

# Dual Diagnosis: Mental Health and Intellectual/Developmental Disability

## Strategies to Improve and Maintain Your Overall Effectiveness as an Advocate

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***“That which we persist in doing becomes easier, not that the task has become easier, but that our ability to perform it has improved.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson***

By definition, an advocate is “a person who pleads another’s cause; a person who speaks or writes in support of something.” When you take on the responsibility to advocate on behalf of persons with special needs, including oneself, the definition of advocate takes on a very powerful and awareness-raising meaning. Moreover, when the subject of your advocacy is yourself, your child or relative, the significance of assuming this advocacy role is monumental in scope, and driven by boundless passion, resourcefulness and unyielding determination. The following recommended methods are offered to help you create a foundation for building and maintaining the necessary skill set to becoming an effective advocate, regardless of the cause you are attempting to advance.

- 1. Raise Your Expectations:** It is essential that you develop and uphold a strong belief in what is possible for you or a person(s) with dual diagnosis to achieve, regardless of your or their challenges. It is certainly wise to take into account the thoughts and opinions of qualified professionals. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the person’s capabilities from their own or their family’s/ caregiver’s perspectives. Cultivating a perspective based on experience and facts, combined with raised expectations of what might be possible for you or the individual to accomplish, is a crucial first step toward becoming a successful advocate. This firm belief in your or the person’s ability to progress in both anticipated and unexpected ways will serve as the motivating force to advance your cause.
- 2. Become An Expert:** Expertise involving a particular cause comes in multiple forms. Individuals, parents/ guardians often consider themselves experts when it comes to understanding the special needs to be addressed, and there is great truth in this assertion. However, it is still important to educate yourself about specific topics related to the cause you are undertaking. Whether you are attempting to obtain access to crisis response/stabilization services for yourself, a relative or client, or trying to establish preventative measures to avoid a crisis situation, you will need to become familiar with how the service delivery system works. Online information, webinars, workshops, conferences, publications, are just a few of the available options to becoming a more knowledgeable advocate. Share your expertise by volunteering to serve on organization advisory committees or school boards, presenting to state legislators, or state human service agencies.

- 3. Be a Savvy Consumer:** Effective advocacy and being a savvy consumer of special needs related services and supports just naturally go hand in hand. Productive advocates understand that their primary responsibility is to obtain the best quality services they can identify to efficiently manage their own or an individual's special needs. Research existing resources according to your or the person's needs, and utilize your advocacy skills to obtain the services/supports deemed most appropriate. Do not forget to utilize the documented professional opinions and recommendations of those with expertise in their practice field to support your advocacy efforts.
- 4. Manage Your Advocacy Cause(s) Like a Business:** The key to successful advocacy is being diplomatic, articulate, concise, and practical-minded in your approach. Think about handling these advocacy interactions as if they were business transactions. It is completely understandable when an individual and/or parent/caregiver becomes emotionally frustrated when advocating for themselves or their child/client. Unfortunately, more times than not, the person on the receiving end will write-off the individual/family/staff member as being overly emotional, and simply dismiss the advocate's argument or request no matter how valid it might be. When emotions take over the focus of your advocacy mission can get completely sidetracked, and any momentum gained might be lost. You will get greater mileage out of your advocacy efforts if you approach every opportunity in a professional business-like manner. Before exiting a meeting, insist on a proposed next step action plan and timeline for implementation. Be sure to send all meeting participants, a detailed follow-up communication to document in writing all agreed upon measures. This strategy serves to keep everyone on the same page, and avoid future roadblocks that might slow down the process toward achieving your advocacy goals.
- 5. Exercise the Human, Civil, and Legal Rights of Citizens with Disabilities:** Educate yourself about the human, civil and legal rights of people with disabilities at both the state and federal levels. There is tremendous power in applying this knowledge as a resourceful advocate. It can save you much time and energy, because the legal system has already done the hard work to enact these essential privileges. You will just need to figure out how best to apply them. You might want to begin by exploring the disability rights resources listed subsequently in this handbook.
- 6. Never Stop Networking:** It is amazing what you can discover and uncover when you are open to networking with professionals, friends and family, educators, service providers, direct support professionals, outreach organizations, state representatives, etc. Be sure to obtain the names, affiliations, contact information and/or business cards of the people you meet, and do not hesitate to connect with them as needed. In return, remember to offer your assistance to them, including facilitating connections amongst those in your network whose expertise and opinions are valued.
- 7. Do Not Be Afraid to Take it to the Top:** You have a right, as a citizen of the State of New Jersey, to advance your cause up the ladder to those persons in top leadership positions. Keep requesting help to move your cause forward, and do not stop until someone finally agrees to support your cause.
- 8. Remain Solution-Focused:** It is very useful to bring an issue to light, and all the more constructive if you couple a concern or complaint with a recommended solution. Starting off by citing something positive pertaining to the subject or service is a great way to break the ice, before moving on to presenting the problem, and your practical and creative solutions.

9. **Be a Team Player:** You will accomplish your advocacy goals much quicker if you embrace the team spirit mentality. Being adversarial will only work against you. Being open-minded, respectful, and grateful to the other team members (i.e. Child Study Team, Adult Interdisciplinary Team, Advisory Committee, etc.), does not mean you have to alter your convictions to appease other members. You can be firm and convincing without being argumentative. So do your best to maintain a pleasant and optimistic demeanor... all the time keeping your eye on the prize.
10. **Trust Your Instincts:** Be open to compromise as long as it does not jeopardize your core values, or interfere with attaining your ultimate goals as an advocate. Do not back down from your cause, because of applied pressure and/or fear of retaliation. Stay strong... in the end your persistence will pay off in meaningful ways.
11. **Do Not Give Up:** There will be times when you feel extremely discouraged, and your goals seem to be completely out of reach. Opposing parties will try to convince you that what you are proposing is not needed; or cannot be done; or it has never been accomplished; or there's no money to fund it. Do not be swayed... persist in your efforts... see yourself as pioneering this initiative. Be creative. Keep in mind that pessimism is a misuse of the imagination.
12. **Take a Moment to Pat Yourself on the Back:** It is not enough to simply believe in your cause. You also will need to firmly believe in your ability to make this happen. In many cases, an advocate working on behalf of an individual(s) with complex special needs serves as their eyes, ears and voice. In a sense, people with special needs are depending on skillful advocates to improve the quality of their overall care/support, and their lives. Needless to say, when progress is achieved the personal rewards are truly priceless. So take a moment to feel good about your accomplishments. This will go a long way in keeping you resilient and motivated to take on the next phase of your endeavor or subsequent worthwhile causes.

#### **Disability Rights Resources:**

“A Guide To Disability Rights Laws” : U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section – <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>

“Disability Law: A Legal Primer” (Sixth Edition) : Disability Rights New Jersey – <https://www.drnj.org>  
(Under Publications)

“New Jersey Special Education Advocacy Guide” : developed by Disability Rights New Jersey – <http://www.drnj.org> (Under Publications)

“Voting: It’s Your Right” : Voter rights policy for people with disabilities, developed by the Elizabeth Boggs Center/Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in collaboration with New Jersey’s Administration on Developmental Disabilities Partners, Disability Rights New Jersey, and the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. – <http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenter> or <http://www.drnj.org> (Under Publications)

“An Advocates Guide To The New Jersey Legislature” (Self Advocacy Series) : developed by Disability Rights New Jersey, “This self-advocacy guide is to assist and inform persons with disabilities, their family members, and other persons and organizations interested in working with and influencing the NJ State Legislature”. – <http://www.drnj.org> (under “Publications”)