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The Natural Authority of Families

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With great regularity consumers of services and their families will find themselves having to confront professionals, bureaucrats and others in role, of authority. Not uncommonly the authority of these persons tends to overshadow the authority of "small people". It can sometimes help to remember that family have a natural authority of their own which can go a long way to reducing this imbalance of power and authority. In order for this to happen, however, families need to appreciate this natural authority and be willing to act on it. What follows is a brief description of some of the common source of authority that families can call on when they are acting in the interest of a family members.

1. The public generally recognises the primacy of families in terms of their responsibility for a person's wellbeing. In this way, families have the authority to be highly engaged because they also tend to have greater responsibility for the well-being of their family members.

2. Families have authority (normally) arising from knowing their family member the most fully and over the longest period of time. In this way they have the authority that arises from long term observation, insight and personal relationships.

3. Families typically care about or love their relative more than would be true of others, however committed the others may be. Not only do families usually care more but they are also expected to care more.

4. Families have a stake in outcomes. For example, they have to live with the long-term consequences of service failures to a greater extent than any other party, except the person themselves.

5. Families are expected to advocate for their own members. Not uncommonly, they are granted considerable presence in the decision-making processes affecting their family members, even where legal formalities do not require it.

6. The family is an authoritative witness to the performance of professionals and systems and may have special (though not necessarily exclusive) insight into events that take place.

7. Family members bring to their role a wide range of talents and experiences which can give them additional authority on many matters. For example, a parent might also be an expert educator.

8. Families are often best positioned to see how everything, in its entirety, adds up in a person's life. For this reason they can often see the incongruencies of different interventions.

9. Family members are often free of the vested interest which call into question the credibility of other parties. Frequently family members are granted a degree of independence which highlights their credibility and purity of motive.

While these common sources of authority do not, in the end, resolve the question of ultimate authority, they do offer families some measure of security that their views should matter as much as, or more than, others who also claim authority in deciding what will happen to a person. Because it is very difficult for a person to advocate if they hold some doubt about the legitimacy of taking on the role, these points may help to strengthen the resolve to hang-in-there and advocate for your family member.

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