



The Role of a Peer Advocate

Child Care Providers Together (CCPT)/AFSCME members bring different skills, abilities, strengths and experiences to the position of peer advocate. Some peer advocates are terrific organizers while others are great at motivating people. Some enjoy representing members who need assistance dealing with regulators and others eagerly tackle provider issues by developing new tactics and strategies. With their energy, enthusiasm and commitment, CCPT/AFSCME peer advocates play a key role in creating a vigorous local union.

This information is based on “The Roles of the Steward Advocate” in the [AFSCME Steward Handbook](#).



The Peer Advocate as Leader

Leadership can be defined as **the ability to motivate a group of people to act in pursuit of its common interests and goals.**

CCPT/AFSCME members look to the peer advocate as a leader in the union.

They turn to the peer advocate when they are seeking information or when they need some help in solving a problem. To be a leader, the peer advocate must understand the diversity of the union’s membership — cultural, racial, gender, sexual orientation, age differences — and promote unity to put a stop to any attempts to divide providers.

As a peer advocate, you must have **credibility** (defined simply as being “worthy of belief or trust”) with union members, fellow providers, and the regulators and other people with whom you attempt to resolve provider issues and problems. Usually, credibility isn’t easily granted — it must be earned over time.



You must be **able to listen** to the problems, concerns and issues of members and fellow providers. By identifying provider problems, peer advocates can engage members in developing solutions. Listening is a skill that must be developed and practiced.

Peer advocates must be **able to motivate** members to take action on provider concerns and problems. Peer advocates who try to “do it all” become overburdened, overwhelmed and stressed out. Peer advocates who do it all are not involving other members in the union. High member participation is a sign of a strong union.



The Peer Advocate as a Communicator

The peer advocate is the hub of a communications wheel. Information is constantly transmitting back and forth along all the spokes of this wheel.

One-on-One

The most effective way to communicate with fellow providers is face-to-face or one-on-one. This type of communication has several advantages over any other method. By communicating one-on-one, peer advocates can:

- ✓ “Put a face” on the union.
- ✓ Increase union visibility.
- ✓ Build relationships with union members.
- ✓ Gain immediate feedback on issues.
- ✓ Learn about a provider’s concerns and problems.
- ✓ Directly ask the member to be involved in some specific way (examples: come to a meeting, be on a committee, sign a petition, wear a button, hand out leaflets, etc.).

A strong union depends on a constant information flow. Union officers, peer advocates and active members are always making decisions on how to address problems and on actions needed to create better conditions for providers and the families that providers serve. The greater the quantity and quality of information, the better those decisions will be.

First and foremost, peer advocates should know their contract and the regulatory framework. But just as important, peer advocates should know the issues and problems affecting members, and all about the union. A big part of communication is your ability to share knowledge and information in a way that helps providers understand how and why issues affect them. Informed and educated members become active members.

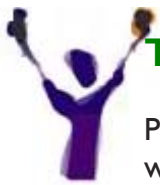


The Peer Advocate as Representative

The peer advocate represents employees in the formal grievance procedure. In addition, the peer advocate represents providers in several other ways, including:

- ✓ Informal problem-solving efforts and discussions with regulators.
- ✓ Interactions with local officers, giving voice to employee views and concerns.

On the flip side, the peer advocate represents local leaders when passing union-related information on to the membership.



The Peer Advocate as Organizer

Peer advocates often are the most visible union presence in the community. You come into contact with fellow providers in various settings. Because of this fact, the peer advocate is in a good position to carry out the most important function of any union activist: being a union organizer.

Peer advocates can do this in two ways. First, you can activate and mobilize union members on issues that affect them. And second, you can sign up and activate new members.

Mobilizing Members

Different problems arise on the job almost every day. The regulator is treating providers unfairly. The State is ignoring or misinterpreting the contract. Agency representatives or elected officials are not doing what they promised, or they are doing exactly what they said they wouldn't do. To address most such problems, there are usually several approaches and options available.

- ✓ The **Grievance Procedure** is the formal problem-solving process found in the contract. But the grievance procedure has several drawbacks:

Many problems are not covered by contract language. It takes time to process a grievance and "justice delayed is justice denied." A grievance often involves only one peer advocate and one provider, and the State has to deal with only those two people. And where do unions find their strength? In numbers! So, peer advocates should always think about how to involve members to address provider problems.



- ✓ **Informal discussions** with agency representatives can sometimes resolve provider problems. The provider's representative — the peer advocate — could do this. Better yet, a group of providers — with their peer advocate — could meet with the agency representative. Strength in numbers! This could be done before filing a grievance (when there may be a better chance to solve the problem). Or, it could be done instead of filing a grievance.
- ✓ **Mobilizing members** to solve problems is the best way to build union strength and power in the community. This approach takes advantage of the source of the union's strength — the members!



The Peer Advocate as a Success

To carry out successful actions, peer advocates should:

- ✓ Plan tactics and strategies **together** with members; actions can be simple or elaborate — everything from petitions to sending emails to leaflets for parents to delegations to meet with agency representatives.
- ✓ **Involve** as many providers as possible in planning and carrying out actions.
- ✓ **Build support** by talking with providers one on one.
- ✓ Keep fellow providers **informed** so the group can make decisions together.
- ✓ **Publicize** your victories.