

**Inclusive Volunteering: Community and Family Perspectives**

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**Abstract**

*Communities are strengthened when the assets of every citizen are recognized, utilized, and valued. Inclusive volunteering (i.e., the engagement of volunteers with and without disabilities) capitalizes on the assets of community members who traditionally have not been sought out. There are benefits to both volunteers with disabilities and the agencies that engage them when they are included. Obstacles and barriers, both real and perceived, to fostering the engagement of these volunteers are evident. However, when individuals of diverse abilities are supported appropriately, these barriers can be successfully overcome and a win-win scenario realized. This article provides a brief review of what is known about the engagement of volunteers with disabilities, outlines how inclusive volunteering contributed to the building of capacity for one community, and illustrates how one family has been impacted through volunteering. The authors provide several suggestions for how volunteer resource managers may facilitate inclusive volunteering.*

**Key Words:**

disabilities, benefits, community, family, inclusive, volunteering

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## Introduction

During these difficult economic times, nonprofit organizations are being squeezed from two directions; charitable giving is down while the need for services is rising (National Council of Nonprofits, 2010). The nonprofit agencies that survive and thrive will be those who identify assets where others see deficits, and contribute to the building of community capacity. Successful agencies know that they are only as strong as the community in which they serve. A central message about building community capacity speaks to this:

Every single person has capacities, abilities, and gifts. Living the good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making. (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993)

Inclusive volunteering seeks to capture and capitalize on the assets that come from those in our community who are rarely viewed as assets; those individuals with disabilities. In this way, inclusive volunteering represents a potent strategy for building the capacity of individuals, nonprofit agencies, and the broader community within which they are located. This article briefly reviews what is known about the engagement of volunteers with diverse abilities, including benefits and obstacles, how a community strengthened its capacity through inclusive volunteering, and the story of how one family built a supportive community through volunteering.

## Volunteers with Disabilities

Approximately 19% of the population has some form of disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), yet only 4.5% of

volunteers have an identified disability (Miller, Schleien, Brooke, & Merrill, 2005). While the number of volunteers with disabilities is low, the majority (83%) of volunteer resource managers (VRMs) reported engaging these volunteers. There is much to be gained by volunteers with disabilities and the agencies that engage them. Volunteering has provided individuals with disabilities myriad benefits such as raised levels of maturity and responsibility, improved socialization, relationship skills and development of social networks, increased sensitivity to the needs of others, increased self-confidence and a sense of empowerment, and vocational skills development (Brill, 1994; Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Miller, Schleien, Kraft, Bodo-Lehman, Frisoli, & Strack, 2003/2004; Miller, Schleien, Rider, Hall, Roche, Worsley, 2002; Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998).

Likewise, VRMs speak to a number of benefits, such as more accurately representing their consumers and community (i.e., increased diversity), providing insights and perspectives on the broader community. A more robust volunteer base has also helped diversify services that agencies provide (e.g., a volunteer with a hearing impairment allows the agency to serve members of the deaf community for the very first time), increase awareness and tolerance of differences, and improve the agency's public image, publicity, and community relations. Furthermore, they have depicted volunteers with disabilities as dedicated and hard working, conscientious, reliable, and motivated to acquire new skills (Miller, Schleien, & Bedini, 2003; Miller, Schleien, Brooke, & Merrill, 2005; Stroud, Miller, Schleien, & Merrill, 2005).

Volunteer resource managers and individuals with disabilities have identified similar barriers to inclusive volunteering,

including staff not being prepared to engage volunteers with disabilities, negative attitudes among staff and consumers, inaccessible settings, and perceived skill deficits of individuals with disabilities (Balandin, Llewellyn, Dew, & Ballin, 2006; Balandin, Llewellyn, Dew, Ballin, & Schneider, 2006; Bruce, 2006; Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Graff & Vedell, 2003; Reilly, 2005). Volunteers with disabilities identified a lack of understanding and awareness of their potential assets and an underestimate of their abilities as additional barriers. VRMs also alluded to the perceived need for increases in staff supervision of individuals of diverse abilities being a barrier. Moreover, barriers of omission, a type of attitudinal barrier that is evident when society fails to provide for the needs of individuals of diverse abilities (e.g., individuals with disabilities never ask or wish to volunteer) are highly prevalent throughout our communities (Miller, Schleien, & Bedini, 2003; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997).

