



Trans Care Advocacy

An advocacy guide for trans people and loved ones

Advocacy means helping an individual or a group get what they need. Sometimes advocacy involves providing support or resources so a person can better assert their rights, think things through, decide on a course of action, or otherwise solve the problem. Sometimes advocacy involves working on behalf of an individual or a group to defend their rights, negotiate a solution to a particular problem, or try to change the way a system works.

Who can be an advocate?

Self-advocates are people who represent themselves in a situation. Sometimes self-advocates act completely on their own, and sometimes they get help from other people to make it possible to be self-represented. For example, an advocate might be able to arrange for an interpreter, organize child care, or otherwise address resources you need to self-advocate. If lack of information is the biggest barrier for you in advocating for yourself, you can ask for help in researching information or understanding how a system works. Support from a loved one or a community peer can also help by giving you moral support.

Sometimes self-advocacy is difficult or impossible. It can be overwhelming and stressful to constantly have to be a self-advocate. There may be physical/financial reasons that prevent you from representing yourself. Often people are afraid of the consequences of directly challenging a person with power, intimidated, or worried that they won't be listened to. In these instances you can ask an informal advocate, community advocate, or a professional advocate to speak on your behalf.

Informal advocates are friends, family members, or other people who have no experience or special training in advocacy, but you trust them to help you. Informal advocates usually can't make decisions for you (unless there is a formal representation agreement because you aren't considered capable of making decisions on your own), but they can ask questions, express concern, suggest possible ways to solve a problem, challenge a decision, and educate someone else on your behalf. In everyday life we advocate for each other all the time in this way – calling people on it when they make offensive remarks, raising awareness, and challenging decisions that we think are unfair.

Community advocates are lay people who act as your formal advocate. They are not professional advocates, but have experience advocating for other people, and sometimes have specialized advocacy training. Many Aboriginal organizations, anti-poverty organizations, disability rights groups, HIV/AIDS agencies, immigrant/refugee agencies, lesbian/gay/bisexual groups, seniors' organizations, transgender groups, and youth groups have volunteer or paid community advocates. Like informal advocates, community advocates usually can't make decisions for you but can attend formal meetings with you to provide you with information, advice, and support. Community advocates can also raise systemic issues, when more than one person has been affected by an individual or an agency's actions.

Professional advocates are licensed professionals who have formal training in advocacy – social workers, lawyers, etc. In BC, there are laws determining what a specific professional can and can't do ("scope of practice"); a lawyer can do some kinds of advocacy that can't be done by another type of professional. Even when a professional is legally representing you (e.g., in court) they are still acting on your behalf and under your instructions. Professional assistance is often helpful when a system is so complicated that you don't have a good chance of getting

what you need without a professional to help you navigate through it. There are also situations where you have to involve a professional – for example, to apply for disability benefits a doctor must fill out part of the form and sign it.

General advocacy tips

The webpage at <http://www.transalliancesociety.org/advocacy/individual.html> has links to resources written by various community organizations with experience in advocacy. Below are some tips pulled from this collective community wisdom and our own experience as advocates for trans people and loved ones. The specifics depend on the type of advocacy you're doing, whether you're doing it for yourself or for someone else, your personal style, the amount of experience you have as an advocate, and the kinds of things you need for support. Every situation is different and there is no one right way to be effective. We hope you find this useful as a starting point for considering how you want to be as an advocate for yourself and for others.

The basics

Be clear

- Try to understand both the big picture and the details, and how they fit together.
- Treat everyone in the way that you want to be treated – with respect and dignity.
- Be clear on what you are trying to achieve and what your priorities are. Distinguish between what you need, what you want, and what would be nice to have (but you can live without).
- Be clear on your role and the role of other people who are involved. Being clear on what you can and can't do is especially important if you are advocating for someone else.
- Don't make an agreement on behalf of a person you are advocating for. You can talk to them, tell them your opinion, and even give advice, but you should never agree for them.

Be organized

- Take notes on meetings/appointments/phone calls so you can remember what was said, when, and by who. It's best if these are recorded during or just afterwards when it's still fresh in your mind, to keep the details accurate.
- Keep copies of all paperwork and/or correspondence – including forms you fill out, letters, and electronic files (e.g., emails).
- Keep all your information in a safe place and organize it so you can quickly find what you need.
- Keep track of the timelines for steps in a decision, or the deadlines for submitting a form. If you know you can't get a task done on time, ask before it's due to see if you can get an extension.

