



Ascension

Ascension WI EAP

## Advocating for Yourself in a Service System

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major changes to our world and the communities in which we live. Our society is made up of a number of systems that we rely on and have to deal with. These systems include legal, financial, healthcare, work, food, housing, social services, etc. Being able to learn these systems to get what we need is a skill. Shown below are some tips that will help you be better at dealing with these systems during these difficult times.

### **Prepare yourself to have patience.**

Most systems related to work, healthcare, banking, social services are very busy right now. Since we are encouraged to stay home, we will have to make phone calls to get information or the help we need. Expect to be on hold before actually speaking with someone. Connect a headset or earbuds to your phone, or put the phone on speaker so you can do other things while on hold. Feeling frustrated about having to wait is understandable, but is not helpful to you or anyone else living with you. Remind yourself that the workers on the other end speak to people in your shoes regularly and are stressed out as well. Taking your frustration out on them will not help you get what you need.

### **Figure out the problem.**

Ask yourself:

- What is the problem or issue? If there is more than one, focus on one at a time.
- What is my goal?
- What facts do I know?

First, keep your issues separate. Life can be complicated and we can have more than one problem at a time. For example, you might have been laid off from your job. You think, “how will I pay rent,

how will I get food, how will I get healthcare, how will I get money”. These are all good questions and can cause a lot of stress. Take a deep breath, then pick the problem you should resolve first.

### **Know who and where you need to go for help.**

Think about where you need to go for help after selecting a problem to solve. We wouldn't contact our doctor about a problem with paying rent or fixing something in our apartment. If you need help solving problems call a family member, relative, friend, trusted neighbor, local pastor, teacher, or case manager/social worker to help you figure out a plan to solve your problem. 211 Wisconsin is also a great resource to help you connect with government and non-profit services in your area based on need. To access this service go to the website at <https://211wisconsin.communityos.org/>, or simply dial 211 from your phone.

### **Plan what you are going to say and gather the information you might need**

As said before, most issues right now will need to be addressed over the phone. For example, people are losing their jobs and are struggling to pay rent or mortgages. Our first instinct might be to call the landlord or bank in a panic to tell them we can't pay

the bills. Before making that call, take a deep breath and figure out what your options might be. Are you protected by a new law that might be in place? Will you receive stimulus funds that can help pay bills? Are you eligible for unemployment insurance that might help pay the bills? Can I negotiate a payment arrangement? Banks and landlords are feeling the stress of this too. Bringing negative and stressful energy to an interaction will make your situation worse. Prepare by writing down the facts of your situation and what you need help with. Call someone in your inner circle for assistance if you need help planning for these types of phone calls and interactions. Consider having a 3rd person on the phone call if you need more assistance communicating what you need.

### Being Assertive

A big part of assertiveness when using the phone is being persistent enough to get in touch with someone who can help you. When calling large organizations, it's not always easy to reach people. If you have not heard back by the next day, call again and leave another message until you get a return call. Leave messages indicating best dates/times you are able to answer the phone. Learning to be assertive without raising your voice or being rude is a skill to be learned, and one that will make you a much better advocate.

1. **Do your research.** If you are told that you cannot do something or qualify for certain benefits, you should know the standards. For example, you might say, "My insurance policy says that I have the right to appeal this decision, and I would like to appeal."
2. **Set minimum standards.** Often, you will first be dealing with employees who do not have the power to compromise; therefore, if anyone compromises, it will have to be you. If the first employee you speak with cannot meet your minimum demands, ask to speak to his or her supervisor.

3. **Recognize the other side of the argument.** If you demonstrate that you understand the other person's point of view, then he or she cannot dismiss you as being irrational.
4. **Ask for clarification.** Don't let the other person confuse you. Whenever the other person says something that you don't understand, ask for clarification. You can't win a dispute if you don't understand what the other person is saying.

### Formal Advocacy

Formal advocacy strategies generally involve bringing in an outside decision-maker when problems cannot be resolved informally. Examples of formal advocacy strategies include grievance procedures, agency complaint processes, fair hearings, or court action. These are potential options a person can take with particular organizations or agencies; however, you will need to first figure out if your rights have been violated. Not every bad thing that happens to people is a violation of a law, policy, or procedure. However, formal advocacy procedures generally require that there is such a violation. Always ask for a written copy of an organization's grievance procedure, of an agency's complaint process, and of the fair hearing process.

### In Summary

Now more than ever we need to be good advocates for ourselves. Be prepared to be patient when dealing with larger entities such as healthcare systems, banks, government and/or social service agencies. Identify what problem you are facing and make a plan for who you need to contact and what you need to say. Understand that the first person you speak with at a large organization has limited power. If the first person you speak with cannot help you, ask to speak with a person who can. Try to have ideas or solutions in place before making these contacts. Lastly, ask a trusted person to help you problem solve if you need it.