Despite these initial doubts, Miller, Schleien, and Bedini (2003) found that more than two-thirds of volunteer resource managers (VRMs) who engaged volunteers with disabilities believed the resulting benefits far outweighed the barriers. Also, they noted that VRMs who were currently engaging volunteers with disabilities perceived far fewer barriers to their engagement when compared to barriers perceived by those who have not engaged them. Furthermore, there has been clear evidence that when structured and supported appropriately, barriers are overcome successfully and volunteers with disabilities become true assets to their communities (Balandin, Llewellyn, Dew, & Ballin, 2006; Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Miller et al., 2003/2004; Miller, et al., 2002; Stroud, Miller, Schleien, & Adams, 2006). What follows is an example of how one

community overcame negative perceptions and implemented key strategies that resulted in a diverse and successful volunteer corp.

### **One Community's Approach**

In recognizing the "win-win" potential of inclusive volunteering, the Greensboro (NC) community came together to establish Partnership F.I.V.E. (Fostering Inclusive Volunteer Efforts), a collaborative initiative of the local volunteer center, volunteer resource managers and nonprofit agencies, disability advocacy groups, self-advocates, and inclusion specialists. The partnership was founded on two principles: 1) every citizen has a basic right to full community participation through volunteerism, to be recognized as a community asset, and to have the opportunity to give of oneself to others for the betterment of the community; and 2) every citizen has strengths and abilities to offer his or her community that will enhance the capacity of that community (Miller, Frisoli, Smythe, & Schleien, 2003). Partnership F.I.V.E. prepared VRMs to recruit, engage, and support volunteers of diverse abilities; prepared and supported individuals with disabilities to be successful volunteers; and worked with family members and care providers to sustain inclusive volunteer efforts. This broad approach to supporting volunteers of diverse abilities had a dramatic impact on the face of volunteering in the community. Follow-up evaluation indicated that the percentage of volunteers with disabilities in the community's volunteer pool grew substantially, increasing from 4.9% to 12.1%, within a three-year time frame.

It was determined that three key factors were responsible for the success of the partnership: 1) the careful matching of the assets of volunteers with the needs of agencies; 2) support was provided to volunteer coordinators in the form of

training, assistance with planning to be more accommodating, and technical support when a volunteer of diverse ability was engaged; and 3) a purposeful inclusive approach was utilized which paired volunteers without disabilities with volunteers who would be more successful with supports.

### **A Family Builds Community Through Inclusive Volunteering: A Mother's Perspective**

The Partnership F.I.V.E. initiative began as a grassroots effort, and one of its earliest proponents was the Scoglio family. To understand why, you need to know their personal story. What follows is the mother's perspective, in her own words, concerning the important roles that inclusive volunteering played in surrounding her entire family with a strong and supportive community.

#### *In Her Own Words . . .*

Thirty years ago, following the birth of our first child, Erin, we learned almost immediately that she had some serious developmental delays. At 18 months, it was confirmed that she was also deaf. Devastated, my natural tendency was to withdraw. And that's exactly what I did – withdraw from other new parents and their babies and toddlers. It was just too painful to be around them and their typically-developing little ones. Their 'issues' seemed so trivial to me. Play dates and outgrown clothes . . . My issues were learning sign language and understanding the importance of 'language' and development, not to mention paying for hearing aids. I chose to focus on the differences between our family and others with new children instead of the similarities. The coming months brought improvement in her development, but her deafness remained. Life settled into a new 'normal' for our little family.

Four years later, after the birth of our son, Mike, we immediately learned he had Down syndrome. That desire to withdraw came flooding back, even stronger than the first time. The longing to 'hole up' at home was overcome with the need to see cardiologists and specialists. Lots of bad news and tons of medical tests and negative diagnoses followed. Thankfully, folks from church reached out to our family, and friends stood close-by during these difficult times. With their help and prayers, we got through it. But even with all of the support, it still just hurt too much. The coming months brought heart surgery in a faraway city and gradual improvements in Mike's development. As the 'danger' decreased, along came the desire to reach out to others who also had children with Down syndrome. Little had we planned on dealing with all of this at such a young age, but also little had either of us planned on getting involved with volunteering our very limited time. We didn't come from families where 'volunteerism' was instilled. Actually, to me, it was a foreign concept. I was busy caring for our son who had recovered from heart surgery and was catching up on his development. I was also busy continuing to learn sign language and interpreting for our young daughter at each of her soccer practices and games.