Be informed

Effective advocacy requires knowledge of the issue you are working on. There isn't always time to find information before you begin, but even in an emergency situation you can try to find out as much as you can. In particular:

- Understand the system's rules – how is the situation regulated (e.g., legal regulation, policies of an institution/agency), who are the people involved, who makes decisions?
- Know your rights and the rights of the people you're challenging – can you/they refuse to meet, can you/they refuse to answer a question, can you/they appeal a decision?
- Who can you call on if you need more information or support?

The importance of credibility

Power structures tend to place a high value on professional status, academic credentials, or clinical expertise. If you don't have any of these, being persuasive depends on establishing that you are someone who should be listened to and taken seriously. You can build your credibility by:

- Showing you are well informed – you understand how the system works, you know the facts of the situation, and you are clear on what you want to have happen.
- Showing that you have considered a variety of perspectives.
- Giving examples of how other people dealt with similar situations, to support your position and show that a creative solution is possible.

- Using a formal tone that conveys that you expect to be taken seriously, just like a professional would be.

Some professionals pay more attention when a professional peer talks (e.g., doctors tend to listen to other doctors). If you feel you will not be taken seriously no matter what you do or say, the best strategy might be to ask a professional to advocate on your behalf.

Working with people who have professional status and power can make you doubt your own abilities. Self-confidence is a huge part of successful advocacy. It is important to remember that you have knowledge and experience they don't: you are the expert about your life.

Choosing your strategy

- Think about what tactics will be best for a specific situation, rather than always relying on the same tactic.
- Focus on creative solutions rather than getting stuck on the problems.
- Balance planning and intuition. Go in as prepared as possible, and be willing to change your plan if an unexpected opportunity arises or your plan isn't working.
- Be patient and persistent.
- Save your energy (and the attention of the people you have to convince) for the issues that are most important to you.

Listening and watching

Sometimes advocacy is about making a principled stand even when there's no hope of victory, but usually it involves trying to persuade someone to change what they're doing. Being persuasive is not the same as being manipulative or otherwise acting in a way that lacks integrity; it is about figuring out how to communicate in a way that reaches people and moves them to act. This is different in every situation. Some people respond well to passionate arguments or personal stories; others only listen to economic rationales, and get squeamish when asked to listen to a personal appeal.

When you're first engaging in a situation, focusing on listening and watching (rather than trying to get your point across right away) helps you get information that will help you pick your tactics and strategies.

You're not only getting information about the situation, but also about the people involved.

- Listen carefully to what is being said and read between the lines (listen to what is not being said). Sometimes the way people avoid particular topics can be very useful in understanding what needs work.
- Ask questions to figure out where there is common ground, where there is conflict, and where there might be room to maneuver.
- Acknowledge that there are always at least two sides to a conflict. You can say “this is my impression of what happened – what was your take on it?” Try to understand everyone’s perspective, even if you don’t agree with their interpretation.
- Try to get a sense of how the organization/system the person works in is affecting this conflict. What do they need to satisfy their bosses?

Cutting off potential allies within the system cuts off your options. The person you’re dealing with may be a bureaucrat who is secretly trans, has a trans loved one, or shares your principles/values, but is not sure how to help – or they may need some time to think about how to bend the rules. Be open to the possibility that the person you think is your enemy might turn out to be an ally.

Getting beyond confrontation

Confrontation can be an important persuasive tool in advocacy, but it is not the only way to bring about change, and it’s often risky. Assuming that a person is determined to hurt you escalates what might be a situation that can be easily cleared up into a full-on battle. Check out the terrain first before deciding on tactics and strategy. Sometimes clear, calm, and firm communication is as effective (or more effective) than confrontation.

- Focus on a possible solution rather than assigning blame for the problem.
- Think about how to express disagreement without closing the lines of communication. For example, you can calmly state that you disagree with what's being said and explain why, without raising your voice or losing your temper.
- If you’ve reached a deadlock on an issue, move on to a topic where there’s still room for negotiation, rather than going around and

around in circles. “It doesn’t seem we can agree about X at this point, so why don’t we focus on Y for now and we’ll come back to X later.”

- If communication is going downhill and things are getting nasty, ask to take a break or to continue at a later time.

Venting your frustration on the person in front of you can be temporarily satisfying but it usually makes things worse, especially if they have power over you or someone you care about. Even if you win this time, you may need help from the same person on a future issue. Try to build a relationship that might help you and others the next time around.

Taking care of yourself

Advocacy can be inspiring and satisfying, but it can also be exhausting. Effective advocacy often involves having to control your anger/frustration so communication doesn’t get shut down. Find ways to release that pent up emotion (e.g., exercise, relaxation techniques, counselling) so you don’t end up taking it out on yourself or your loved ones.

