

Cases in Agency Advocacy – what would you do, and how?

A social worker is concerned about her agency's intake procedures, which require clients to provide extensive information about their finances and financial habits, even though benefits are not means-tested. When she asks her supervisor why that information is needed, she receives an unsatisfactory answer related to the agency's interest in knowing 'what kind of clients we serve'. She feels strongly that the questions serve as a deterrent to those seeking assistance, are unnecessarily invasive, and intrude on clients' privacy without justification. She shares her concerns with a few of her coworkers, most of whom have never really paid attention to the intake form and don't understand why she wants to change it. One comments that her "clients have never complained about it." The social worker isn't sure what to do, but she doesn't want to let this drop. What should her next step be? Who will be key allies for her as she moves forward? How can she increase her chances of success? What can she expect as possible repercussions for her advocacy? What if the information had been required by donors?

A social work agency is facing significant budget shortfalls, and the Board of Directors will make recommendations for change at the upcoming meeting. Among the options are across-the-board pay cuts for staff, instituting new fees for services, elimination of an outreach worker position, or elimination of one of the two programs that have the biggest deficits – a senior program that serves relatively few clients but is the only available resource for the target population and was the first program of the agency or a youth program that has recently begun to serve at-risk adolescents and is showing great promise but having trouble attracting any revenue, especially as it competes with more established youth programs at other agencies. The social worker directing the youth program is concerned about his program's fate and the impact of the budgetary decisions on the overall agency. He has two weeks before the meeting to influence the Board of Directors, but he has little access to Board members directly and does not know much about their priorities. What should his first step be? With whom does he need to speak before approaching the Board? What does he need to know about the Board, the agency's finances, and the culture to increase his chances of success? How can he influence Board members to protect his program? Are there other options that he should explore? What are the ethical dilemmas he faces?

As a supervisor, you are concerned when several of your direct reports display symptoms of burnout related to rising caseloads in the past six months. The caseload increases stem from the agency's attempts to operate within the constraints of a new privatization contract negotiated by the prior Executive Director. It was later learned that reimbursement levels were inadequate, and increasing the work burden on direct service staff is the agency's strategy for coping. Your employees express frustration that they are not able to spend much time with any client, their paperwork burden has increased to the point that they are taking home hours of work every weekend, and they find themselves blaming clients for the difficulties associated with working through their problems. You have raised these issues with your supervisor, the agency's vice-president for client services, but she has responded that her hands are tied by the Board's insistence that the contract be made profitable. The contract will not be renegotiated with the state for another 14 months, and you know that your supervisees cannot last that long at this

pace. You feel that, if the Board and other stakeholders knew about the caseload levels and their impact on clients and staff, they would share many of your concerns, but you're not sure how to initiate advocacy without endangering the agency's contract, an essential component of the overall financial support. How should you respond to your employees' concerns? What additional information do you need to proceed? Who will be your most important allies? What channels would be most likely to yield success? What can you expect as possible repercussions of your advocacy?