

Background:

In October 2012, the Project Development Committee reviewed an **Executive Summary for Advocacy U Support**. “Advocacy U” (www.AdvocacyU.org) is a website that was developed by a TCDD grant initiated in 2007; it was intended to serve as a repository for information that would help people understand what advocacy is, how to advocate, and where people living in Texas might call or email to find advocacy trainings. After reviewing the summary, which offered three options for future action, the Committee requested that staff contract with the webhost to continue to support the site while developing an executive summary for a project that would expand the partner base, increase the website traffic to the site, and make the site more useful to those who see the site.

Staff have incorporated information from the recommendations of the previous grantee and have had two conversations with staff of DataMomentum (the website host) to gather ideas for activities that might result in the goals expressed by the Council. Those ideas are summarized in the attached Executive Summary. However, **staff do not recommend TCDD commit additional funds or effort to the future development of this site for the following reasons:**

- Advocacy U website visitor statistics from January to September 2012 show that less than 100 people visited the site over those 9 months. Of those, a significant number of the visits were associated with the grantee, TCDD and project partners. This means that the majority of website visitors were actually reviewing or adding information to the website, and not actually part of the intended target audience.
- Advocacy U was designed as a place for people to spend time researching information. However, website traffic shows that visitors spent **less than 30 seconds** on the website. That likely means that people did not find the information they needed.
- The ways in which people use the internet and social media evolves rapidly. Making sure Advocacy U keeps pace with this and with the rapid changes in technology would require continuous investment and constant updating. The typical TCDD grantee would not have the capacity to do this without additional funding, and TCDD funds would be time limited.
- A Google search of “Advocacy training Texas” turns up links to Texas Advocates, the Arc of Texas, and the Texas Advanced Leadership and Advocacy Conference among the first six listings (the AdvocacyU website is found on the third page of search results). Each of these offers leadership and advocacy training. It appears that one of the purposes of Advocacy U, to provide information about advocacy and direct people to organizations that provide advocacy training, is served through the use of Google and other website search engines. Technology, and the public’s use of it, may be outpacing the ability of this website to be useful.

Project Development Committee

Agenda Item 7. A.

Expected Action:

The Project Development Committee will discuss the executive summary and may make recommendations to the Council.

Council

Agenda Item 11. D.

Expected Action:

The Council will consider recommendations from the Project Development Committee.

Future Funding Proposal Executive Summary Further Development and Promotion of Advocacy U Website

Background

TCDD funded the development of the website “Advocacy U” (www.AdvocacyU.org) as one component of a group of projects designed to create a comprehensive network of partner organizations that provide leadership and advocacy training, so that they could share information and resources. TCDD intended for Advocacy U to help ensure that:

- Texans with developmental disabilities, their families, and their allies had access, as needed, to free training materials, resources and curriculum modules that organizations or individuals may use to train people on a range of topics related to disability advocacy, leadership, and community organizing. TCDD hoped the site would include materials designed for specific target audiences, materials in Spanish, and possibly materials to assist organizations in fundraising or marketing.
- Texans with developmental disabilities, their families, and their allies could locate existing leadership and advocacy training programs in their area of the state. The site was to include listings of advocacy, leadership, and community organizing training programs in Texas.

TCDD awarded a grant for the Advocacy U project to Syracuse University beginning in 2007. Syracuse University managed the project, provided customer support, and gathered and maintained the information that was not specific to the partner organizations (primarily TCDD Leadership and Advocacy grantees). However, Advocacy U was developed primarily to provide partner organizations with a centralized location for information about their upcoming advocacy training and events, and partner organizations were expected to update their own content on the site. Eight organizations that received TCDD leadership development and advocacy training grants at the same time were required to contribute information about their advocacy events. Several of them contributed other valuable information as well, such as programs that could be used by others.

Over the course of the initial grant project (3 yrs of grant funding support plus one year of support for the website by Syracuse University without grant funding), Advocacy U project staff found that it was a challenge for partner organizations to keep the site updated, as they needed to put their energy into maintaining their own websites. Thus the task of updating content on the site frequently fell to the Advocacy U project staff, who estimated that they spent 6-8 hours per week managing information, answering emails and conducting surveys. Upon completion of their grant funding, Syracuse no longer made updates for partners, and as a result few events or training opportunities are listed on the website.