Avoiding burnout

- Keep perspective. Remember that there is always more than one person can tackle and that you can’t do everything.
- Know and respect your limits. Everyone gets tired and needs down time. Take breaks.
- Expect to make mistakes – it’s part of being human.
- Celebrate your victories and achievements.
- A lot is at stake in advocacy. Balance the seriousness by taking time away from advocacy to have silly, foolish fun.

We take in every absurd, contradictory, counterproductive aspect of the war zone and transform it into grist for irony, humor, irreverence, and creative mischief. That’s how we stay nimble inside it. That’s how we keep it from burning us out.

– Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How can I help?*
Stories and reflections on service

Trans-specific advocacy

In some situations trans people and loved ones seek advocacy to deal with a trans-specific issue. In other cases the problem isn't specifically related to trans concerns. The charts on the next six pages are some examples of general situations and trans-specific situations where advocacy approaches might be useful. The column titled "what an advocate could do" applies to self-advocacy, lay advocacy (friend, family member, community advocate, etc.), and in some cases professional advocacy. These are just examples intended to show the kinds of things an advocate can do in an individual case – there are many other issues trans people and loved ones face in addition to the ones listed on the following pages.

An advocate might**be useful if...****Trans-specific examples****What an advocate could do**

You want support during a stressful process

Medical exam that you find traumatic (e.g., breast/chest exam, Pap smear/pelvic exam, prostate exam)

- educate the doctor/nurse about gender dysphoria and recommended protocols for examination of trans people before the exam
 - help you negotiate an agreement with the doctor/nurse about how they will handle the exam
 - go with you to the appointment to provide support
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Looking for a trans-friendly place to live

- help you figure out where to look (newspaper, community centre ads, etc.)
 - help you brainstorm what questions you could ask to get a sense of whether or not it will be a safe & trans-positive place to live
 - help you work out a plan re: possible disclosure of trans status to roommates/landlord
 - gather information about your tenancy rights and resources if tenancy advocacy is needed
 - go with you when you are seeing places, to provide support and increase your safety
-

Court hearing where you will be asked questions about being trans

- help you find out what your rights are to refuse to answer, and when you have to answer
 - help you practice being asked personal questions
 - provide support before and afterwards
 - educate your lawyer about trans issues and relevant legal precedents
 - provide legal representation (if the advocate is a lawyer)
-

You need help with forms or applications

Applying to change name or legal sex designation

- helping you get and complete the forms
 - going over the steps involved
 - helping coordinate getting a letter from your doctor to request a waiver of the fee
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An advocate might be useful if...	Trans-specific examples	What an advocate could do
You need help with forms or applications (cont'd)	Trying to get surgery coverage from the Medical Services Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • finding information about what MSP requires • collecting information to support the application • following up with MSP to find out when they will make a decision • helping you find assessors and a surgeon approved by MSP
	A form only gives "M" or "F" options, but you don't identify with either one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brainstorming possible actions and discussing possible pros/cons of each • educating the agency about the need to change the forms • researching examples of trans-inclusive intake forms used by other agencies
	An intake form asks for your legal name but that's not the name you want used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • negotiate with staff about adding a space for preferred name on the form • asking that your preferred name be put on your file, used in letters to you, and used when someone is addressing you by name
You can't figure out how the system works or what your options are (e.g., welfare, immigration)	Wanting to start hormones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help you find information about how the system works • educate your GP or another health professional about guidelines for hormone care
	Sponsoring a trans partner to immigrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help you find information about how the immigration system works • help you find trans-positive legal help • help you fill out forms and collect supporting documentation to prove you are partners • researching information about getting established as a newcomer (e.g., applying for medical coverage)
You don't feel you're being treated respectfully	Intrusive questions (e.g., your landlord asks if you've ever had genital surgery)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inform the person you want them to stop asking you these questions • if the questions continue, explore options: e.g., file harassment complaint, move • help with the course of action decided on

