

Project Dandelion
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What is Project Dandelion?

Project Dandelion, a project of Neighborhood Legal Services, brings together community and legal support for families and individuals receiving public assistance, helping them to attain economic self sufficiency through

- legal advocacy,
- training,
- peer group support,
- publications,
- volunteer opportunities, and
- legal information.”ⁱ

There is no charge for any Project Dandelion service.ⁱⁱ

What is the significance of the name “Project Dandelion?”

Dandelions are strong willed plants that live and thrive under the most adverse circumstances. Dandelions are difficult to destroy, spread without effort and now grow worldwide. Project Dandelion grows and spreads in similar fashion as its members educate themselves on their rights. Project

Dandelions motto has always been. “The only difference between a flower and a weed is a judgment.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Why was Project Dandelion begun?

The program was created in 1992 by Skadden Fellow Michele Lang Palter. Ms. Lang Palter saw an opportunity to assist individuals who were being abused by the system or by their own surroundings. For most people, public benefits and the rules and laws that come with them are not



easy to understand. The inspiration behind Project Dandelion was to educate the people seeking or receiving benefits as to what their rights really were and how to use the system to become more successful and self-sufficient. Originally set up through the Skadden Fellowship, Project Dandelion now runs solely on the small grants that Neighborhood Legal Services can procure for it.

What makes Project Dandelion distinctive?

Project Dandelion seeks to empower individuals with the ability to help them improve their own lives.

Instead of giving in to the adversarial system that seeking benefits from the Department of Social Services (DSS) can produce, Project Dandelion seeks to work in a collaborative effort with its clients so the information can spread in a reciprocal method that reaches from one individual to the next. The Project’s advisors believe that if you can educate even one person of her rights and empower her to embrace this learning, she can improve not only her own life but also another’s, by teaching the next person the same things she learned through the project.^{iv}

What is the Consumer Advisory Group (CAG)?

As an outgrowth of Project Dandelion, Neighborhood Legal Services developed a Consumer Advisory Group of people from all walks of life who have dealt with the issues that affect public assistance recipients. The purpose of the group is to incorporate and emphasize consumer participation and empowerment for low-income women by teaching participants the laws that directly affect their financial well-being.

The CAG began by meeting each month to teach members the state regulations that directly affected their lives. It quickly became clear that the regulations were too dense, and there was too much “legalese” for the common person to understand. The CAG then began to focus on the idea of teaching advocacy as a whole, so that members could advocate for themselves and others. NLS and the CAG organized mock Fair Hearings, with the notion that no matter what regulations, sanctions, or denials came their way, once the CAG members knew how to advocate for themselves at a hearing, they could seek justice for themselves and others.

Although, due to lack of funding, the CAG no longer does mock hearings, CAG members continue to use what they have learned to empower others in their community and assist others in their efforts to overcome legal barriers that face low-income women. CAG members have served as peer navigators at Erie County Department of Social Services (ECDSS) and have helped other community members to navigate the complex systems at DSS in their attempt to get the benefits they are legally entitled to.^v

What successes has Project Dandelion seen?

The Dandelion model has proven successful in many ways. Some Dandelions have learned the skills to become their own best advocates, while others have made dramatic changes in their lives.

Over the years Dandelion participants have won higher paying jobs, gone back to school, and become college graduates. Alumna of the program include biologists, teachers, mental health professionals, child psychologists, tutoring coordinators, home mortgage specialists, employees at the Department of Justice, and Neighborhood Legal Services staff and Board of Directors members.

Many Project Dandelion members are still living in poverty, but, many of these members, too, have made positive life changes with their own will and hard work. Other successes include women who have filed for divorces and child support orders, secured transitional benefits, or found affordable housing.^{vi} The ability to get off drugs, end domestic violence in their home, or without the need for public benefits are all significant positive changes that may not have happened without the empowerment they received.^{vii}

What is the end goal of Project Dandelion?

To spread knowledge of individuals' rights as they advance through the system. The Project seeks to have "Dandelions" pop up anywhere at any time. Current members teach future "Dandelions" how to fight and advocate for their rights and reach success in their lives. The more people that have the knowledge, the more people will obtain and use their rights.^{viii}

End Notes

ⁱ In person interview with Penny Selmonsky, Asst. Supervising Attorney, Public Benefits Unit, Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Id.

ⁱⁱⁱ Id.

^{iv} Id.

^v Id.

^{vi} <http://www.nls.org/pdf/dandman.pdf>, Project Dandelion Advocacy Skills Manual A Self Help Guide For People In Transition

^{vii} Id.

^{viii} Id.

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