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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the concept of child advocacy as a service strategy for troubled youth, particularly juvenile delinquents. The shortcomings of more traditional approaches to these youth and the concomitant recommendations for the use of advocacy are reviewed. The lack of clearly specified operating principles and techniques for advocacy interventions is noted as an obstacle to the implementation of a child advocacy strategy. The successful advocacy techniques utilized in an ongoing delinquency program, the Adolescent Diversion Project, are detailed. Some implications of the use of advocacy for other target populations are also examined. (Author)

Youth Advocacy: A Strategy for Service to Troubled Youth

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Youth Advocacy: A Strategy for Service to Troubled Youth

In the past decade and a half, increasing attention has focused upon the problems facing youth in America. In particular, the problem of youth crime and delinquency has been of central concern. Traditional approaches to the delinquency problem have tended to focus on corrective treatment of the individual youth. In practice, this has too often consisted of some form of professional treatment aimed at "changing" the youth (Krisberg & Austin, 1978) or, failing in that, in confinement of the youth to an institution (Medinnus & Johnson, 1969). The limitations of this model and its lack of positive results are such that service providers are increasingly seeking effective alternative strategies (Levitt, 1971; Grey & Dermody, 1972; Gold, 1974; Wright & Dixon, 1977).

One of the most promising alternatives to the more traditional approaches is that of child advocacy. Indeed, the concept of youth advocacy has received widespread attention and support (White House Conference on Children, 1970; Joint Commission on Mental Health and Children, 1973; Sarason, 1976; Davidson & Rapp, 1976). Certainly many of today's troubled youth are in need of advocacy services. This is particularly true in situations of broken marriages, where absent parents are unavailable to serve as natural advocates. Yet it is also often true even in intact families, where the parents are unable to perform an advocacy role either due to their own inability or disinterest, or due to the increasingly complex roadblocks erected by today's social institutions.

Unfortunately, one constraint on the adoption of advocacy strategies by those serving youth is the lack of clear definitions and specified operating principles for performing advocacy. Activities which have been described as advocacy range all the way from somewhat altered individual counseling styles to active political interventions (Davidson & Rapp, 1976).

In response to this problem, the present paper will describe the practical application of advocacy principles to a target population of juvenile delinquents, as has been accomplished in an ongoing program in Michigan. Processes and procedures utilized will be delineated, as well as a summary of obtained results. Finally, some implications for service delivery to other youth target populations will be discussed.

The Adolescent Diversion Project: Advocacy in Action

The Adolescent Diversion Project, which is funded by an NIMH grant, has been in operation since the fall of 1976. The project's operating procedures are as follows. Court intake workers refer youth to the project after their preliminary hearings as an alternative to further court proceedings. The project then assigns an undergraduate student, working for course credit, to act as an advocate for the youth. The students, who have received eight weeks of intensive training prior to assignment, are supervised in small groups led by graduate students from the project staff. The 18-week advocacy intervention involves 6-8 hours of student effort every week and includes the following steps.

Assessment. The student first meets with the youth and the youth's family in their home and spends some time getting to know them. Almost immediately the student begins the process of identifying unmet needs of the youth. This involves speaking with the youth, his parents and friends, as well as observing the youth and his interactions with others. At the same time, the student looks for potential resources that might be available to alleviate problematic situations. The assessment process continues until particular areas of need are focused upon and potential resources identified. If a resource is not available, a means of generating it must be conceived. For resources available, it is necessary to specify the exact individual or group in control of the resources and how they might be approached to obtain that resource.

Strategy selection. The completed assessment will suggest a number of potential strategies for meeting the youth's needs. The alternatives can be considered based on the available skills of the youth and advocate and the probability of successful implementation. In general, the strategies will vary on two continua as detailed by Davidson and Rapp (1976). First, the strategies can range from a positive "salesmanship" approach to an approach based on the potential use of negative consequences.

For example, an advocate whose youth is in need of a job might visit a counselor in a local employment program and "present a case" for the youth (e.g., point out positive features of the youth and how the particular program is just what he/she needs). It is almost always recommended that the advocate begin with a positive strategy because a reciprocal exchange of positive rewards is the most harmonious situation for all involved. However, if it becomes clear that a positive approach will not succeed, other alternatives are considered. Using the above example, a non-cooperative counselor might be persuaded by direct pressure (e.g., confronting him/her with program guidelines that say the youth is eligible and must be admitted) or by indirect pressure (e.g., discussing the merits of the case with the counselor's supervisor or generating attention/publicity outside the program).

The latter illustrations suggest the second continuum on which an advocacy intervention can vary: that of the organizational level at which the strategy is implemented. Indeed, the organizational level approached can vary from the individual, to an administrative, to a policy level. For instance, an advocacy effort in a school might focus on a particular teacher, a principal, or a board of education which sets policy. (Of course, it should be remembered that "going over the head" of the person with immediate responsibility for a decision is usually negatively perceived and should generally not be recommended until a positive approach has been attempted with that person.)

Implementation of the strategy. After consultation with other students in the group and with the case supervisors, the student implements the strategy selected. It is important to note that these efforts take place in whatever settings are appropriate for the youth (e.g., school, place of employment, community agency or program, etc.).

