

## Sunshine Coast Citizen Advocacy: Submission to FACSIA, 2006

It would be difficult to find many community initiatives funded by the Commonwealth Government which more accurately reflect the government's current social policy than does Citizen Advocacy. Despite this, it is clear that steps are now being taken which will further reduce the already low profile of citizen advocacy in Australia. It is also clear that some of the features of citizen advocacy which are most valued by people with disability, their families and the wider community, are being portrayed as deficiencies which need to be addressed by the new advocacy service models.

**Citizen Advocacy inspires a community to take care of its own!** With a small amount of funding, citizen advocacy recruits and supports members of the community to provide free of charge what could not be bought at any price. Citizen advocates are generally well connected, skilled and experienced people who are prepared to use those connections, skills and experiences to benefit those who need it most. Why would anyone want to stop that?

**Citizen Advocacy protects vulnerable people from harm!** One of the most important features of citizen advocacy is its powerful preventative effect. By being involved for the long term, citizen advocates with their very presence mitigate against the all too often recurring incidents of neglect, abuse and exploitation experienced by many people with disability. Recently the Commonwealth Government has commenced a heavy promotion of the importance of **prevention** as a feature of health policy. Citizen advocacy has always recognised and responded to the need for a preventative, protective approach— because it works! For people who will always be vulnerable, long term advocacy is not a result of inability or unwillingness to “close the case”, it is just plain common sense. Why would anyone want that to stop?

**Citizen Advocacy remembers those who are often forgotten!** People who are most vulnerable and therefore most in need of advocacy are those who cannot, or do not speak for themselves, and who do not have family or friends who will speak on their behalf. They are therefore those who are least likely to seek out, or be referred to, an advocacy service. They need advocacy services which will proactively seek them out and take action to protect them. The idea of centralised referral based case management might seem to be very efficient. The unwelcome outcome of a reliance on referrals will be that advocacy resources will be shifted away from those who need it most. Why would anyone want that to happen?

**Citizen Advocacy changes the way a community sees people with disability!** Citizen advocacy does not set out to have a community development role with regard to people with disability. However striking changes in community attitudes to people with disability are an inevitable and welcome result of the way citizen advocacy is done. Because many members of the community are directly involved in doing advocacy, a depth of understanding, awareness and concern about issues affecting people with disability is not restricted only to a small coterie of paid professional staff. Each citizen advocate becomes a dedicated and effective role model and messenger to the rest of the community about how people with disability can be valued and included to the benefit of the whole community. They do that for free too! Why would anyone want that to stop?

**Citizen Advocacy is good value!** Citizen advocacy is a small but important part of the response Australian society makes to people with disability. It doesn't work for everyone, and would never try, but for people with a disability who cannot speak for themselves, and who are subject to abuse and neglect because they are vulnerable, it provides protection, guidance and support that money could never buy. Basically, for the money spent, it is very good value! Why would anyone want to stop something like that?