

Dual Diagnosis: Mental Health and Intellectual/Developmental Disability

Tips for Becoming an Advocate

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You may wish to become involved as an advocate. Advocates take advantage of every opportunity available to them to work for a cause in which they firmly believe. In the process of advocating on behalf of people with dual disorders, you can help improve the quality of life and standard of services for those who are depending on your continued strong support. The unique and personal perspective that individuals and families can offer as advocates is truly meaningful, in terms of ongoing and sustainable service, system and policy reforms. Every contribution you make, no matter how limited or extensive in scope, can have a positive impact on your relative and others with similar challenges throughout the state of New Jersey.

Here are some things you can do to help advocate on behalf of people with dual disorders.

1. **Familiarize yourself with the current system of crisis intervention services.**

Research all options: available resources, outreach services, state agency programs, and state legislative reform packages.

2. **Begin writing letters.**

Draft a letter describing your personal experience dealing with the present crisis service system:

- Include a summary of your family's crisis experience and highlight any service gaps.
- If you have suggestions about how to improve the current crisis service system, include them.
- It is important for the letter to be written in an informative, courteous, and constructive manner. Abusive language or other expressions of anger may not be taken as seriously as constructive criticism aimed at improving the current system of care.
- This letter can be sent to any number of individuals including the Office of the Governor, State Government agency officials at the NJ Department of Human Services (DHS), NJ Department of Children and Families (DCF), and the Ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families.
- A copy of your letter can also be forwarded to the hospital Crisis Screening Center management team, your DDD Case Manager or Support Coordinator, CMO Care Manager, and to State Government Representatives in the Assembly and Senate. Information about the State Legislature can be found at www.njleg.state.nj.us
- Submit an Op-Ed letter to the local newspapers.
- New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS) oversees these Divisions:
 - Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD)
 - Division of Medical Assistance and Health Services (DMAHS)
 - Division of Disability Services (DDS)

- New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) oversees these Divisions:
 - Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) oversees these Offices:
 - Children's System of Care (CSOC)
 - Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P) formerly DYFS
 - Office of Advocacy (OOA)
 - Institutional Abuse Investigation Unit (IAIU)
- New Jersey Department of the Treasury:
 - Ombudsman

3. Address the issues facing individuals with dual diagnoses in a public forum:

Provide testimony at NJ State Government public hearings.

Throughout the year, New Jersey citizens are given the opportunities to voice their concerns and to make recommendations in a variety of public forums. These may be sponsored by the Senate and Assembly Budget Committees, State Senate and Assembly Human Services Committees, and/or established task force panels. It is essential that our State legislatures and State department officials hear from people with disabilities in order to understand the challenges families and service providers face as they attempt to meet the needs of individuals affected with dual diagnosis.

4. Meet and speak to the Governor of New Jersey at scheduled Town Hall Meetings.

- Public announcements for these events appear in local newspapers and online at www.state.nj.us/government.
- Consult the NJ State government website at www.njleg.state.nj.us for scheduled event notices.

5. Contact outreach service organizations and support groups.

Ask about their interest in discussing issues related to people with dual diagnosis as part of their regular meeting agendas. Volunteer to speak. Please review the Resources Pages in the Appendix section of the Revised Handbook.

6. Encourage and support a relative or person served who shows interest in self-advocacy.

This can be a very productive and rewarding experience for your relative, and an effective means of having their voices heard. Sharing their experiences and recommendations in various venues, including testifying at public hearings, participating on task force/advisory committees, joining self-advocacy groups or initiatives, can serve as a true catalyst to improving the quality of care and services for people affected with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

7. Consider having your family member accompany you when advocating on their behalf, as well as others.

This type of personal association with the cause you are attempting to advance can be very meaningful. For example, Donna's son, Michael, sat beside her as she testified before the N.J. State Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. Donna believes Michael's presence at this public hearing had an invaluable impact on the Senate Committee members, and of equal importance, Michael's experience (captured by two photos in a local newspaper) was very reinforcing to him.