

Administering A Parish Advocacy Program

Many dioceses have found parish advocacy programs to be an effective means of supporting parishes in their efforts to welcome and create access for parishioners with disabilities. Parish advocates, referred to as parish representatives in some dioceses, are recruited, trained, and supported by the diocesan director (hereinafter referred to as director). They serve as a liaison between people with disabilities and the parish, and between the parish and the diocesan ministry with people with disabilities. The parish advocate may be an individual, or ideally, may be the chairperson of a parish Committee for People with Disabilities (the advocate may choose to form such a committee to assist him or her in the ministry).

The goal of the parish advocacy program is for parishioners with disabilities to fully participate in the life of their church community. The parish advocate assists the parish in meeting the spiritual, social, and educational needs of its members with disabilities. The advocate acts on behalf of parishioners with disabilities to ensure that all are invited to share in the life of the parish, serving as the channel through which parishioners with disabilities and other members of the parish discover each other. In many parishes, advocates serve as members of the parish council. Where this is not feasible, advocates should serve on appropriate parish council committees and as a resource to the full council, reporting to them on a regular basis.

Responsibilities and Tasks

Responsibilities of and tasks performed by parish advocates include, but are not limited to, those outlined below:

1. Assist the pastor and other parish staff and volunteers in their ministry with parishioners with disabilities and their families.

- Ascertain the needs of parishioners with disabilities and their families, and the extent to which they desire to be involved in the life and ministry of the parish.
- Work with parish leaders to overcome barriers, both architectural and attitudinal, within the parish.
- Recruit and coordinate other volunteers, including people with disabilities.
- Present an annual written report to the pastor, parish council, and staff.
- Promote awareness and a welcoming attitude throughout the parish community at all times.

2. Identify people with disabilities in the parish.

- Ask pastor, parochial vicars, parish leaders, secretary, parish social minister, religious education coordinator, and others for names of parishioners with disabilities of whom they are aware.

- Scan the parish congregation during weekend liturgies to discover people with noticeable disabilities.
- Place a short article in the parish bulletin describing your mission and asking people to contact you.
- Emphasize access more than disabilities, as many people who could benefit from accessibility features do not consider themselves disabled.
- Check the roster of residents of group homes and institutions within the parish boundaries.
- Request that questions regarding functional limitations be included in the parish census.
- Contact parishioners with disabilities either by phone, or preferably by a personal visit, to identify concerns and discern needs. Maintain contact.
- Host a meeting of parishioners with disabilities and family members, brainstorming about their needs and talents to determine how best to facilitate participation in the parish community.

3. Sensitize the parish to the needs and gifts of people with disabilities.

- Provide awareness education opportunities to be offered periodically throughout the year to parish, school, and religious education students, and youth groups.
- Invite speakers, especially parishioners with disabilities, to talk on disability issues at special forums or at regular meeting times for parish organizations.
- Ask the priests to include the concerns of people with disabilities in their homilies.
- Supply pamphlets and brochures on disability issues in the parish book racks.
- Occasionally include disability concerns in Sunday liturgies.
- Provide bulletin inserts on a regular basis.
- Ask that the needs of people with disabilities be included in the prayers of the faithful, as are those of other parishioners.
- Submit articles to be published in the local and diocesan newspapers.
- Organize a support system, prayer chain, or other method to match parishioners with disabilities with others in the parish.
- Sponsor a study group to read and discuss the Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities, the Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities and other relevant resources.
- Offer sign language classes taught by a qualified person.

4. Assess current access levels of the parish, identifying existing resources and unmet needs.

- Assist parish in conducting accessibility survey of facilities and programs.
- Advocate and work for accommodations to facilitate involvement, including physical accessibility to the church and other parish buildings, interpreters, assistive listening systems, braille, and large print materials.

5. Welcome parishioners with disabilities and their families to participate fully in parish life and programs.

- Invite and assist people with disabilities to become active in the various aspects of parish life (liturgical, educational, and social) according to their interests and abilities. Encourage them to serve on committees and the parish council.
- Coordinate a transportation program for parishioners in need. It is best to avoid group transportation. Rather, link each person with a family or individual from the parish, so that they can be introduced to the parish through that family or friend and to avoid segregation of disabled or elderly people into a special needs group.
- Provide resources and support to the director of religious education to assist him or her in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.
- Establish a support group of people with disabilities and family members to assist those who have recently become disabled or parents who have a newborn with a disability.

6. Make referrals to appropriate agencies or diocesan offices.

- Participate in seminars, read relevant disability resources, and maintain contact with disability organizations in order to maintain current knowledge of disability issues.
- Maintain an up-to-date resource file of existing local and national resources. Share new information with pastor, parish organizations, and others as requested.

7. Maintain contact with the diocesan office for persons with disabilities.

- Remain in communication with the diocesan director of disability ministry.
- Attend periodic seminars within the deanery, vicariate or diocese for ongoing formation.

Many people place demands on a pastor, expecting him to be an expert in every field. The director and parish advocates are the experts in this ministry, and offer assistance to the pastor in his role of inviting people to full membership within the parish. Every pastor has assumed his responsibilities to seek out and serve all the members of his flock. The director and parish advocate can be real allies as they offer to help him in fulfilling his sense of mission, recognizing and acknowledging his interest and concern.

National Catholic Partnership on Disability, Opening Doors, 1990

