

Here at Golden Gate Regional Center, we have group called the Advocats, which works on legislative issues. Although the Advocats are not specifically a board group - in fact it was originally created by a GGRC staff member - board members have been part of the Advocats from the beginning.

The Advocats have been in existence for about 6 years. There have always been board members involved, who also sit on the board legislative committee and attend ARCA legislative meetings. In this way, we can report on ARCA and board news to the Advocats, and on the Advocats to the board, and align our activities. Currently I cover all these roles. I also meet regularly with the legislative chair of our SPAC - Service Providers Advisory Committee, and we often coordinate actions.

*Our mission is to help promote local, state-wide and national efforts that will protect and improve the quality of life for all people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.*

The Advocats' members are drawn from many parts of our community. We have GGRC staff and board, service providers (both management and Direct Support staff), self-advocates, family members, and representatives of other organizations with similar agendas.

The diverse makeup of our membership allows for a variety of perspectives, which is very useful as we interact with our local legislators.

We also interact with members of our communities, and invite their participation in our actions. For example, having raised a child with severe, multiple needs for 32 years, I am part of a large and supportive community of families. I also facilitate several support groups for Support for Families of Children with Disabilities, our local Family Resource Center, where I worked for many years. I often find myself being a kind of ambassador for the Regional Center to other parents. I keep members of my circles informed about legislative news, and routinely enlist other parents to join us for visits to our representatives, or to write letters.

Our members who work with clients support them to join us for meetings as well. We have created simple, fill-in-the-blanks postcards, and

sponsored afternoons to help clients at the Arc and the Pomeroy Center, two of our largest SF Day Programs, write to their elected representatives.

We meet monthly to review current legislative activity and plan ways to be involved and hopefully have some influence.

We work in an ongoing way to build and cultivate relationships with our local representatives. When the legislature isn't in session, we try to meet with our Senators and Assembly Members in their Bay Area offices, going in teams with the variety of perspectives I mentioned earlier. This is much like the way ARCA sets teams up for legislative visits on Grass Roots Day. In fact, the Advocats and others we enlist participate in GRD every year.

We have partnered with SPAC to participate in some of their planned activities, which are always well-attended and very impactful. For many years they held a legislative breakfast, with local reps attending to listen to stakeholders, and speak themselves. We also joined with them in 2016 for a series of afternoon tours with our local lawmakers - site visits to day programs, supported living locations, and supported employment sites.

We've had some great luck in creating relationships, and we have found some strong partners, but it's an ongoing process. Elections change things, priorities change, staff members come and go. We keep working to build and strengthen connections. It can be very useful to get to know legislators and learn how they operate. For example, one of our Assembly members always says "I can see that you need this money. But so do a lot of other groups. Where will this money come from?" So now we try to go in with ideas about that, and numbers.

The group began during the campaign for 10 percent. We joined with many others to make phone calls and write letters and participate in rallies in Sacramento. We organized local rallies as well, and met with our representatives in their local offices. It was an amazing time, with a coordinated message throughout the state, and we were powerful.

In recent years we organized a local campaign, along with others around the state, to push for the rate increases so desperately needed and suggested by the Burns & Assoc. rate study.

We wrote a letter from the GGRC Bd of Directors. We gathered letters from families and clients at the Arc and Pomeroy Center, which we emailed and snail-mailed, and gathered into a packet, which we brought with us to every meeting. These personal stories are, to me, one of the most powerful ways to reach our legislators. Hearing about the realities from people living with service shortfalls every day has tremendous impact.

I have made the packet of letters we sent available to Daniel, including the letter I sent to families to solicit their participation, and if you'd like to see them, I think you can just let him know.

When interim funds were received, we put together a social media campaign to thank our folks. We wanted to be sure we didn't only ask for help, but also acknowledged when it was granted.

We made it public because we knew that some of our local folks really liked attention. We wrote a single blurb and shared it from each one of us on the Facebook and Twitter pages of each of our local reps. Of course, we also wrote a letter to each, which we emailed. We spread the word so that our networks also posted thanks. The two large day programs with staff in the Advocats made short videos interviewing clients with their thanks, and we posted those as well.

COVID and the lack of in-person meetings changes the way we're working this year, and we're still making plans, but we have stayed in touch with the offices, and we're currently sending our congratulations to those who won re-election this month.

We're hoping to find a coordinated message again to join with. We look to partner with other groups, and if your Regional Center has something like this, or would like to, let's talk. You are welcome to come to an Advocats meeting, and just listen, or participate as much as you'd like. We meet the second Tuesday of each month from 2 to 3 PM, via Zoom, of course. Just let me know.

Thanks!