



INFOGUIDE

January 2009

Self-Advocacy

Disclaimer: This material is prepared by the Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office with the intention that it provide general information in summary form on legal and advocacy topics which is current when first published. The contents do not constitute legal advice or recommendations and should not be relied upon as such. Appropriate legal advice should be obtained in actual situations. While every care has been taken in the preparation of this material, the Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions in the material, including those caused by negligence. The Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office is not responsible for the accuracy of information contained on other websites accessed by links from this website.

What is self-advocacy?

- Self-advocacy is advocacy that you do to achieve a specific goal or outcome for yourself. Self-advocacy is about speaking and negotiating for yourself, making your own informed decisions and knowing how you would like a problem to be resolved. Self-advocacy is also about empowerment, recovery and standing up for your rights. You may also want to get help from an independent advocate, or another person of your choice who can provide information, resources, or support you as you advocate for yourself.

Why is self-advocacy important?

- Self-advocacy is important because it helps you solve your issues in the way that you would like them resolved and it allows you to take ownership of the issue. Self-advocacy can help you learn new skills, improve the skills you already have and work together with others to improve your situation. Self-advocacy also heightens accountability and breaks the cycle of dependence on others to resolve issues for you. By making a complaint, you are giving the other person an opportunity to review existing practices, policies and procedures and make sure that these are respectful of your rights and entitlements. Self-advocacy can lead to positive change.

How do I know what my advocacy style is?

- Before you begin to self-advocate, you need to assess your advocacy style. Advocacy styles are based on experience, personality and the outcome you are seeking. For example, some people like to avoid conflict while others are more assertive.
- There is no “perfect advocacy style” that will guarantee success as each situation is different. You will need to be flexible and use a range of skills while adapting to the situation. You will find a style that is comfortable for you, one which complements your personality and one that allows you to draw on previous experiences. It may take some time before you find your comfort zone and define your advocacy style. It is important to remember to treat others like you would want to be treated – with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Attitude plays a big part in self-advocacy and having the “right” attitude is important. If you are polite, respectful, and reasonable and show that you want to work together to resolve the issue you are more likely to be successful.

Should I tell the other person if I have special needs that make it more difficult to communicate?

- Yes. If you have special needs that may make communication more difficult or challenging, you might want to let the person you are working with know. This will allow them to work with you to accommodate your needs. For example, some people have difficulty hearing and would prefer to meet in person instead of speaking on the phone. Others might want everything in writing or extra time after a meeting to review the information. Whatever your needs are, it is best to let people know as early as possible in the process so that it doesn't become a barrier later in the process.
- If your first language is not English, you may also want to involve an interpreter so that you have the best opportunity possible to communicate the issue and the outcome you are expecting.

Can self-advocacy be stressful or intimidating?

- Yes. Being your own advocate can be stressful because there will be many demands placed on you, quick decisions may be necessary or you may find that the other party has access to more resources than you do. You may also feel alone, afraid of failing or not as powerful as the other person and that could make you feel overwhelmed. For example, the other party may be represented by legal counsel, have more money to research issues or simply have more experience resolving problems than you. Don't let this intimidate you or make you abandon your issue. If what you expect to happen is reasonable and you have set achievable goals, it may be less stressful for

you. But, know when you have reached your limit and then seek out support and assistance. It is also best to know in advance who you will go to for help. Choose a person that you respect and trust, and can talk to freely about your issue.

What are the steps to successful self-advocacy?

- Successful self-advocacy involves planning, preparation, research and knowing when to reach out for support. It also involves knowing how your rights were violated and what you would like to achieve in resolving your issue. To help you plan a self-advocacy strategy, consider the following basic steps:
 1. Define or explain the problem – be clear, to the point and have all the facts
 2. Develop an action plan – know where to begin and be prepared with information
 3. Carry out the action plan – don't be afraid to reassess or modify the plan as you go
 4. Evaluate the results – what worked and what didn't work? – this will help you the next time you self-advocate

To learn more about developing a self-advocacy action plan check out the PPAO InfoGuide “Four Steps to Successful Self-Advocacy.”

What do I do if my issue isn't resolved?

- If your issue isn't resolved, you can consider escalating it to a higher level. Before escalating the complaint, you might want to step back and evaluate why the issue wasn't resolved. Sometimes you need to take a new approach or involve others who might have an interest in the outcome of your issue in your action plan. Often discussing options, approaches and consequences with an independent advocate is helpful in evaluating your strategy and action plan.
- Escalating the issue can be a very powerful way to bring attention to your issue but you want to be careful not to escalate an issue too soon or too high as it could undermine your efforts. Self-advocacy often works best if you start working with the person who made the original decision and then escalating it upwards until it is resolved. If you start at the top and that person makes a decision that is not in your favour then you have nowhere else to go. However, if you start with the person closest to the issue, you probably have several other people you can talk to about your issue before it gets to the final decision maker.

- In some cases, if your complaint is about the provincial government, you may be able to contact the Ombudsman (416-586-3300 in Toronto or 1-800-263-1830 elsewhere in Ontario). If the issue involves an allegation of discrimination or harassment, you may want to contact the Ontario Human Rights Commission (416-326-9511 in Toronto or 1-800-387-9080 elsewhere in Ontario). If you are unsure of where or how to escalate your complaint, you may want to talk to the PPAO about next steps.

Helpful Tips

- Clearly state the issue
- Know what you want
- Keep records and document the process
- Educate yourself and others about the issue
- Research your topic and know your rights
- Know the options for resolution
- Have a back-up plan
- Treat others like you would like to be treated
- Provide feedback to those who worked with you to resolve the issue
- Don't be afraid to say "thank you"

Questions?

Contact your local PPAO Patient Advocate or Rights Adviser or contact the Central Office at 1-800-578-2343. Visit our website at www.ppao.gov.on.ca for information about patients' rights in Ontario.