

## **Ottawa advocacy group for disabled eyes expansion here**

Organization matches volunteers with people with disabilities

**Douglas Gloin, editor**

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**Local News** - An Ottawa organization that helps match community volunteers with persons with disabilities is considering possible expansion of its services to Renfrew County and elsewhere in Eastern Ontario.

Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa, a United Way agency, has received a grant from Ontario's Trillium Foundation to study the feasibility of expansion. In addition to Renfrew County, the group is looking at providing services in Prescott-Russell and Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry counties.

The organization has a proven track record of matching volunteers - it calls them advocates - with clients who disabilities, who are known as protégés. Its goal is to help individuals with disabilities, people who are often feeling alone and isolated, become more included in the community around them. It sees its advocates as "taking on the role that any good neighbour would."

Advocates volunteer their time to help represent and protect the rights of their protégés, assist them through the challenges they face, and encourage them to take part in the community around them. They help with a wide range of issues such as housing, budgeting, transportation and doctors' visits.

The fruits of the program for the person with a disability are improved self-esteem, a feeling of empowerment and reduced vulnerability, the organization says.

In Ottawa, there are now 220 such matches under way. The average length of a match is five years, but the organization has one that has been going for more than 20 years. Citizen Advocacy was established roughly 32 years ago and, in that time, it has supported about 2,000 matches.

Once Citizen Advocacy has set up a match - the requests for an advocate are made by the protégé - the two individuals take things from there. Volunteers undergo an orientation program before they take on the task.

"The people in the match build the relationship," says Kathleen Stephenson, the Ottawa group's feasibility study co-ordinator. She hopes the study will ascertain whether or not a Citizen Advocacy program would be useful in Renfrew County and what model for it would be best.

Representatives from the organization will be in Barry's Bay next Wednesday (Nov. 1) to deliver a presentation on their organization. The meeting is being hosted by the Madawaska Valley Association for Community Living.

MVACL Executive Director Marion Peck is already a supporter.

"Individuals living in rural areas like Barry's Bay face a number of issues that lead to isolation, including the vastness of the geographic area as well as the limited resources of a small community," Peck said.

"The services currently offered in Renfrew County could be enhanced by a program like Citizen Advocacy. There is a sense of pride that results when people are able to solve issues and reach goals without having to access a paid worker."

Citizen Advocacy's executive director, Brian Tardif, said the service is unique.

"While we have grown and developed in Ottawa as a leader in the disability sector, there is no organization that provides similar types of support to people with disabilities in the counties of Eastern Ontario," said Tardif.

Slightly more than half of Citizen Advocacy's clients are people with intellectual disabilities. The group also helps people with mental illness, age-related disabilities and other physical disabilities.

Citizen Advocacy receives funding from Ontario's Community and Social Services Ministry, the United Way, the city of Ottawa and donations from other sources. It is a registered charitable organization.

The feasibility study is scheduled to conclude in November and a report is expected to be available at the end of that month. For more information on Citizen Advocacy, see [www.citizenadvocacy.org](http://www.citizenadvocacy.org)