Promoting Clients’ Interests

Introduction

One theme which has appeared throughout this book is the extent to which social care in the community relies not only on individual social workers, not even only on their agencies, but on the combination of a whole variety of resources – people, organisations and physical resources. One assumption underlying community care is that these resources are freely available or can be released by effective work from social workers. If they were more supportive, more enabling, if they negotiated better, if they looked for, created and co-ordinated resources more effectively, then their service to clients would be much improved. And so, no doubt, it would. But it has also to be recognised that there are not enough resources, that agencies resist the release of resources, or that resources are of the wrong kind or in the wrong place. This chapter is about ways of dealing with such difficulties.

The first sections are about advocacy, that is, presenting a case for changes in the distribution or delivery of resources for the benefit of a client or clients. The following section is about public education which is the process of seeking public support and sympathy for changes in policy and resources which will be of benefit to clients. The final section is about consultation, which is a process of assisting other helpers to change or develop their mode of help.

Advocacy – principles and problems

There is a considerable, but mainly American, literature on advocacy, which raises a number of important issues both of definition and of principle.
Defining advocacy has been a controversial matter. It is generally agreed, however, that two types must be considered: what Bull (1982) has distinguished as 'case' advocacy and 'cause' advocacy. Case advocacy is like that of a lawyer: the advocate takes up a particular problem of the client and argues on their behalf. Cause advocacy is a process of arguing for the reform of a system of administration which leads to difficulties. Bull thinks that these two can be related: the arguments for a cause may be enhanced by the experience of arguing for a case and thus becoming closely acquainted with the details of a particular set of problems. Similarly, successful advocacy for a cause can resolve many individual cases of difficulty. The two processes go hand in hand.

Various other forms of advocacy are dealt with in the literature. One important area is 'internal advocacy', defined by Patti (1971, p. 537) as 'an activity... which is undertaken for the purpose of changing the formal policies, programs, or procedures of the agencies which employ them [the advocates] in the interest of increasing the effectiveness of the services provided or removing organisational conditions or practices which are deleterious to the client population served'. Social workers formally setting out to change their own agencies present themselves with many practical difficulties, but, as with cause advocacy, it may be a very effective way of helping a large number of clients with problems.

Sosin and Caulum (1983) point to a number of aspects of advocacy which should be included in any definition. They emphasise the importance of the imbalance of power between the client and the agency which is being influenced to change. This clearly delineates the distinction that has been drawn between negotiation, mediation and advocacy. I have described the processes of negotiation and mediation as ones of mutual education and exploration, in which, even if there is 'fighting', a reasonable degree of power to influence exists on both sides. Advocacy is required when the power is against a client or group of clients and the situation must be changed in their favour.

Sosin and Caulum also make the point that advocacy is not relevant where there is no chance of influencing decisions in favour of the interests of clients. It is important, however,