Still, this is exactly what we did. Over the years, I believe that volunteering (and through volunteering, pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones) helped bring us back to reality. I learned that the rewards and confidence that resulted through the sharing of my life with others were in fact healing and beneficial to me. Helping other young families with their questions and concerns, and meeting other families who were dealing with even more difficult issues, made me realize that my life was my own God-given gift. Tremendous

confidence and a personal peace came with this realization.

Initially, my husband, John, and I became trained support parents with Family Support Network. I also served on their Board of Directors for several years. Later, John served on the Board of our local Arc (formerly, The Association for Retarded Citizens, a nonprofit agency that advocates for opportunities that enrich the lives of individuals with intellectual and related developmental disabilities) for many years. He also served on the NC Board of Schools for the Deaf and the NC State Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Later I served on the Board of Communication Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Finally, I've been very involved with our local Challenger Baseball League since its inception. This is a baseball league designed for any person with a disability to successfully play on a team. In every scenario, the agency's volunteer administrator not only respected our desire to give back to the community, but our ongoing interest in networking with professionals and other parents. They also offered us opportunities to provide input concerning agency services and policies, as they were keenly aware that parent volunteers had more to offer than simply their time.

Since we became familiar with the many personal benefits of volunteering in organizations we believe in, we encouraged Erin and Mike to volunteer as well. The benefits to their volunteering were two-fold. Firstly, the obvious benefit that anyone gets from volunteering is that it feels good to help others, knowing that your life experiences can help another person on their journey. Secondly, for individuals with disabilities, the act of volunteering often exposes them to a world they may not have the opportunity to fully experience in any other way. And when they are matched with

a buddy who does not have a disability, they are provided with a way to learn just what behaviors are appropriate and those that are not. Our daughter became involved as a volunteer with our local urban ministry, and she served many years as a member of a sign language troupe that performed at (among other places) nursing homes. These were "win/win" scenarios for everyone involved. Erin was also a volunteer counselor at several camps throughout the state. We were all thrilled and so proud when she was selected to carry the Olympic Torch when it traveled through Greensboro during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. She was chosen because of her many volunteer activities in our community.

Our son, Mike, has been volunteering for most of his life. As early as the fifth grade, we would visit the kindergarten class at his elementary school and read stories to the children. Most were 'typical' kids and a few had disabilities. This was a great experience for all who were involved. Mike became the role model for the children in that class. Prior to this, beginning in the second grade, Mike became involved as an actor with our local community theater. Because of his involvement, our entire family became involved with the Community Theatre of Greensboro. Mike and John have acted in 8 different plays between them, and they have been on stage together and individually. Other family members have worked backstage during most of these productions. It was a blast and a huge confidence builder for Mike. When not on stage, he enjoys ushering for the shows and has also ushered at another downtown theatre.

As a Challenger Baseball League player, Mike initially was supported by a volunteer buddy. Soon he was not only playing independently, but also served as buddy for another player. Mike volunteered at a second game and pushed a young friend

using a wheelchair around the bases. When he was in middle school, he became involved with Partnership F.I.V.E. and was matched with a nondisabled buddy. This was a terrific experience for him because it was the first opportunity he had to volunteer without a family member coaching him. Through this inclusive volunteer program, Mike worked at an Adult Daycare Center and at the Greensboro Public Library; both experiences being major confidence boosters.

As a young adult, Mike currently holds two part-time jobs in our community, at a restaurant and at the local YMCA. One Halloween he volunteered to help out in the YMCA's "Haunted Chamber" and came up with the idea to approach Community Theatre of Greensboro for a ticket donation as a grand prize for the costume contest. He facilitated this and tickets were donated. As an athlete, he's been a power lifter for Special Olympics for several years, and has reaped the benefits of that program's volunteers. At the same time, he still plays baseball and serves as an assistant coach for his team. He's really gone 'full circle' with Challenger. He loves watching out for his team and helping them play. It's his way of giving back to a league that has given him so much for so many years.