DataMomentum - a company located in Ithaca, New York – developed the website architecture and database as a subcontractor to Syracuse University. Since that architecture is proprietary, TCDD has contracted with DataMomentum to continue hosting and maintaining the Advocacy U site on their servers through a contract with TCDD. The contract began in March 7, 2013 and ends February 28, 2014. DataMomentum owns the

software and database that form the structure of the website. DataMomentum entered into the contract with the understanding that an additional organization would receive a grant from TCDD to recruit partners to add content to the site and to promote the site in order to increase usage. As a part of their contract with TCDD, DataMomentum will work with the selected grantee organization to identify and make use of appropriate technology to achieve these goals. For example, the grantee and DataMomentum could potentially:

- Enable the site to push or pull data from other websites or social media (information could be passed from the website to Facebook and Twitter and vice versa), so that content on Advocacy U would automatically be updated whenever partner organizations update their own site.
- Allow a Facebook login, which would connect users to the site more seamlessly.
- Link the TCDD website events calendar so that it may automatically populate the site to boost content.
- Allow users to register to receive text messages, tweets, or emails that are sent automatically when the site is updated.
- Consider tailoring the site to allow people to see what is in their region of the state.
- Use the site to host webinars.
- Add materials in different languages.
- Narrow the target audience or increase the customization of the site to meet specific identified needs.
- Allow people to create online circles of support – or social networks that are focused on advocacy work. People could use these to communicate and collaborate with others whom they trust and share advocacy-related interests in a password-protected environment.

TCDD would also expect to be able to upload content related to advocacy opportunities for self-advocates, such as notifications of boards or committees that are seeking members, hearings at which self-advocates might provide testimony, and potential speaking engagements.

State Plan Goal

Goal 6: Work with others to double the number of identified leadership development and advocacy training programs that are able to provide culturally appropriate training for people with developmental disabilities without ongoing grant funding from TCDD, by 9/30/2016.

Objective 4: Each year of the plan, support individuals who have developmental disabilities, their family members, and their allies to improve their skills related to self-advocacy, public advocacy, and leadership.

Activity 7: Each year of the plan, continue to provide support to maintain Advocacy U, an online clearinghouse that maintains current information about leaders and advocacy training programs.

Expected Outcome(s)

The website www.AdvocacyU.org will be established as a sustainable website that supports disability-related advocacy efforts in Texas, without continued funding by TCDD after the grant period.

Project Description

The selected grantee would collaborate with DataMomentum, other TCDD grantees, advocacy organizations, and other stakeholders to continue to develop and promote the use of the Advocacy U website to support advocacy-related activities. At a minimum, the grantee would be expected to:

- Research and, if necessary, update the content on the site by replacing existing materials with newer versions, if available, or adding new material if necessary;
- Make recommendations to TCDD concerning languages into which materials, including video or audio feeds, should be translated and arrange for the translated materials to be added to the site;
- Determine if there is a need for additional materials;
- Expand the base of partner organizations committed to Advocacy U to include organizations other than TCDD grantees and typical partners;
- Explore and pursue innovative ways that the website might facilitate action on the part of self-advocates;
- Market the website with the specific goal of increasing website traffic;
- Survey users as needed to determine if the content on the website meets their needs; and
- Develop, from the beginning of the grant funding period, a sustainability plan to ensure that the website can be well managed and maintained after TCDD funding ends.

The selected grantee must include meaningful input from self-advocates, including self-advocates who live in and have been active in advocacy activities in Texas.

Proposed Funding Amount and Duration

Up to \$75,000 per year, for up to 4 years. A nonfederal match of at least 25 percent of the total project costs is required. The nonfederal match may consist of “in-kind” value and/or designated nonfederal cash contributions. Project activities located in counties that are designated federal poverty areas require a minimum of 10 percent matching resources. An increasing match in subsequent years is requested and will be negotiated with TCDD.

Other Considerations