	<p>Information is shared without your consent (e.g., you're outed as trans in a public service)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • convey your concerns and upset to the people involved • try to negotiate an agreement about a course of action – e.g., apology + agreement to be more cautious in the future • provide emotional and practical support to deal with consequences of being outed
	<p>You are refused service because you are trans or because your partner is a trans person</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • helping you record details of the incident: what happened, the dates, the people involved • explore options for filing a complaint (e.g., human rights complaint, complaint to a professional association/Better Business Bureau) • organize public campaign to put public pressure on for change
<p>You are overwhelmed and don't have the emotional energy to do things by yourself (e.g., when you're sick or someone you love is in crisis)</p>	<p>You're being treated for a medical emergency or you're in hospital to support a loved one who is critically ill/injured</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • educate hospital staff about trans-sensitivity concerns and any special accommodations needed (e.g., consideration of privacy while changing/ bathing the patient) • provide clinical guidance (e.g., could the symptoms be caused by a reaction to hormones?) • go with you to hospital to provide emotional support and act as buffer with hospital staff
	<p>Filing police report following a transphobic hate crime</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help preparing for questions that might be upsetting, decisions about how to respond if these are asked • be with you when police question you to provide emotional support • identify resources that could be of assistance (e.g., trans-positive sexual assault centre) • create safety plan if the assailant knows where you live: where can you go that's safe?

An advocate might be useful if...
Trans-specific examples
What an advocate could do

You have a better chance of getting what you need if a professional represents you (e.g., legal issues)

Child custody dispute where trans issues are likely to be brought up by the other parent(s)

- try to negotiate a mediated settlement out of court with the other parent(s)
- research legal cases from other areas and prepare a legal brief
- role-play the questions that are likely to be asked, to help you prepare
- find groups of parents who have been through similar struggles, for peer support and tips

Denial of an application for welfare, after quitting a job due to transphobic harassment by your boss or co-workers

- help you understand your options for appeal within the welfare system
- help you file a request for reconsideration (or further levels of appeal if necessary)
- help organize documentation of the reasons for quitting
- explore options for temporary emergency financial assistance while the appeal is processed

The organization, agency, or individuals you're in conflict with won't listen to you or won't give you the information you need

A mental health professional who did an assessment won't tell you their reasons for not recommending surgery

- contact the professional and try to get them to agree to a meeting or a letter of explanation
- help you request access to your file and get copies made
- explore options for reconsideration, including reassessment and a second opinion (by another clinician)

You're told you don't have the right to see a transgender loved one who is in hospital because you're "not family"

- educate/negotiate with hospital staff
 - explore options for advocacy within the hospital setting: patient advocate within hospital, getting a community nurse/doctor to advocate on your behalf with hospital staff
 - organize public campaign: protest/picket, letters/phone calls, etc.
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<p>You're scared that there could be negative consequences if you directly challenge things yourself (e.g., disagreeing with a social worker, teacher, or another person in power)</p>	<p>Issues following arrest and imprisonment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find trans-positive lawyer; educating the lawyer about trans-specific concerns if necessary • monitor measures taken to assess risks and protect safety while in custody • provide information about policies used in other jurisdictions re: celling, strip search, etc. • work on continuity of care: maintaining access to hormones & any other trans-specific care • explore avenues for complaint and possible consequences of challenging the system
	<p>Getting a home care nurse to use the name or pronoun you prefer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making staff aware of your preferences • providing education about sensitivity protocols in care for trans people, and trans people's rights to be referred to by chosen name/pronoun • helping you look for alternative home care provider if this is your preferred course of action
	<p>Negotiating agreement with your boss about transition on the job: who will be told, and when/what they'll be told</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collecting information about transition on the job for you to read and think about • helping you think through a proposal to bring to your boss about how you want transition handled • contacting employer, explaining situation, and offering to provide education to co-workers • providing boss with stories of successful on-the-job transition

An advocate might
be useful if...**Trans-specific examples****What an advocate could do**

You are scared there could be negative consequences ... (cont'd)

You are told you can't crossdress in foster care, group home, long-term care, or another residential facility

- educate staff about crossdressing
- help research policies used in other facilities, and legal cases from other areas
- explore options for a human rights complaint
- organize campaign to support you

You want to file a complaint

Making complaint about staff/volunteers of an organization

- find out who the complaint should be directed to within the organization
- help you think through what you want to say, how you want to say it, and what you want to have happen (apology, staff education, policy change, etc.)

Making complaint to professional organization

- gather information about how complaints are processed
- help you write a formal complaint

Filing complaint with BC Human Rights Tribunal

- collect and discuss information about how the human rights process works
 - identify trans-positive legal advocacy resources
 - help you or a legal advocate prepare the complaint
-

Where can I find an advocate?