This is a crucial aspect of an advocacy strategy because it is in these settings where actual decisions are made and actions taken, both by the youth and those with influence over the youth. For example, if the youth needs a job, talking about that fact at home or in the office will not be as productive as transporting the youth to job sites, assisting in filling out applications, preparing the youth for interviews, or directly speaking to persons responsible for hiring decisions.

Similarly, the families of delinquents often display unconstructive interactional patterns such as poor communication, unspecified rules, and the inappropriate use of rewards and punishment. Consequently, advocacy interventions are also undertaken in the home. The student may act as an advocate in persuading parents to change an unfair rule or punishment practice. In other instances, the student advocate may act as mediator in negotiating a behavioral contact (Stuart, 1971; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969) between the youth and his/her parents. These contracts consist of reciprocal exchanges of privileges and responsibilities and act to modify and specify the operating contingencies in the family.

Monitoring the strategy. An additional important consideration is the need to monitor the intervention in order to assess whether or not the implementation has been successfully carried out. Furthermore, it is necessary to determine if the strategy had the desired effect in terms of meeting the youth's needs. Experience has shown that the verbal response of "everything is OK" (often given by this target population in office-type interviews) is not sufficient. Student

advocates are expected at a minimum level to elicit enough details from the youth to be sure that his/her needs are being met; and are usually expected to visit the appropriate setting in person to observe and meet with parties involved. In this manner one can be sure that a strategy has been successful. However, the process does not end here. As a part of the ongoing observations of the youth's situation the advocate periodically monitors the effects of prior interventions to be sure that old problems do not re-occur. Indeed, throughout the period of the advocate's involvement he/she is constantly assessing the need for any further strategy selection and implementation.

Case termination. A final important component of this advocacy strategy is the preparation of the youth and the family for termination. Specifically, the student advocate carefully explains the techniques he or she has employed to the parties involved and trains them in their use. Where possible, the youth and/or family is encouraged to attempt an advocacy strategy on their own, with the volunteer acting only as an advisor. The ultimate goal is to enable the natural helping system available to the youth to successfully carry on future advocacy related activities as needed. This component of the strategy is most representative of the project's philosophy that intervention, while broad in scope and intensive in depth, should be of limited duration and directed toward maximizing the ability of the youth and his/her family to function effectively and independently.

Effectiveness of Youth Advocacy

An important component of the Adolescent Diversion Project is the careful evaluation of any intervention strategies implemented. Using a true experimental design, the Youth Advocacy strategy has been compared with traditional court processing over a three year period involving approximately 140 youths. Examining such outcome variables as number and seriousness of police contacts; number and seriousness of court petitions; and attendance and academic performance at school,

the much less expensive youth advocacy service has been found to be consistently equal to or superior to the court intervention (Emshoff, Jeppesen, Blakely, & Kushler, 1979).

In addition, the youth advocacy strategy has been experimentally demonstrated to be superior to a "friendly companion" type of volunteer intervention, even though such variables as amount of time spent with the youth each week and length of program involvement were designed to be equivalent. Further, the volunteers themselves rated their experience in the youth advocacy intervention significantly more highly than did the "friendly companion" volunteers (Kantrowitz, 1978).

In summary, the experimental evidence gathered by the Adolescent Diversion Project, as well as its predecessor in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois (see Davidson, et al., 1977) suggests that the youth advocacy strategy is a very successful one for dealing with this target population.

Implications of the Youth Advocacy Model

The first implication of this model is of course in terms of designing and implementing programs dealing with youthful legal offenders. Clearly the model suggested here is a departure (many would say a welcome one) from traditional court programs. However, although the example described here deals with delinquents diverted from the juvenile court, there are a variety of other youth populations that might benefit from the use of advocacy strategies. For example, this service delivery style could be well utilized with such target populations as abused or neglected children, school dropouts, and youth in mental health settings (Berlin, 1975; Weber & McCall, 1978). Certainly these children have a variety of unmet needs similar to or greater in magnitude than delinquent youth. Indeed, with the increasing trend toward instability in the role of the traditional nuclear family, as well as the growing societal complexity, one can anticipate an increasing need for advocacy related services for youth of all types.

Second, the use of child advocacy has implications for the roles of those in service delivery positions, requiring the training and use of new skills. The advocate must be a problem solving generalist who needs to be aware of the operations of a variety of social and community systems (e.g., education, employment, recreation, health, etc.) as opposed to the traditionally more narrow focus on the individual (and occasionally his/her family). The child advocate must have a community orientation and be able to handle what might often be an ambiguous situation. As a result of the nature of these requirements people providing advocacy services to youth can come from a variety of educational disciplines. In many instances advocacy interventions could also be suitable for use by trained paraprofessionals. Ultimately, however, the crucial components of this strategy for the service provider are the understanding of the individuals and institutions that make up the environment of the youth and a willingness and ability to take action in that arena.

Finally, there is a need to continue to evaluate the efficacy of this style of service delivery. Research must attempt to specify which components of the process, applied in what areas, with what populations, are most effective. The current Project discussed in this paper will continue to examine these questions with respect to juvenile delinquents. It is hoped that others will also pursue quality research in this area, particularly with a broader range of target populations which might benefit from advocacy services.