

## Advocacy in Action:

# The Mission of a Developmental Disabilities Provider

by Terry Macy, Ph.D., SARAH Tuxis Residential Services

Like many other human services providers, nonprofit agencies serving persons with developmental disabilities have felt the direct impact of the recession. Many have had their revenues decreased as the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services begins its attendance based fee for service system. The additional impact of runaway increases in the costs of health care (reported to be true for 89% of those responding to a recent CT Association of Nonprofits survey) and worker's compensation have given new meaning to the commentary in CT Nonprofits' recent report, *The Economic Health & Impact of Nonprofits in Connecticut*. The report notes that there is "a dangerous tipping point on the horizon." Unfortunately, it is a very current reality for many.

As if both of these forces were not challenging enough, there is another problem on the horizon as the projected state budget deficits for fiscal years 2012 and 2013 are each reported to be approximately \$4 billion. While it is an overused analogy, the expression "perfect storm" is an apt description of what we are witnessing - one of the largest turnovers in legislators in recent memory alongside one of the largest deficits in history. All but one of our constitutional officers will change and the legislative churn will result in the loss of some of our best advocates. As the new batch of elected officials takes office in January, they will have only six months to find new solutions to a growing budget

deficit. While the coming year is certainly much more challenging than most, it is not so bleak that it cannot be overcome through well planned and coordinated legislative advocacy by the nonprofit community.

The future success of our sector requires dedicated advocacy with full participation of agency Boards of Directors, staff and families. There are many reasons that people will not want to engage in advocacy, from the myth that the IRS prohibits it, to the myth that it is too hard or time-consuming. CT Nonprofits provides ongoing "Advocacy 101" training that teaches nonprofits how the system works and how to execute effective advocacy strategies. Membership gives nonprofits access to consistent and timely public policy updates with all of the information they need to advocate for their cause. This includes an easy, one-click email advocacy system - VoterVOICE (see sidebar). As the name implies it provides a direct means for everyone to alert their legislator about issues critical to their agency and its mission.

At SARAH Tuxis, political advocacy is intimately tied to our mission and has been a constant commitment for nearly all of our 20 years. While it is not necessary to get as involved as some of us do by joining town committees etc., it is imperative that every local legislator knows the Executive Director and Board members of their local nonprofits. At no point in SARAH

Tuxis' history has there been a time when our State Representative or State Senator did not know key staff or Board members or were not familiar with the issues that were essential to us. Our Board of Directors recently hosted a legislative breakfast at one of our group homes. It was a great opportunity to showcase one of our innovative settings where three young men pooled their resources to share staff. All three of our State Representatives and our State Senator attended. Each walked away having met the men and their support staff and understood how this home represents our commitment to our vision, "providing innovative supports, one person at a time."

The relationships that the staff and Board of SARAH Tuxis have built over time allow me quick and easy access to my elected officials. So when a new budget is released or a new regulation is proposed that would be harmful to the people we serve, I have the ear of our policymakers in Hartford. They depend on me to speak for the needs of their constituents who cannot speak for themselves. They know that SARAH Tuxis can provide the data, information and real-world impact of the policies being discussed in Hartford. It is the tireless advocacy of SARAH Tuxis and other area nonprofits that allow our elected officials to make informed decisions and properly meet the needs of their constituents.

It will be critical in the coming year for all nonprofits to come together and effectively advocate as a community. Clients and consumers are accessing services at skyrocketing rates and presenting with more complex needs than ever. In order to properly serve these individuals and families, we will need to demonstrate the efficiency and

cost-effectiveness of nonprofit services. We will need to advocate for the scarce resources that we need to support our clients and consumers.

As a nonprofit Executive engaged in advocacy for over 20 years, I can certainly debunk the myths that advocacy is both overly time-consuming and difficult. The tools are certainly available at CT Nonprofits and we simply must take the time to make our voices heard. Advocacy is incumbent on nonprofits for we serve and support the most underrepresented segments of our population. We must not only speak for them, but also help them find their voice. There are simply too many people depending on us. ■

*Terry Macy, Ph.D., has been the Executive Director of SARAH Tuxis Residential Services since its inception in 1990. Dr. Macy is an active participant in many statewide and national organizations including the Arc movement. He was recently re-elected chair of the Region X Chapter of the American Association of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities and is a Fellow of the organization. Dr. Macy is currently a Board member of CT Nonprofits and Chair of its Public Policy Committee.*



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Thomas D. Roy, CPA  
Director of Non-Profit Division  
35 Cold Spring Road, Suite 111  
Rocky Hill, CT 06067-3161  
860-721-5786  
tomroy@crandg.com

## VoterVOICE - Advocacy made so simple you can't say no!

**With VoterVOICE you will periodically receive an "ACTION ALERT" email letting you know about an important policy issue affecting your organization, services or consumers.**

CT Nonprofits is excited to re-introduce VoterVOICE, a grassroots online advocacy system that allows us to make advocacy more manageable for our members. With VoterVOICE you will periodically receive an "ACTION ALERT" email letting you know about an important policy issue affecting your organization, services or consumers. The staff at CT Nonprofits will prioritize these emails for you, making it easy for you to advocate for the most important causes. By simply providing VoterVOICE with some basic contact information, we assure you that your

voice will be heard by the greatest number of legislators in the easiest way possible.

You can forward our alerts to your board, donors, staff and others who are not members of CT Nonprofits. VoterVOICE will allow them to register and become a part of our advocacy campaign. The more voices talking about issues affecting nonprofits, the greater impact we will have.

Our staff is an extension of your staff - we're here to serve as a resource and help make advocacy as simple and manageable as possible. CT Nonprofits appreciates all that you do to make Connecticut's communities better, safer and healthier. We know that your time is valuable and hope that you will participate in as many advocacy campaigns as possible. CT Nonprofits' success is only as great as the success of our members. ■

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