



Advocates

Caring Partners. Creative Solutions. Better Lives.

The Advocates Way

Because all of us are unique individuals with great potential for health, well-being and fulfillment.



The Advocates Way: A Living Philosophy

In September of 2006 a group of people from all parts of Advocates came together to set down a statement of our values and how we work. The group included people who receive Advocates services, as well as those who provide them. We had two main goals.

The first was to teach new staff how we work and why we work in the ways that we do. Secondly, and more importantly, we wanted to empower the individuals who receive Advocates services to hold all staff accountable to these values. We see this as a living philosophy that will grow and change over time, and that reflects who we are today, as well as who we aspire to become. We call this philosophy The Advocates Way.

Part I: Foundations

Central Ideas

At Advocates, our work is based on our relationships – relationships with the people we support, their families, others with whom we interact, and with each other. We want all of our relationships to be authentic, respectful and caring. Our motto is “First, we listen.” We start by listening, as deeply and with as much empathy as we can, to understand the person from their own point of view, and in a way that honors the person’s culture, values, and preferences. We appreciate the person’s strengths, hopes and the validity of their lived experience. When we provide services to people, who have often not been listened to or respected in the past, we try especially hard to treat the person exactly as the person wants to be treated.

If circumstances prevent us from treating the person exactly as the person prefers – which does occur at times in our work – we always treat the person with deep respect. We still try to give the person as many options and choices as possible. In these circumstances, we may be guided by the idea that we try to provide the same care to the person as we’d want for ourselves, or for someone we deeply love.

To help us remember these ideas, we wrote The Advocates Way. The Advocates Way is based on the idea that all of us are unique individuals with great potential for good health, well-being, and fulfillment.

Overcoming Obstacles and Realizing Dreams

Pretty much all of us have had to overcome challenges to have the life that we want. But people with developmental, mental health, or physical challenges can also face especially hard barriers. These can be physical barriers, like not having curb cuts, or emotional barriers, such as prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

Because community barriers are sometimes the greatest obstacles to a fulfilling life, we believe in inspiring our communities to make whatever changes are needed to be open and accessible to everyone.

Even if a person faces challenges, and even if the person has had these challenges a long time, we believe that every person is capable of change, growth, and a good life. Everyone needs the right supports, a respect for their rights, and a chance to contribute their own efforts.

Part II: Relationships

Listen Deeply

We believe that the voice of the person we support is the most crucial ingredient in the success of our work.

We have to be able to understand the person's own point of view, even when a person has difficulty expressing her or his perspective, or communicates in ways other than language.

We work to understand with both an open heart and an open mind. We want to appreciate the uniqueness of the other person, to enjoy the experience of getting to know that person, and to be open to being changed by them.

It is important that we connect to what people do not say, as well what they do say. We try to feel the music, as well as understand the words, when we engage with others. When people may have experienced disempowerment, prejudice, stigma, or other oppression, we pay close attention for signs of hope, preferences, wishes, or fears that may be felt but not spoken.

Our role is to engage with people actively and attentively. We want to include the people we support when we design new programs and when we review our work. The experience of the people who use our services is our measure for success.

A Powerful Union

We strive to build relationships in which the person we support feels understood, is respected as an expert about her or his own life, and takes a leading role in all decision-making and planning that could affect that person's life.

We see the person we serve as a guide whose experience and point of view are unique and essential to our mutual success. When a person's expertise about her or his own life is combined with our knowledge and resources in an atmosphere of hope, collaboration, and mutual respect, truly wonderful things can happen. We encourage and support people to take charge of their own lives. We do this even when a person's choices involve an element of risk that may cause us concern. We believe that all experiences—successes and challenges alike—can result in growth, learning, and change.

Finding and Celebrating Strengths

When we get to know a person, we focus on the person's many strengths, relationships, talents, accomplishments, skills, and other abilities.

We also recognize the potential a person has for living a life of his or her own choice. By doing so, we try not to allow our own ideas to limit the potential of the people we support.

Every Interaction Is an Opportunity of Respect

It is essential that every member of our Advocates community communicates our commitment to partnership with the people we support, their guardians (if they have one), and their friends and family. We want to express the utmost respect for all of the people we meet, every time and in every place.

It is the obligation of all who belong to our community to be thoughtful and careful in how we act and how we speak, to show respect for the person we support, and to pay attention to the person's preferences whenever possible.

Partnership also implies openness, warmth, flexibility, and friendliness. We want to help people grow and to realize their dreams. People often feel they can grow if they feel encouragement and acceptance. When people feel safe enough to take risks, they can learn from their mistakes and try new things. We want to encourage people to speak out and to say what's important to them.

Respect for Each Other as Co-workers and in Our Communities

We want to treat each other with the same open-mindedness and open-heartedness that we extend to the people we support.

Similarly, we strive to listen deeply to each other and to find ways of partnering and collaborating based on mutual respect.

We extend this same respect and collaborative spirit to the communities in which we live and work.

We All Desire a Fulfilling Life

All members of the human family want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. We all want to develop our best qualities. We all want the good experiences of loving, working, and playing. When we support a person, we always want to recognize and celebrate each person's abilities. These could include the person's ability to love and work, or their courage and determination. Other good qualities could include the person's compassion, generosity, and integrity—among many others. We want to encourage the people we support—and each other—to enjoy the good things available in life, including work, friendship, romance, laughter, and joy.

Part III: Challenges

Building Trust

Unfortunately, many people we support have been rejected by society, had their rights violated, and have not been treated fairly by people in positions of power. For that reason, we have to build a relationship with the people we support as true partners and experts in their own lives.

