THE PITCHFORK APPROACH TO ADVOCACY

This is chapter six from “Disability Organizing 101 and Beyond” found at http://freeourpeople.net/disabilityorganizing101andbeyond/ published by ADAPT.

As ADAPT got further and further into the our work to end the institutional bias in long term care and expand community based services we found we were combining strategies more and more often. Bob Kafka dubbed this the pitchfork approach and developed a framework for thinking about and planning this line of attack. ADAPT’s multi-pronged strategy uses this approach often.

What is the pitchfork?

There are five prongs, so some refer to the hand, but I prefer pitchfork. Some people say pitchforks don’t have five prongs, but they do. We have seen them and even have one. I have been told five pronged pitchforks are mostly used for dung, appropriately enough. The prongs for the advocacy pitchfork are: political, system/administrative, direct action, media/education and legal.

The political prong addresses the political system, a state legislature, the U.S. Congress, county commissioners or a city council, in other words elected officials who pass or block passage of laws. During the political process there are opportunities to meet with the politicians to talk about your issue. These folks are elected and the whole election process gives opportunities to educate those involved. Candidates forums, surveys and the like can tell us what the candidates think about our issues, but these are also opportunities to tell them what issues are important to our communities.

The system/administrative prong addresses bureaucracies, state agencies, city departments and other rule making bodies. Believe it or not, once a law is passed it gets “clarified” by bureaucrats who write rules (also called regulations, or regs. for short) with a lot more details about what the law means. During this process, we can testify, write comments and in various ways let them know our position. These folks also interpret rules and oversee the programs. If things aren’t happening the way they are supposed to, we can let the decision makers know and force them to deal with the short comings in the system.

Direct action involves using people power to do “street” theater, demonstrations, civil disobedience, anything that directly involves using the people involved in your group. I have found that many people think that all forms of direct action are illegal, from holding a sign or having a rally to chaining yourself to a door or blocking a bus. In reality, most kinds of direct action are completely legal; you must break a law for something to be illegal. Sometimes breaking a law to demonstrate an immoral situation (civil disobedience) is a step you want to take, ADAPT members have done this many times and it can be very effective. However, there are many other types of direct action to choose from if your group is not ready for civil disobedience. Direct action can be the most fun prong on the pitchfork and often gets the quickest results.
**Media/education** involves getting media (TV, radio, papers, blogs, etc.) or other general education tactics like flyering, websites, social media and other efforts to get the public up-to-speed on your issue.

**Legal** refers to the courts, filing suits and the like. I list it last because so often people turn to that strategy first and then stop; they don’t use any of the other prongs. Yet legal efforts are often very slow. The lawyers, judges, mediators and other players in the legal system often take the decision-making and action out of the hands of those directly involved in the issue and put control in the hands of the lawyers. This can be very disempowering. Some lawyers who take our kinds of cases are better about leaving us in control than others. None-the-less legal can sometimes lead to great results so don’t forget or totally dismiss this last prong.

**What is a multi-pronged strategy?**

A multi-prong strategy to social change uses a group or community’s coordinated advocacy effort using all the tools in an advocate’s arsenal, all the prongs on the pitchfork, to bring about real changes in people’s lives. When organizing we found, if we were stopped in one avenue, using one strategy or prong, a multi-pronged strategy allowed us to turn our focus to another prong of our campaign and continue the fight. In addition, work in one area can often push another area to move forward.

Individuals within a single organization can use the pitchfork, as can multiple organizations working together. When ADAPT of Texas began to fight to end the institutional bias in Texas we went to board meetings of our then Department of Human Services and pushed for more funds for community services. We testified at the department’s meetings and all the folks who had been warehoused (or were currently warehoused) in nursing homes or state institutions spoke about why they wanted out and how getting out had improved their lives. (This would be the system/administrative approach). Sometimes our testimony involved theater, like when we found out that by cutting the nursing home rate by a penny a day millions of dollars would become available to increase community-based services so we pitched pennies at the Board while we testified. (This would be direct action). Our “policy-wonking” members (the folks who actually like to read regulations and policies and procedures – difficult as that may be to imagine) combed the rules the agency made to look for possible areas of improvement. We would fax out press releases to all the media each time we went; sometimes they came, sometimes not. (This was using media). When we “found” a set of income and expense reports for the Texas nursing homes, we made a flyer listing the profits (in millions) for the top 20 or so. Just as the nursing homes were moaning they could not get by on their current funding rates, we distributed it to the members of our state legislature and the public. (This combined the education and legislation prongs of our campaign).

By using the diverse individual skills and resources of your group and or your community, a multi-prong strategy allows different talents and ideas to emerge.

**How do you use a multi-pronged strategy?**
Think about your campaign and your goal. What is involved in accomplishing your goal? Who can make it happen? How could elected officials help? How could bureaucrats help? What kinds of things would your members enjoy doing? How can the message be spun to the public, how do we explain it to Joe or Josie Public? How do we get the word out? Is there a legal angle to the campaign?

