Handout 1: Essential Elements of Systems Advocacy

Systems Advocacy occurs when a group of people come together to represent the interests of a community or sub group within a community. They do this to effect social and political change. Systems Advocacy is concerned with genuine life issues /needs and the welfare of groups in the community.

Systems advocacy involves:

- Engaging with the community; working with them to affect structural change in areas such as legislation, policy, and service provision.
- Supporting disadvantaged individuals and groups to bring about the structural changes required to meet their needs.
- Taking action to prevent negative changes, or to bring about positive changes in social policy areas, e.g. amending legislation or policy, increasing and expanding services, develop new services and improving access to services.

Key Features of Systems Advocacy include:

- It is not politically neutral rather it is on the “side” of the group/community.
- Minimal conflict of interest, i.e. the advocate demonstrates singular loyalty towards the group/community for whom they are engaged in systems advocacy.
- Has clear goals.
- Demonstrates determination in facing obstacles.
- Is long term.
- Is strategic.
- Is based on solid information, i.e. research to support claim/demand.

Effective approaches to systems advocacy involves:

- Assessment of the needs of the community.
- Identification of all stakeholders.
- Consultations.
- Development of effective partnerships.
- Lobbying members of parliament.
- Working with the media.
- Understanding the political context and environment.
- A capacity to work in an inclusive manner (with the target group affected by the issues).
- A capacity to work collaborative (with all the stakeholders).
Systems Advocacy is an important community sector activity because it:

- Is a way of recognizing structural inequalities in the community
- Helps to empower disadvantaged groups to address their needs
- Addresses issues pertaining to Human Rights
- Seeks to redress inequities in the distribution of government managed resources
- Facilitates the implementation of government policy
- Creates broader community awareness and develops a “groundswell” for social change
- Seeks to make changes in the way services are planned, managed and delivered
- Informs government of community needs, rights and expectations
- Provides the community with a “voice”
- Raises community awareness of the issue/problem/injustice.

Other ways of describing advocacy include:

- Sticking up for your rights and those of others
- Going to bat for someone else
- A person who argues, defends or recommends a course of action or submits a proposal
- A support, champion or representative
- Someone or an agency who uses their power to influence a decision.

Principles to be applied by Workers engaging in Systems Advocacy:

- Act in and represent the interests of the group/community
- Safeguard the interests of the community or group represented in the advocacy, e.g. identify areas of resistance and hostility
- Work in an inclusive & collaborative manner
- Keep group/community informed of progress of campaign including any barriers to that arise and the outcome of any action
- Maintain confidentiality.

**Who Initiates a Systems Advocacy Program?**

Systems advocacy can either be initiated by a worker and their agency (A PROACTIVE WORKER APPROACH) or by the community who invites the worker and their agency to assist them in the process of social change (A REACTIVE WORKER APPROACH). When working proactively the worker identifies the need for action on an issue and works with the community educating them about the issue, consulting with them to obtain their perspectives on the issues and seeking their active support for the advocacy.

A reactive approach also calls for a needs assessment to validate the views of the community. It also requires networking and consultation to gain cross sectional community support.