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Connecting Clients to Power:

How Service Providers Can Mobilize Clients for Advocacy

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Note: This handbook should come with a CD that includes an educational presentation, a presentation on why service providers should engage client volunteers, and an electronic copy of this handbook.

Section 1: Introduction to Volunteer Advocacy

Preface

Thank you for picking up a copy of this handbook. It is meant to lead you through the process of starting up a group of advocates and engaging clients in advocacy.

The handbook has six sections. The first section explains why you should create a volunteer committee, and shows some of the first steps you'll take once you've decided to create a committee. Next, there's a conceptual discussion of the facilitation and organizing techniques that make for successful meetings. Then, it lays out some ideas for developing your committee, and the next section explains what happened at the first three meetings of the Citizen's Advocacy Network (CAN) at Oregon Food Bank, giving you concrete examples of what could happen at your first few meetings. The final section offers some suggestions for how to mobilize and engage your group in several types of advocacy.

This handbook is based mostly on the experiences I working with the CAN at Oregon Food Bank. Other information comes from interviews with experienced advocates at Oregon Food Bank and other Oregon anti-poverty organizations. Local and national anti-poverty advocates also contributed

advocacy-related materials that have been included in the handbook.

The contribution this handbook makes is mostly in how to get a group started. Community or group-based advocacy is a complex, well-studied subject. Other tutorials explain the topics covered in this handbook in greater detail and scope. Each section includes extra materials and references to these helpful resources.

Finally, advocacy is the right thing to do, and it's good for your organization. If you make a long-term commitment to volunteer advocacy, follow through with time and effort, and have some successes, you will create a cohesive group of volunteer advocates. Advocates can lobby for public policies that will reduce demand for your services, attract attention to your organization from potential donors and volunteers, and fulfill your mission as an anti-poverty organization.

And remember that advocacy is fun and exciting. Enjoy it!

Why volunteer advocacy?

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is the act of speaking up on someone's behalf. Almost everyone who provides services has done some advocacy. If you've ever helped someone acquire governmental benefits, or helped them find a service from a different non-profit, you've been someone's advocate.

What is volunteer advocacy?

Fundamentally, what we'll call volunteer advocacy is defined by *who* is doing it: volunteers. For this handbook, we'll be discussing volunteer advocates who have experienced or are experiencing poverty, and who work in a group that's supported (or led) by a nonprofit service provider. And of course, we'll be talking about doing anti-poverty advocacy.

Why should non-profits engage volunteers in advocacy?

A volunteer advocacy committee can bring a number of assets to your organization and its advocacy efforts.

Volunteers know what you don't.

You, important stakeholders, and the public can learn from volunteers. Your volunteers may understand poverty in a personal, comprehensive way. They may know the emotional dimensions of poverty. They may

see the barriers that both cause people to become and remain poor. They'll have ideas on how to address these barriers. They can inform people about aspects of poverty that may be overlooked or misunderstood.

Volunteers do what you need.

Because of their knowledge and experience,

low-income volunteer advocates have a unique power to change minds. In the wealthiest nation on earth, many people are skeptical that Americans really do experience hunger and poverty. Unpaid, low-income volunteers are often perceived as impartial and possessing of genuine knowledge. They can prove

"If you have ever spoken up on behalf of someone you cared about, then you have been an advocate. It's that simple."

-Nancy Amidei, [So You Want to Make a Difference: Advocacy is the Key!](#)

that there is a problem by showing up and speaking out. They have the **credibility** that conventional ways of demonstrating a problem may lack.

Volunteers also have the power **to reach people on an emotional level.**

Volunteers can be adept at expressing the emotional impact of a policy decision. They can appeal to a politician's conscience. They can make them feel guilty about making harmful decisions. These appeals have the power to change minds.

Plus, low-income volunteers have **the power to get attention.** The media often puts out stories about poverty that volunteer advocates can contribute to. Media pieces that include these stories can bring lots of attention to an anti-poverty issue and your organization.

Finally, there is **power in numbers.** Volunteers are voters, and most politicians

want to treat their constituents with respect and listen to what they have to say. And volunteer advocates increase an organization's capacity to advocate. You'll have more advocates, and you may be able to take on more issues with an eye towards cost-efficiency.

It's the right thing to do.

Clients of service providers ought to be empowered to advocate for themselves. Low-income clients are citizens, and they have a right to speak out. But too often, low-income people do not have a forum through which they can make an impact on powerful people. Anti-poverty nonprofits, as one of the few organizations in a position to help, should feel obligated to help low-income clients get a seat at the table.

Doing advocacy can also have a positive impact on a volunteer. It can counteract the feelings of hopelessness and disenfranchisement that weigh on many low-income people. A successful advocate feels responsible for making the world a better place, which can renew hope and a sense of agency.

And real change in low-income communities is possible when communal bonds are restored. Empowerment brings people together, gives people more control over their lives, and can create a sense of shared interest and identity. People need these things if their community is to prosper.

A CAN member's experience: In my search to find something worthwhile to do with my life, I came across an old friend, Julie Massa, the co-facilitator of the CAN, and with her guidance I found out that possibly my experiences could help others. I am disabled, I have been homeless, I relied on food stamps at times, I have faced the possible loss of my home, and I have fought for my rights for programs such as weatherization for my home and help paying my utilities. I have been caught in the trap of "payday loans." It is living through the stress of survival that I realized that there are many people who cannot, or are not able to speak out and reach out for help.

It was scary, but I testified at a January hearing of the Oregon House Subcommittee on Payday Loans, and I believe they heard what I had to say, and I believe that my statements made an impression. It is by hearing of personal experiences that elected officials learn the realities of struggles, and then try to change the laws that do not work. I learned that if I speak from my heart that the words touch people who can do something about the issues.

CAN is a wonderful, diverse group of people, who together can create changes in the system by getting the message across that we will fight for our rights and fight for those who are not able to fight for their rights. We each have something to offer, and by meeting and advocating together we can initiate progress and equality.

Nancy Willhite, CAN member. February 3rd, 2006.