We believe that all of us who provide Advocates services must approach our work with a profound sense of compassion and always remember how limited our knowledge may be. We must keep in mind that no one, no matter how experienced, wise, or well-meaning, can fully understand another person's experience. We must recognize that the best understanding is gained through empathy,

which means trying to know what it actually feels like to be that other person. We must always try to look past our own ideas about the other person, to see the real other person with whom we are in a relationship. We have to be willing to face up to mistakes and know how to sincerely apologize.

Using Power Honestly, Wisely and Respectfully

Sometimes we treat people in ways they don't like or want, but we feel we have to act for their well-being or safety. For example, in a psychiatric crisis, we may commit a person to a hospital against his or her will. Or, we may support a person under guardianship who is forced to take medications that they do not want to take, or we may place a person in housing not of her or his own choosing.

In situations like these, we must be open about the loss of the person's rights while trying to honor the person's dignity. We must keep in mind that any idea, request, or choice the person expresses is worthy of respect, even when we do not agree, or cannot do as the person wishes. We must support her or him to make as many real choices as possible.

Sometimes a person we serve appears to be having great difficulty and we worry that the person may be in danger unless we do something. We must be very careful in these instances to balance our respect for the person's human rights and dignity with a commitment to remain involved and to fulfill our professional and ethical obligations. We want to have dialogue about our concerns with the person we support. In these difficult situations, we seek support and consultation for ourselves. We try to find a balance between maintaining respect for the person's rights, but not neglecting the person's well-being.

Sometimes a person's guardian restricts the person's freedoms or doesn't allow the person to make her or his own choices. Sometimes, we may also underestimate a person's abilities and restrict them. We must make every effort to look at these situations through the person's own eyes.

It is crucial that we be as honest and clear as possible that in these situations, staff members, guardians and other authorities have much more power than the person receiving support. We should do whatever we can to prevent harm from this difference in power.

Respectful Language

We understand that we need to be careful about how we speak about the people we support and how we speak to people directly. We want to use words that convey respect.

We need to remember that language can be hurtful. It can be demeaning and disempowering, even when the person who is speaking doesn't intend to be hurtful. Slang terms for people or groups* and clinical terms can be deeply hurtful, especially in the fields of mental health and developmental services.

We do not speak about individuals as if they were defined by their condition or diagnosis.

We use person-first language. This means that we speak of a “person with schizophrenia,” or “a person with developmental challenges” or “a person with substance use issues,” for example.

In the same spirit, we believe that every person—whether a person receiving services, a staff person, a family member, or a member of the community—should be treated with respect and dignity. We reject racist slurs or other terms or actions used to demean or devalue anyone on the basis of a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disability, or personal characteristics/qualities. When such abuse occurs, we support the person experiencing the abuse. We also make every effort to help the person who is behaving abusively to understand the importance of mutual respect in our community.

* We have deliberately refrained from giving examples of these hurtful terms in this document. For a full discussion of this topic, including examples of these terms as related to mental health practice, see The Intentional Care Standards.

Understanding the Whole Person

We appreciate that everybody is a complicated person, with hopes and dreams. When a person is facing a challenge, we try to understand his or her situation from at least four points of view:

1. First, we think about a person from a social/cultural point of view. This means we think about that person and all the important relationships that the person is in. It also includes the person's culture and the community the person lives in. We also think about relationships with family members, friends, supports, and other community members. Often, when a person is having

problems, it can be helpful to think about what's going on in these relationships. Sometimes this helps us understand the problem—like if a person is in an abusive relationship, or is experiencing stigma or other oppression. Sometimes thinking about relationships helps us understand what would be most helpful. When this is the case, a person may need support and advocacy to deal with these problems.

2. A second way of looking at people involves a biological point of view. This means thinking about how a person's body and health might be involved in the current problem. Sometimes human problems can be at least partially understood as biological, for which medical treatments and lifestyle changes are sometimes helpful options.
3. The third point of view from which we try to understand people is psychological. This means that sometimes problems from the past make a person suffer if they are not dealt with. An example might be someone who was badly hurt as a child, or someone whose beloved family member died and they were not able to grieve. There are many sorts of trauma that leave emotional scars. These are the sorts of problems that sometimes can be helped with counseling and understanding, from both professionals, peers, and other supports.
4. Finally, we approach people from a spiritual point of view. We know that we all need to find meaning in our lives, and that sometimes people have difficulty because of issues in their spiritual lives. When that happens, it is sometimes helpful to reconnect with a spiritual or religious community, or to find other spiritual resources.

When we think about a person this way, we are trying to understand the whole person. When we share our ideas about these four points of view with the person we support, it often helps us find a deep understanding of who the person is, what the best options are, and how we might best work together. We also have to be careful not to put too much emphasis on any one model of understanding a person—after all, everyone is a complicated human being.

Part IV: The Promise

Looking Inward

Realistically, we know that we often fail to live up to this Advocates Way philosophy. All of us often fall short of the mark. We do not always treat the people we support as equals in every regard. We do not always use our power wisely or carefully; we sometimes use our power in relationship in a way that actually hurts the person we are here to support.

We have to remember, too, that the staff of Advocates often face great difficulties in doing their work. Staff have a great burden of paperwork, not enough resources, competing needs, low pay for their hard work, and sometimes anger from the community. Advocates staff need and deserve support and encouragement to practice The Advocates Way, day in and day out.

Miles to Go...

We promise to be open in every interaction and to consider how we may be missing the mark. We promise to behave in a way that is consistent with this Advocates Way philosophy. We promise to remain open, always, to being taught by, and changed by, the people we support.

It is our great hope that this Advocates Way philosophy will grow and change as Advocates grows and changes.



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