# Blind Citizens Australia logo

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# Advocacy Fact Sheet

**September 2023**

## What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is about speaking out to make things better for you and for others. You might undertake advocacy on your own or as part of a group, or you might have an advocacy organisation like Blind Citizens Australia help you with advocacy.

No matter how advocacy is done, it is important because it helps people who are blind or vision impaired to live as part of the community.

Advocacy sometimes happens directly through one person asking people or organisations to change what they do. This is often called individual advocacy. For example, a university student who is blind may need to use individual advocacy to get their textbooks in large print or Braille.

Sometimes advocacy is less direct, and it helps by educating other people about blindness and vision impairment. This is often called systemic advocacy, and usually involves a person or a group asking for changes which will affect many people who are blind or vision impaired. They might be asking for changes from another person, an organisation or the government, or several different groups at once.

To use the example above, the same student might use systemic advocacy by getting help to meet with government, university officials and book publishers to try and make sure all future students who need Braille or large print books can get them. Systemic advocacy often takes a lot of time and patience.

## Why do we advocate?

There are many reasons we advocate. The ultimate goal is to achieve independence and equality in every part of our lives. Advocacy helps to achieve this by changing the behaviour of others and educating them about the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Taking part in advocacy can help someone to feel better about who they are because they are working to bring about positive change.

Australian society says that people with disabilities should be treated equally, but this doesn’t always happen in real life. Changes which make things better will only come about if we ask for them through advocacy.

People sometimes think that advocacy means ‘making a fuss’ or ‘being difficult’. Others are afraid that advocacy will lead to a complicated, stressful and expensive court case. In reality, most of the time advocacy is about talking to others and making sure everyone understands what needs to happen. This can be done calmly and respectfully, and often there is no need to go through a formal process to fix things. For example, someone who is vision impaired might ask their bus driver to call out the stops because they cannot see where they are. If the bus driver refuses, a complaint to the company would usually fix the problem.

In the bus driver example, if the company refused to make the bus driver call out stops then the customer who is blind or vision impaired could get help from an organisation like Blind Citizens Australia to tell them about the Disability Discrimination Act, a Federal law which says that all information about public transport must be accessible to people with disabilities. Not following the Act by refusing to call out bus stops is against the law.

The bus company might not decide to change even if they know that what they are doing is against the law. Then the person would have the choice to leave the issue alone, or to take it to an anti-discrimination body. There are anti-discrimination bodies funded by government in each State and Territory, as well as a national body. The anti-discrimination body would help by bringing everyone together with a person specially trained to work out solutions. This is called conciliation, and it is provided free of charge. The issue would only go to court if conciliation did not work and the person still wanted to solve the problem.

So although advocacy can feel overwhelming, most of the time it doesn’t need to be complicated or difficult. Organisations like Blind Citizens Australia can help by giving information over the phone or providing advocacy support to help with a resolution.

## How can I advocate for myself?

Advocacy is different for everyone. Some people like to be very formal and may begin by writing letters. Others like to be more laid back, and may make phone calls or send email. What feels comfortable for you is often what will work best.

Here are some basic guidelines that may help:

1. Try to stay calm. It is okay to feel upset, but advocacy is more effective if everyone is calm when discussing what has happened and what needs to change.
2. Know your topic and points of discussion before you meet with someone or call them. It can be helpful to talk things through with someone you trust first.
3. Make a list of the issues you would like to discuss. This way you are able to check each point off as it is addressed, and you are less likely to forget something or to feel overwhelmed. It is also helpful to keep notes about anything else you have done to solve the problem, such as listing when you talked to someone else about it and what they said.
4. Think carefully about how the situation has come about and what you would like to happen. Has this happened through a misunderstanding or is someone deliberately breaking the law? Do you want an apology, or would you like something else to change?
5. If you cannot change the situation by yourself, talk to a person who might be able to help you, such as a friend, an advocacy agency or a manager at the company you’ve had issues with. They will be able to advise you on ways to address your concerns.

## Getting involved

Advocacy isn’t just about solving problems when they happen, it can help to prevent them too. Sometimes keeping the lines of communication open makes all the difference.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Join a committee. Many organisations have committees which help to make sure that people with disabilities get a say in what the organisation does. Local councils, transport companies and organisations which provide services for people who are blind or vision impaired are just some of the groups who want to know what you think.
2. Contact your local MP. If there are big issues you’re concerned about, telling your local politician in an email, letter, phone call or meeting might help.
3. Talk about your blindness or vision impairment where-ever you feel comfortable doing so. You might not want to answer every question asked by every stranger, but you can raise awareness in your local community. You could write an article for a newsletter, talk to a local club or start a website.
4. Join Blind Citizens Australia and be an active member. We have branches all over the country. While some of our branches are more social and others are more advocacy-based, most offer opportunities for you to speak out in your local community. BCA also has special interest groups and committees.

Blind Citizens Australia also has self advocacy tools and policies which can help you get to your message across. All of these are available on our website.