The LC & EW v Olmstead Case Example

When we started using the Olmstead Supreme Court Case as an organizing tool, we dubbed the anti-disability, Florida brief the “dark side” brief, borrowing from Star Wars. Though we did not know what kind of effect this might have on the Supreme Court itself, ADAPT and our allies felt that there were other benefits to such a campaign. We felt it would spread the word about the issue among the disability community, to whom we turned for help, and to the general public. In addition it put state officials on notice that the disability organizations, agencies and groups in their states cared about this issue and were willing to fight for the liberation of people with disabilities. ADAPT and other groups in the unofficial coalition reached out to our networks of people across the nation. We developed “talking papers” (short one or two page papers explaining the issues in the case, hitting the highlights of why the disability position was the correct position and suggesting how to explain this to state leadership.) We wrote up press releases that could be easily modified to fit the group and state using them. We held a couple of conference calls to explain these things in more detail and we set up a listserve to share information. Every day or so we would send out an email with an update of some action a group had taken: a meeting held with officials, a press conference or rally, theater they had done about the issue. Of course whenever a state pulled off or joined the states’ legal brief we would announce who had moved away from the “dark side” or had joined it. Different states and different groups chose different tactics at different times; press conferences, rallies and meetings were common, some groups had petitions, some marches, some had teach-ins. Pretty much every state in the U.S. participated in supporting the disability position in some form or fashion, and in the end of the 26 states that signed on to the “dark side” brief all but 7 came back off, including Florida – the state that started the whole brief.

It Got Hot in Texas

In Texas we escalated as our Governor and Attorney General remained entrenched against the disability position and supporting the states’ anti-disability brief. Eventually ADAPT members flyered the Governor’s church one Sunday, standing on the sidewalks passing out flyers about the issues and the Governor’s refusal to budge. We learned that day that sucking up was alive and well as tons of Texas big wigs entered and left that church; so we not only pressured the Governor, we educated lots of other movers and shakers as well. Although Texas never came off the “bad” brief, when Governor Bush ran for President he committed to supporting the ADA and the most integrated setting of the Supreme Court, and once in office he sent out an Executive Order the New Freedom Initiative that started the Federal Agencies working on ways to promote our goals, albeit with a Republican thrust. In addition, our state legislators were educated on the issue and therefore more willing to take action once the Supreme Court made their decision.
With the informal coalition, we were able to use all the prongs of the pitchfork. We were pushing elected political officials to stop supporting the anti-disability position and legal brief. Some on our team were pressing systems officials to push the state leadership to do the right thing. Some were doing street theater, marches, rallies and other direct action to call attention to the campaign. Some held press conferences, did flyering, media releases and similar tactics used media and education to spread the word. Of course the case itself was legal as was the pro-disability amicus brief we drafted and got many of the members of the campaign to sign onto.

**How do you use this with multiple groups?**

Using this kind of strategy with several groups can be a bit tricky, but it can also pay off. Frequently groups which use a particular strategy are either ignorant of other advocacy efforts or think they are ineffective and/or even harmful. For example, legal agencies can feel media and public education get in the way, systems/administrative kinds of groups can feel legal groups are too confrontational. Pretty much everyone, except those using it, used to look askance at direct action. Fortunately, this seems to be getting a bit better. Coalitions can be a headache but they can also cover more bases and more ground than a single group.

The main issues are coordination and trust. You want to share information and ideas so advocacy strategies are coordinated, not conducted in isolation. Different prongs can support and enhance each other, but only if they know what the other is doing and why. Various strategies can go on at different times, but even if they are not at the same time coordination increases effectiveness.

In addition to being the major issues for multiple strategies, coordination and trust are also benefits. As you get used to coordinating these plans you get better at coordinating in general and as trust builds between groups working together becomes easier.

A multi-prong strategy is more powerful strategically than any single pronged strategy. The opposition rarely expects to be taken on on so many fronts, and each prong tends to feed the others – if they are working together. In addition if you get blocked in one area you can focus on another and if that peters out, often enough time has passed that the first strategy is viable again, or a third or fourth can take the lead.

Good cop, bad cop is a classic example of using different approaches. When we were trying to get lifts on buses in Dallas we would often block buses and get arrested. But we also knew the man who lead the Mayor’s Office on Disability. He was not someone who would come out in the streets with us, but he believed in equal access to public transit just as we did. He would attend meetings within the city bureaucracy and say things like, “I know those lifts are expensive but if we don’t do something those folks out there are going to be blocking buses during the rodeo.” He would find out when the bus conventions would be and where and share that information with us, to use as we found necessary. Could we have found out another way? Sure and sometimes we did, but it was just one more thing we didn’t need to use our time on.

You can have one organization focus on a single prong and another on another, or groups can collaborate on a couple of prongs. Whatever works with the folks you have is the way to go.
Coalitions can be a headache too, but if you are straight with each other and your own group you will have an easier time. People who say one thing to one person and another thing to another will soon burn their bridges with others and others will not want to work with them. Remember the old organizing adage, “no permanent friends; no permanent enemies.” You may not agree on the ideas for every campaign. You may not even have the same goals each time. But where you do agree, where you are headed in the same direction why not broaden your efforts and join forces?