

# Self-advocacy — take control of your life

“Don’t accept no,” said veteran advocate for people with disabilities, Bill Marvin, when asked for his most important advice on self-advocacy. As the former special projects coordinator for Florida’s Advocacy Center, Marvin understands protecting individuals’ rights and entitlements.

Self-advocacy gives people with disabilities the tools and experience needed to take greater control over their lives. Although a person with a disability may need support from others, the individual is entitled to control his or her own resources and how they are directed. It’s about having the right to make life decisions without undue influence or control by others. It’s about speaking up for yourself and not just accepting things they way they are.

“Stay true to your commitment and if you continue to meet resistance, move up the chain of command as far as it takes to make sure your goals are met,” recommended Marvin. He also suggested following the Advocacy Center’s Ten Steps for Being an Effective Self-Advocate.

## 1. Believe in yourself

You are worth the effort it takes to protect your interests and your rights. You can do it!

## 2. Realize your rights

You are entitled to equality under the law. Gather information by asking questions and using available resources. To find an advocacy group in your state visit the National Disability Rights Network’s Web site ([www.napas.org](http://www.napas.org)).

Other resources include peer-run family and community support programs, referral/crisis hotlines, advocacy groups, and service providers that offer informative classes, assertiveness training groups and publications. When contacting a resource insist that explanations are clear and understandable. Remember, service providers are public servants: they work for you.

## 3. Discuss your concerns

Schedule a meeting with your service provider. Speaking to someone in person is effective in self-advocacy. Plan and practice what you will say. Dress accordingly, and be on time.

Be courteous and call the person by name. Stay calm. State your message clearly and simply. Prepare

an agenda to stay focused on your issues. Be attentive and if you do not understand something, ask questions. If you feel you are not making progress, tell him or her that you wish to pursue your issue further and ask to speak to a supervisor.

Thank the person for his or her time. It is important to document whom you speak with, the phone number, agency name and what was generally discussed.

Another option is to write a letter to request and confirm information, to present facts or to express your opinion. Keep it short and simple — less than two pages, if possible. Keep your message positive.

Send copies of your letter to agency supervisors,



**Self-advocacy is about protecting your rights and entitlements.**

advocacy groups or others you want to inform. In some instances you may want to copy your legislator. Put "cc" (copies circulated) at the bottom of the letter listing those you are copying. Keep a copy for your records. This documentation will be useful if you need to follow up.

#### 4. Get the facts

Problem solve by gathering information. Get the facts in writing. Ask for a copy of the policies, rules or regulations that are quoted to you. People sometimes settle for a quick verbal decision that may be inaccurate. Hold agencies accountable for the decisions they make.

**>> It's about having the right to make life decisions without undue influence or control by others. It's about speaking up for yourself and not just accepting things the way they are.**

#### 5. Use the chain of command

Use an agency's chain of command to make sure a supervisor or someone else with authority has an opportunity to work with you on the problem and resolution.

#### 6. Know your appeal rights

Request clear written information on your appeal rights. Know your next step when you are dissatisfied.



**If you are dissatisfied with the answers you get, request clear written information on your appeal rights.**

#### 7. Be assertive and persistent

Go after what you want. Remember that effort moves bureaucracies.

#### 8. Use communication skills

Use the telephone to gather information, keep track of your progress and let people know what you want. Before calling, write down essential points. Stay calm. Make your conversation brief and clear.

Listen, because what you hear may be as important as what you say. Ask for the name and position of the person you are speaking with. Ask when you can expect a response or action. If this person can't help you, ask who can. If necessary, ask for a supervisor. Thank the person, keep a record of your call and follow up.

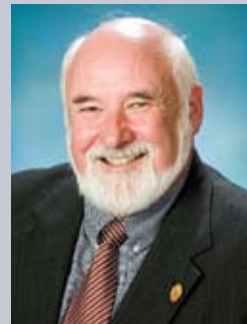
#### 9. Ask for help

Link up with advocacy organizations for more specific information or if you have trouble obtaining services

### About Bill Marvin

At the age of 14, Bill Marvin worked at a camp for post-polio youth. It was the beginning of a career serving as an advocate for people with disabilities.

For 15 years, Marvin was the governor's executive director for Florida's statewide advocacy council, which oversees all disability services in the state, and formerly the special projects coordinator for The Advocacy Center in Florida.



As a member of the NWTF National Board of Directors since 2006, Marvin has worked with national staff on programs throughout the country for people with disabilities.

Marvin believes the Wheelin' Sportsmen program is important to the NWTF. "Everyone deserves the opportunity to experience the great outdoors. Wheelin' Sportsmen is the NWTF's way of making opportunities available to individuals with disabilities," he said. "Wheelin' Sportsmen exposes people to technology and assistive devices they can use to enjoy the outdoors."

Taking individuals hunting, fishing or simply outdoors has rewarded Marvin with friendships and experiences to last a lifetime.

related to a disability. Seek assistance from community support groups or organizations.

#### 10. Follow up

Agencies are accountable for the decisions they make. You are entitled to know and exercise all your options to obtain the assistance you need. But don't forget to thank people along the way.

