
How To Start and Support A Local Self-Advocacy Group

It has been agreed upon by participants at a previous International Self-Advocacy Leadership Conference, that the most important thing to remember when you start a local self-advocacy group is to be sure that the members have *control* and *power* right from the beginning. They decided that control and power mean that the members must be able to decide and determine when and where the group meets, who the advisor is, and what goes on in the meetings. The presenters and participants came up with the following ideas on how to start a local self-advocacy group.



- ▶ Write to any of the conference co-sponsors who can help you get started.
- ▶ Get another self-advocacy group in your area to help you get started.
- ▶ Find an accessible place to meet that is close to the bus lines. Try and find a place to meet that is not where the members live or work.
- ▶ Talk with your friends about what self-advocacy is and encourage them to meet with your group.
- ▶ Make sure the day and time you meet is good for everyone. Make sure the day and time you meet is not the same day and time when people are already involved in other things.
- ▶ Make up a “flyer” or meeting notice and put these up in group homes, workshops and other places. Put the bus number and a picture of how to get to the meeting on the flyer. Put the phone number of someone to call for more information on the flyer.
- ▶ If your group is going to have an advisor, make sure the members vote to approve the advisor and make sure the advisor knows what they are supposed to do.
- ▶ Use a film (People First; Board and Care; Feeling Good—Feeling Proud; Rights Now), or a videotape (Speaking for Ourselves; Don’t Think I don’t Think), as a way of introducing self-advocacy to new members. Have people from other self advocacy groups talk about what self-advocacy means to them.
- ▶ Have refreshments and a “social time” at the end of the meetings.
- ▶ Don’t elect officers for two or three meetings. This gives everyone a chance to speak and get to know the other members before you vote. When you do elect officers, have the people running for office give a speech and put pictures of the people who are running for office on the ballot box. This makes it easier for people to decide who to vote for.
- ▶ As a group, make rules for how the group will work. Examples of rules include: Only one person speaks at a time, how to will vote to decide on things, etc. Make sure everyone understands before you vote on things.
- ▶ If you want, you can set up an “organizing committee” to get the group going. The organizing committee can be responsible for finding a place to meet, making up meeting

notices, calling people to remind them of the meetings, doing refreshments, etc.

▶ Use easy to understand words and pictures during the meetings to make sure everyone understands what is going on.

▶ Set realistic goals for your group. It is important for your group to have success right at the very beginning so everyone will feel good about the group and themselves.

▶ Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak and participate during the meeting. It is important to share power so that everyone

feels like an important and equal member. Get everyone involved in the group.

▶ Do some fun things together as a group. Make people feel good about coming to the meetings.

▶ Always thank everyone for coming to the meeting and make sure they know then the next meeting is before you adjourn the meeting. Hand out calendars so everyone will know when the next meeting is.

How To Support/Keep A People First Chapter Going Over Time

After a group has been started, you need to think about how to keep the group going. All groups have “ups” and “downs.” All groups will have problems at times. One of the most important things to keep a group going over time is to face problems head on. Problems don’t just go away on their own—you have to face them head on and try to work them out. When your group has problems, remember to give people a chance to grow and change.

Most people have never had the experience of being part of a self-advocacy group where they get to make the decisions and solve problems on their own. Sometimes, it is hard to be a self-advocate, and people need time and understanding to work out problems and grow as a group. Below are the ideas that the conference participants came up with on how to support a self-advocacy group over time and keep it going.

▶ Make the discussion in the meetings *real*. By real, we mean that the discussions must be about things that are important to the members. Each group has to decide what is real and important to them. If you keep the discussions real, and on things that are important to the members’ lives, then people will want to come to the meetings and take part.

▶ Always have officer meetings. Officer meetings are a good time to learn about leadership, talk about and solve problems the group is having,

and work with the advisor. If an advisor does a good job in the officer meetings, then the officers can run the membership meetings on their own. An officer meeting should be about one week before membership meetings, to give people a chance to learn and practice their duties and to make sure everything is ready for the membership meeting.

▶ Set up some *committees* when you plan to do things. Committees are a good way to get

everyone involved, plan things, and get things done. Committees give everyone a chance to have responsibilities and feel like an important part of the group.

- ▶ Make sure there is a place and *something for everyone* at the meetings. It is important for everyone to have something to say at the meeting and a way to feel that they are an important part of the group. The best way to

keep people involved is for everyone to have an important part in the group.

- ▶ Plan some *fun* things together. Don't make the meetings all "hard work." Go out and eat together, go on a camping trip together, do fun things together. Find things to do together that build "team spirit." Don't let the meetings get boring.

In starting and supporting a self-advocacy group, it is important for the members to learn and use a process for working together and getting things done. It is also important for self-advocates to be responsible for teaching others the process, to assume leadership roles, and to be in control of the goals that the group develops by working together. During all of this, the self-advocacy group must be able to include people with a wide range of disabilities so that everyone can participate and be a valued group member.

Starting and supporting a successful self-advocacy group is a process that takes lots of careful planning and thinking. Members and advisors must work together to establish a strong foundation so the group will continue to grow stronger. Below is a list of steps that self-advocates and advisors typically use and go through in order to have successful self-help/self-advocacy groups. Some of these processes are described by Norsman in **Patterns of Participation**, and others have been identified by self-advocacy groups as they have started up.

Steps that Self-Advocates and Advisors Typically Use to Have Successful Self-Advocacy Groups

- ▶ Make sure everyone understand why a group of people would want to meet. The group should ask, "Is there a need for a self-advocacy group? Why would people with disabilities want to get involved?"
- ▶ Define the roles and responsibilities of the organizers in getting the group going. In other words, make sure everyone understands what they are supposed to do to get the group going.
- ▶ Find out how other similar groups got organized and how they operate—learn from others' experience.
- ▶ Arrange for the details of organization. That is, when and where to meet, publicizing the group to attract broader interest, transportation, refreshments, introductory presentations, films, video-tapes, speakers from similar groups, etc.
- ▶ Decide on how the group members will work together (rules, officers, agendas, voting, etc.)

- ▶ Develop a working friendship between the members and develop “team spirit.”
- ▶ Develop the goals and issues for the group to work on.
- ▶ Develop ways (strategies /tactics/methods) to reach goals.
- ▶ Develop connections/links and “allies” between the group and the community to increase the presence and participation of the group and group members in community life and decision making.
- ▶ Work on ways to decide how well the group is doing, and how to make changes to help the group move forward.
- ▶ Develop a process to decide how the group will change and expand over time (coalitions, state organization, etc.).

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