

Being an Advocate and a Planner*

Planning Council members, especially PLWH, have important roles to play in the Ryan White planning process both as advocates and as planners. Knowledge of your own population and community, your practical experiences and those of your friends and families, and your perspective on HIV/AIDS are all special and needed. Without input from people living with HIV disease, the planning body cannot effectively do its job.

- ▶ **As advocates,** People living with HIV disease can call attention to the needs of PLWH like themselves and support targeting of services to these groups (e.g., women, gay men of color, substance abusers, PLWH living in outlying areas, etc.). Other Planning Council members from all service categories also serve as advocates on behalf of their communities or the people they serve or represent. In addition, they can serve as advocates for groups that are not represented on the Planning Council.
- ▶ **As planners,** Council members need to think in terms of the needs of all communities and all PLWH population groups in the service area, and to prioritize these needs and allocate resources to services based on sound data and objective criteria. The focus should be on low-income uninsured and underinsured PLWH, because the Ryan White legislation was designed to serve them.

Each role (advocate, planner) has its appropriate moments. For example:

- ▶ When the planning body is involved in needs assessment, the **advocate** makes sure that his/her community is represented in focus groups, surveys, and other information collection efforts to ensure that its needs are documented. During the comprehensive planning process, the advocate questions assumptions made by other members (such as service providers and representatives of public health agencies) that may be inaccurate for his/her community. S/he helps to ensure that important community factors are considered in projecting future service needs, and that interventions/services are appropriate for the PLWH population(s) s/he represents or serves. The advocate provides a "client perspective" when the planning body is assessing the effectiveness of services. The advocate also looks around the table, sees what populations are not well represented, and advocates on their behalf.
- ▶ The **planner** makes sure that the priority-setting process is based on objective criteria, and reflects documented needs; that conflict of interest—including his/her own and that of others—is prevented or managed; and that the needs of all PLWH groups, not just the community s/he represents, are considered. The planner takes responsibility for working to ensure an equitable and data-based process.

* Based on the *Training Guide, Module 7*, available online from the HAB website (written by Mosaica).

Managing the personal struggle between advocate and planner is not easy; however, it is essential. While the advocate may represent or support the interests of a particular PLWH community or service provider, the planner must remember that s/he is there to ensure that the Ryan White planning process addresses the needs of all people living with HIV and AIDS who depend upon it for services, and does so in a cost-effective manner. *If all members functioned as advocates all the time, power, influence, and advocacy skills might determine priorities, rather than demonstrated relative need.*

A sum-up of the roles of the advocate and the planner:

The advocate:

- Calls attention to the needs of specific groups of people living with HIV disease
- Supports targeting of services to these groups
- During needs assessment, ensures that the needs of his/her community are studied and documented
- Carries out the same kinds of advocacy on behalf of populations that are not well represented at the table
- During comprehensive planning:
 - ▶ Questions assumptions
 - ▶ Helps ensure that important community factors are considered
 - ▶ Supports services appropriate for his/her community or population and for other populations that lack their own advocates
- During evaluation, provides the "client perspective" or the "provider perspective"

The planner:

- In needs assessment and comprehensive planning, ensures that the needs of all communities, including those other than his/her own, are studied and documented
- In decision making:
 - ▶ Considers the needs of all communities and PLWH population groups in the service area
 - ▶ Prioritizes needs and allocates resources to services based on sound needs assessment data and objective criteria
 - ▶ Helps prevent and manage conflict of interest -- including his/her own and that of other members
 - ▶ Takes responsibility for helping to ensure an equitable and methodologically sound process