



Advocacy 101

Basic Training
On Effective Advocacy

Story Structure

Example

Introduction.

My name is Kat and I live with my wife of 20 years, Juanita, in Waterbury where we're raising our 2 children on a small farm. My oldest is a busy 13-year-old who has a lot of interest, but above all else, he loves sports, with a special talent for basketball. Our daughter is 9 years old, and she shares his passion for sports as a skilled softball player. When we're not tending to the farm, Juanita is a doctor at UVMHC and I'm managing our home. We feel lucky to have such an incredible family.

We dreamed of having a family for so many years, thinking about the typical milestones that most families experience, like family vacations and graduations. We also wanted to help the children in our community who needed a safe, loving home, which is why we decided to adopt our children.

Illuminate.

It was such an amazingly joyful experience when each of them came into our lives, however, we were not prepared for how pre-verbal trauma can adversely impact the healthy development of our children for years to come, despite being loved and adored by us. And what we quickly discovered is that Vermont woefully lacks the necessary home and community-based services that can improve outcomes for children, so as a result, we're going at it alone, with little help. We noticed early on that there may be an attachment issue and although we were doing everything that we had read and prepared for, it felt like we were ill equipped and didn't know how to best support them. We had no idea what we were doing so we would ask for help from anybody who would listen – connecting with our designated agency, searching for therapists, seeking effective parenting classes, trying to access "skills development" and the list goes on and on. Consistently and persistently, we were told that they didn't have availability, or we didn't qualify, or we would have to wait for 8-12 months. We felt them slipping and we were desperate for support.

Impact.

The moment that changed everything for us was after years of trying to access help from Vermont's mental health system without success, our youngest was exhibiting such severe behavioral challenges that it all culminated to her being kicked out of kindergarten and one evening close to the timing of her suspension, a neighbor called the police on her for screaming while outside, which led to a violent altercation with the police. I will respect her privacy, but I will tell you that it was a traumatic and devastating event for our daughter and for our family that 4 years later we are still dealing with, and she will have to deal with forever. As an abused infant, she faced more abuse from the very people in our community who are supposed to protect her.

The Shift.

This incident should never have happened, and we realized that it was years in the making. We were doing everything right, but we needed professional help. It simple didn't and doesn't exist in Vermont. We were spending hours a week advocating and we were constantly given plans about services, but because of years of underfunding, under planning and undervaluing that importance of mental health in Vermont, our family, like many Vermonters across this state, we suffered because home and community-based services are not invested in.

Solution.

It's time for the state to invest in home and community-based services, such as evidenced based parenting classes, therapies such as DBT-C, day-programs, and respite for parents and caregivers who need rest so that they can best support their children. By investing in these services and programs, we will create more access to the important supports that families need. It will shorten the long waitlists, provide better care and help families thrive.

Call-to-action.

I urge you to take action to support increase funding for home and community-based services. It's time for Vermont to prioritize the mental health of children, especially those who need greater support.

Worksheet

Introduction. Here you're helping the audience connect with you by sharing a little information about yourself.

Illuminate. Determine which event in your life best illuminates the challenge you faced.

Impact. Think of key points to make about your experience that invites people into your struggle.

The Shift. Share the moment when you determined what the solution is.

Solution. Highlight how your solution would work.

Call-to-action. State clearly what you want people to do.

You're on your way!

For more help developing your story, preparing testimony, talking to the media, or writing a letter-to-the editor, Vermont Family Network is here to help. Email Robyn Freedner-Maguire at freednermaguire@gmail.com