

# The Issue of Recruiting Multiple Citizen Advocates for a Protégé

By Wolf Wolfensberger (1934-2011)

*EDITORS' NOTE: In this article, Dr. Wolfensberger reflects back on the development and early practice of Citizen Advocacy, taking advantage of time, experience, and insight to highlight a potentially valid Citizen Advocacy response to a real problem brought about and exacerbated by wounding.*

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The possibility that more than one citizen advocate might be matched up with a person had been envisioned from the early days of Citizen Advocacy (e.g., Wolfensberger & Zauha, 1972, pp. 15-16). Indeed, there have been repeated occasions in the Citizen Advocacy culture where this has happened, such as where a married couple advocates for a protégé. For instance, a person might be matched with one advocate who would function more on the instrumental side in the language of the Citizen Advocacy culture, and one who would relate more expressively. However, very little has been written about this issue in the Citizen Advocacy literature, and this is why, in response to a dialogue with a local Citizen Advocacy office on this issue, I am here putting together a number of thoughts on it which draw on a treasury of experience that was not yet available in the early days of Citizen Advocacy.

One fact that is very familiar to persons who are close to wounded people is that some people are so wounded, and have so many needs, that they can exhaust the helpful efforts of a small army of volunteers who engage themselves with the person, either in an advocacy role or some other helping role. There are many stories about a needy person “chewing through 20 volunteers like a beaver through wood.”

It could very well be that such a person does need more than one advocate, but there are any number of pitfalls of which one needs to be aware, and questions that need to be clarified, before one can come up with a clear idea on the issue.

1. One question on which one needs to achieve clarity is whether one is really talking about needs for advocacy or needs for **other** kinds of help and assistance. This question is particularly *actuel* at this time when so-called circles of friends are so much talked about, and occasionally even actually implemented. (For our purposes here, we will not address the problem that the term “circle of friends” has become something of a craze phrase, and that one cannot automatically assume that one knows what people are talking about when they use that phrase.)

It is not very helpful when direct help is confused with advocacy, the essence of which is for a second party (the advocacy party) to obtain something for a first party (the needy one) from third parties, rather than for the second (advocacy) party to do itself what is needed for the first party. In a so-called circle of friends, the following scenarios are conceivable: (a)

everybody is actually “doing for” a needy person; (b) every member of a circle of friends functions exclusively as an advocate; (c) members at various times function in either role; or (d) one or more members function mostly as advocates, and the others mostly or always as direct helpers. Thus, one should certainly not make any facile verbal assertions that just because someone is a member of a so-called circle of friends, this person is automatically an advocate for the person around whom the friends circle.

Where a person does have a so-called circle of friends, one related question to consider is whether this circle has been convened exclusively or primarily to support a needy person, or whether such a circle is actually of the nature of a communality, and whether its engagement with a needy person is an outgrowth of its communal functioning, and therefore of the mutual support that all members give each other. One thing that one can state as a general principle is that needy people who are members of a communality of mostly competent people **not** specifically formed to attend to a needy person's situation will ordinarily be in much less need of advocacy than those who are not, because their needs will be very extensively addressed **directly** by the members of the communality itself.

However, in this article, we want to look at the issue specifically from the perspective of Citizen Advocacy, rather than from the perspective of advocacies outside the Citizen Advocacy framework, including possibly by members of “circle of friends.” Thus, we offer the following additional considerations.

2. Another very fundamental question to ask is whether the apparent need for multiple advocates is, more than anything, the result of the “right” advocate not as yet having been conceptualized and/or recruited. After all, we now have a wealth of experiences in the Citizen Advocacy culture that informs us that there are people in society who **can** be recruited to the most heroic kinds of advocacy engagements, exemplified par excellence by the story of *Roxene* (Stephenson, 1983). Obviously, the recruitment of such a properly talented, inclined and engaged advocate would obviate in at least some cases the need for multiple advocates.

3. Experienced Citizen Advocacy coordinators have noted that whenever more than one citizen advocate is matched up with a person, there is the danger that neither of the citizen advocates has a sense of carrying the major advocacy responsibility for the protégé. Of course, this can lead to confusion, indecisiveness, and reluctance to act, perhaps in part from an advocate's concern about trespassing on another advocate's domain of engagement. In some cases, it could even lead to mutual interference between advocates.

This problem might be lessened by two measures. Firstly, the Citizen Advocacy office might take a much stronger than usual role in supporting, consulting and coordinating the multiple advocates. And secondly, there is the possibility of clarifying that one certain advocate plays a major role, and that any additional advocates function primarily in support of the major advocate.

4. What would fall clearly outside the appropriate purview of a Citizen Advocacy office would be the recruitment of a so-called circle of friends

because: (a) this is an appropriate purview of any number of other parties; and (b) it is very unlikely that all or even many members of such a circle of friends would function as citizen advocates.

## **References**

Stephenson, W. (1983). *Roxene*. Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Detselig Enterprises.

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