

'Good neighbours' for people with disabilities

Citizen Advocacy eyes expansion to Renfrew County

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Local News - There are times when the simplest tasks can present the largest obstacles to individuals with an intellectual or other form of disability.

Many people rely on the support of others to help with many daily activities that most of us do with ease. Can you imagine having to depend on a paid person to assist you to travel from your home to a destination, help you make a grocery list or even accompany you to church?

Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa, an organization whose name may soon become more much more familiar to people in the Madawaska Valley, relies on a core of volunteers who provide friendship and a helping hand to people with disabilities. The group is considering expansion to Renfrew County as well as Prescott-Russell and Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry counties. The organization is just completing a feasibility study on expansion, funded by a grant from Ontario's Trillium Foundation.

Representatives from the 32-year-old organization were in Barry's Bay a few weeks ago to give people a rundown on just what they're all about. About 35 people attended the meeting, held at the Activities + drop-in centre run by the Madawaska Valley Association for Community Living (MVACL). The participants included representatives from local organizations, individuals with intellectual disabilities, family members, members of MVACL and elected municipal officials.

"We believe that people with disabilities should be included in decisions that affect their lives," Citizen Advocacy spokesperson Heather Badenoch told the gathering, adding that the core of her organization is its volunteers. Citizen Advocacy has only 11 staff members, but more than 200 volunteers provide friendship and support to about 240 people of all ages and disabilities. The group sees its advocates as "taking on the role that any good neighbour would."

"For the most part, people who come to us looking for volunteers are either isolated or home-involved," Badenoch said. "They have people who are paid to be in their life; but they don't always have people who choose to be in their life. They don't always have someone who would like to go for a cup of coffee, find out how their week was, take an interest in ... what they're doing." Citizen Advocates are friends who, when something comes up, can help their "proteges" make decisions or navigate difficult processes. They do this through three basic programs:

- "Everyday Champions" matches people with disabilities and volunteer advocates. The volunteers and individuals share activities, and often include friends and families in their match. People of all ages and disabilities are served under the program. "It's entirely

flexible,” Badenoch said. “They decide when they want to get together and they decide what they want to do.”

- “Chance for Choice” is a program designed for senior citizens in need of a friend and advocate. Badenoch cited one incident in which a senior was being taken advantage of financially by her family. When a family member who was a bit removed from the situation got in touch with Citizen Advocacy, the organization found a volunteer advocate who she could trust to help her sort things out. They continue to meet every week.
- Citizen Advocacy also matches volunteers to group homes. While they aren’t paired with an individual, they help people at the home and provide companionship and activities.

Badenoch says one of the secrets to Citizen Advocacy’s success is its rigorous screening process, which seeks people with compatible interests and goals. The matching process can take time – it doesn’t run on a first-come, first-served basis. Volunteers must make a minimum 12-month commitment to their match. It seems to work, on average, a match lasts 5 and a half years.

“People learn from their match,” Badenoch says. “The volunteer advocates say they learn a lot, the protégés say they learn a lot. It really does work both ways.”

The Barry’s Bay session included a presentation on Citizen Advocacy and then moved into group discussions where members offered ideas on ways to create this “match” program in our community. People seemed to agree that a project of this type would be beneficial to individuals living in our community.

“I believe in the philosophy and the structure that is currently in place for Citizen Advocacy in the Ottawa area,” said Marion Peck, executive director of the Madawaska Valley Association for Community Living. “There are so many positive effects of a program like this, some individuals require minimal help to live independently in the community – say, a friend to take them to church or help with grocery shopping can mean the difference between dependence and independence. There are needs that can be met by a trained staff support, but there also many ways that supported volunteers can befriend individuals in our community, the match program offers the steps to make that happen.

For more information on Citizen Advocacy, see www.citizenadvocacy.org