your fight, "win" by learning how to advocate better.

Advocacy Tip: The appeal of last resort is, of course, the courts. Thus a lawsuit is usually a possibility if the complaint has merit and a violation of state or federal law has occurred. But lawsuits are very expensive, slow, and usually do not build good feelings among the parties. Sometimes they do not even result in the desired outcome.

Short of a lawsuit, you should have an alternative plan in mind should the first advocacy effort fail. This is important even if it means changing your demands. Compromise may be the only way you can get some of what you want, and some good will might be recovered as well.



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