Trans Alliance Society: TAS is a coalition of trans and ally organizations throughout BC. Many of the member organizations have community volunteers who are trans (or at least trans-positive) and experienced with advocacy. For more info:

Email: chair@transalliancesociety.org

Web: <http://www.transalliancesociety.org/members>

Transgender Health Program: Staff can help you figure out resources as close to where you live as possible, or can directly act as your advocates in some situations. For more info:

Phone / TTY / TDD: 1-866-999-1514

Email: trans.health@vch.ca

Web: <http://www.vch.ca/transhealth>

You can also contact local organizations that do a specific type of advocacy or advocate for a particular group of people (e.g., Aboriginal organizations, anti-poverty organizations, anti-violence agencies, disability rights groups, HIV/AIDS agencies, human rights organizations, immigrant/refugee agencies, lesbian/gay/bisexual groups, prisoner advocacy organizations, seniors' groups, sex trade worker organizations, youth groups) and see if they can help you.

Sometimes there is a choice about who to seek services from, and sometimes there isn't. Generally, the degree of choice around service often depends on what you can afford, what language the services are offered in, how easy it is to get from where you live or work to the location of the service, how confident you are that a service will be respectful of your cultural heritage, and other issues relating to accessibility. In advocacy you are sometimes limited by bureaucratic requirements – for example, a lay advocate can help you get a disability application and understand what has to be done to complete it, but they can't fill out the entire form (a doctor has to fill out part of it).

When you have a choice about who to go to, there are many things you can do to try to find someone who fits what you are looking for. Before choosing an advocate, consider:

- ***Who is in the best position to help me get what I need?*** Will a trans-experienced lay advocate be your best option for the situation? Is it better to have a professional, even if they don't know as much about trans issues? Do you need an advocate who is inside the system, or who has no ties with the system?
- ***What qualities am I looking for in an advocate?*** One way to think about this is to think about past experiences you've had that have been positive as well as those that have been negative. What did the advocate/service provider do or say that made it so positive/negative?
- ***What are my expectations?*** Consider whether you're looking for something immediate, short-term, or long-term. What kind of commitment do you want the advocate to make to you?
- ***What have other people's experiences been?*** If you know other trans people or family members, ask them if there is anyone they would recommend or if there is anyone they had negative experiences with.
- ***Do I want another perspective?*** Sometimes it is difficult to make decisions when you are in a crisis. It can be helpful to ask friends, family, peers, or other professionals to help you sort out what your options are and determine what would help you to make a decision.

Finding an advocate that is right for you:

Asking questions

Before starting to work on your case, many advocates are willing to talk by phone, email, or in person to get a sense of what you're looking for in an advocate and whether or not they can help you with what you need. This gives you a chance to ask the service provider questions about their experience, expertise, and attitudes relating to trans issues, as well as find out more about the practical logistics such as fees and waitlist for services.

The types of questions you ask depend on your personal preferences and needs. Examples of possible questions are:

- What kinds of advocacy do you do? What kinds of advocacy do you not take on?
- Have you ever worked with trans people or their family members? Have you worked specifically with ___ (Two Spirit people, trans people of colour, MTFs, FTMs, transsexuals, crossdressers, etc.)?
- Are you familiar with the language used to talk about gender issues and sexual orientation?
- Are you open to everyone, or are there limits on who is eligible for your services?
- What are the limits of your services and powers? What can/can't you do?
- Do I need to get a referral from another service provider to see you?
- Do you have an intake process?
- How long is your waiting list?
- What are your fees?
- Are there stairs into your office? Is the bathroom wheelchair accessible?

Advocates think of themselves as fair, just, open-minded people and are likely to get defensive if asked directly about their attitudes to transgender people, or just say “I don’t discriminate.” But when you start talking with them about your problem and asking about their experience, you can try to get a sense of their sensitivity to trans issues. For example:

- Do they seem open to advocating on your behalf?
- What is their approach to gender and to gender diversity? Do they seem to perceive transgenderism as a mental illness or sexually deviant?
- Do they understand how societal issues (such as transphobia, racism, sexism, etc.) affect trans people’s health and well-being?
- How comfortable do they seem talking explicitly about gender issues and being around trans people?
- Does it seem like they value diversity and honour the client’s perspective?
- Do they seem open to hearing your opinions and concerns?

Questions? Contact the Transgender Health Program:

Office: #301-1290 Hornby Street, Vancouver, BC V6Z 1W2

Phone/TTY/TDD: 604-734-1514 or 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC)

Email: transhealth@vch.ca

Web: <http://www.vch.ca/transhealth>

The Transgender Health Program is an anonymous and confidential free service for anyone in BC who has a trans health question or concern.

Services for trans people and loved ones include:

- information about trans advocacy, medical care, hormones, speech change, and surgery
- help finding health/social services, and help navigating the trans health system
- non-judgmental peer counselling and support
- information about trans community organizations and peer support groups



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For more copies, email the Transgender Health Program at trans.health@vch.ca or call/TTY 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC) and quote Catalogue No. GA.100.Ad95.