



Advocating for a Family Member

Dependent on the health and ability of the person you are caring for, it is likely that at some point in your role as a family caregiver, you will be advocating for that person. You may need to be present at appointments to ask questions, research and access services, resolve problem situations and ensure all care needs are respected and met.

The following are some tips for helping you to be an effective advocate:

Communicate with the care recipient: As much as possible keep them involved in decisions regarding their care. Focus on their wishes as you work to advocate on their behalf.

Develop an action plan: Set realistic goals and take one step at a time toward reaching them. When tasks seem overwhelming, having a plan that lays out each step makes everything seem more manageable. The worst time to try and figure out what is available and how to access it is during a crisis.

Prepare questions in advance: Health care professionals often have limited time to spend with you. Write down your questions in advance so that you don't forget them if you become stressed or upset. Rehearse what you want to say. Decide what information is most important and ask those questions first. Be concise and specific about the information that you need.

Keep a written record: Write down answers you receive to questions. You may need to refer to this information in the future. Also keep a log of contacts, phone numbers, names, dates, and information acquired all in one place, so you can easily retrieve them when needed. In addition, keep a written record of any pertinent details related to your family member's health condition and behavior.

Remain calm: Believe that the information you seek and what you have to say is important and that you and your family member have the right to know it. Becoming angry or shutting down will only get in the way of the communication.

Communicate clearly and directly: Prepare well in advance for any meetings so that you can be clear and concise. Ask for what you want and express your feelings. Avoid rambling and don't expect the other person to guess what it is you are trying to say.

Be persistent and follow-up: Finding the answers you need may take time, effort and several telephone calls or emails. Don't give up. Persistence produces results. Keep in mind that even though you are focused only on your family member, the healthcare professionals have many patients to take care of.

Right person: Determine who the key contact is so that you don't waste time struggling to find answers where they are not available.

Find an appropriate time: Good timing is essential and can make the difference between managing the problem and making it worse. Wait until you are less anxious, angry or upset before trying to deal with a situation. Arrange to meet and talk at a time when both parties can focus on problem-solving.

By Barbara Small, former Program Development Coordinator, FCBC