

By Ryan Clarke, LL.B.

Significant changes are taking place within the mental health system in this country. We may hear about many of these changes on the evening news, or read about them in newspapers. But seldom do we as patients, caregivers or members of an association such as the Schizophrenia Society of Canada take the time to engage in the processes that bring about these changes. Advocacy is one way for individual citizens to actively insert themselves into the debate and help shape public policy.

In this article, I will introduce some of the basic concepts of advocacy and discuss why it is important for people to make their voices heard. I will also outline how to start engaging and some of the practical things that you can do to advocate for change on behalf of people affected by schizophrenia.

From the outset, I am going to focus my discussion on advocating to government. Decision-makers, both politicians and bureaucrats, make choices everyday in areas that impact people with severe mental illness: health care, education, training and employment, housing and income support. People in positions of power need to hear from you when you have something to say about these issues.

What is advocacy?

So, let's start at the beginning - what is 'advocacy'? According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 'advocacy' is *verbal support or argument for a cause, policy*. More simply, it is telling your story to a decision-maker, through various means, with the express purpose of compelling that person to do (or not do) something. It is a process that normally takes time to realize tangible results and there is no one way to go about advocating. It is personal to your

own style and comfort level, and is grounded in two fundamental components:

- Your ability to tell your personal story
- Establishing and fostering mutually-beneficial relationships with those who have the ability to affect change

Now, don't be concerned if you've never told your story about living with schizophrenia before, or if you don't currently have any relationships with people in government. The development of these components will come with time and practice. The important point to understand here is that without these two things, your ability to effectively advocate will be compromised.

It is important to engage in advocacy because decision-makers react to those credible groups or people who most effectively bring their issues to the forefront of the public agenda. All governments have competing interests and concerns that must be addressed, as well as their own policy priorities. Those who can best engage in this process will have their voices heard. Those who choose not to engage will have no say in decisions that could fundamentally impact their lives.

Identify the issue

Before you get started, you need to get prepared. And that means you need an issue; what is happening in your life or what is being publicly discussed that may have an impact on you or your family? The recent release of the Final Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (see Page XX) is an example of the latter. That report contains detailed recommendations around mental health, mental illness and addiction – potentially affecting the lives of every person in this country.

Once you've determined the issue you want to advocate about, you next need to decide what you want to say about it. So, using our example of the Senate Report, you may want to tell your local Member of Parliament (MP) that you think it is important that the government implement a recommendation contained within the report to enhance the lives of people living with schizophrenia. That's your key message, and you support it by telling your personal story that illustrates the need for positive change.

Next, you will want to decide how to communicate your key message and personal story to your local MP. You could write that person a letter, send an e-mail or make an appointment to meet. There are many options, but as I said earlier, you need to choose the ones that you feel comfortable doing. Having said that, a face-to-face meeting with your MP, in his or her constituency office, can be one of the most impactful ways to convey any message you want to deliver.

Determine your 'ask'

Finally, you need to determine your 'ask' -- the actual thing you are going to ask your elected official to do on your behalf. To finish up with our example, you may ask your local MP to write a letter to the Minister of Health asking that the government

immediately implement recommendations contained within the report, such as the establishment of the Canadian Mental Health Commission. Be sure to ask your MP to copy you on that letter and continue to follow up with your representative to make sure the letter is actually sent.

This framework works equally well if you decide to advocate around a personal issue (one affecting your family), for which you need the government to take action. It is also the same model used by the Schizophrenia Society of Canada to advocate for broad public policy issues on behalf of people affected by this disease.

The impact of government policies at all levels in Canada is pervasive. I encourage every one of you to engage in advocacy, in any way you can, towards those in government that are making important decisions impacting those you love. Together, we can bring about change that will result in better lives for people affected by schizophrenia.

Ryan Clarke is founder of Advocacy Solutions, a business committed to providing a voice to organizations through the development and implementation of impactful advocacy strategies. He works with the SSC Advocacy, Public Awareness and Education Committee and can be contacted at ryan@advocacysolutions.ca.