There are a few common threads that were essential to the success of our children as volunteers. In each case, volunteer administrators and agency staff focused on their strengths. Rather than being blinded by potential limitations associated with their disabilities and labels, staff became familiar with their individual assets and then identified agency needs that would capitalize on those strengths. Erin and Mike were never forced into 'cookie-cutter' volunteer roles. To the contrary, roles were constructed around Erin and Mike, and subsequently, the agencies benefited in ways that they never could have anticipated.

Also, agency staff established open communication with us and our children. This enabled us to help staff identify simple accommodations when an occasional barrier arose and before challenges became insurmountable. Furthermore, agency staff recognized how Erin and Mike were blossoming in their experiences and adjusted their volunteer roles accordingly. Mike's progression from being a player supported by a volunteer buddy, to serving as a buddy assisting a player in a wheelchair, to becoming an assistant coach in the Challenger Baseball league is one example of how this worked. Simply put, the agencies where Erin and Mike volunteered demonstrated an ongoing willingness to capitalize on their many assets and problem-solve until a "win-win" situation was established and maintained.

Our children grew up in a mid-sized southern city. The sense of community that we have experienced has provided well for them. In school and in the community, they were not 'lost' in a sea of services and programs. Instead, due to the creativity of a community that cared, they flourished and had many unique opportunities that helped them develop into concerned and caring members of their communities. The saying goes "It takes a village..." Our experience expands that to "It takes the creativity and caring of a few..."

### **Suggestions for Volunteer Resource Managers**

From our understanding gleaned through Partnership F.I.V.E. and volunteers such as the Scoglios, we offer six suggestions on how VRMs could increase the likelihood of success with inclusive volunteering:

- 1) *Extend an invitation:* Reach out to individuals with disabilities and the agencies that serve them. Inform them that you are interested in recruiting

volunteers of diverse abilities. Many of these individuals have never been asked to volunteer, and subsequently, may have never considered themselves as contributors to community capacity.

*2) Take an asset-based approach:*

Concentration should be placed on identifying individual strengths that the volunteers have to offer.

*3. Make a careful match:* Ensure that a “win-win” situation is created by making an accurate match between individuals’ strengths and your agency’s needs. The cold reality: if your agency is not benefiting from the contributions of any volunteer, you are perpetuating the stereotypical, charitable position of the individual in society at the expense of your agency’s resources.

*4) Don’t hesitate to ask the experts:*

Establish open lines of communication with your volunteers, and family members when appropriate. When barriers arise, ask these individuals how they can be overcome.

Accommodations are often simple and inexpensive when we ask the experts.

*5) Consider the power of peers:*

Inclusive volunteering becomes substantially more powerful when we purposefully partner individuals with and without disabilities. In some cases, serving as a peer partner has revitalized veteran volunteers in need of a new ways of contributing to the agencies in which they serve. Others have elected to volunteer solely because they had a desire to work with an individual who had a disability.

*6) Empower staff and volunteers with knowledge:* Provide disability awareness and etiquette training to staff and volunteers. A little bit of knowledge will go a long way in helping everyone to feel more comfortable working with volunteers of diverse abilities and

improving the quality of services provided to the constituents of your agency.

### **Conclusion**

As the economy continues to stagnate and the budgets of nonprofit agencies continue to shrink, “volunteers become even more vital to the health of our nation’s communities” (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2009, p. 1). Concurrent with this growing dependency on volunteers, a staggering number of volunteers are being lost (Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009). The Corporation for National and Community Service (2007) reported that of the 65.4 million individuals who volunteered in 2005, 20.9 million did not continue to volunteer during the following year.

Subsequently, nonprofit agencies will need to become significantly more creative in broadening their volunteer pools.

The time is now for everyone, regardless of diagnosis or level of ability, to have the opportunity to “live the good life” by volunteering and giving of themselves to their communities. Individuals of diverse abilities must be encouraged to tap into their intact strengths to make our communities more powerful, and in turn, better places to live. The Partnership F.I.V.E. inclusive volunteering initiative serves as an excellent example depicting the necessary collaboration between parties to facilitate engagement of members of our society who have not traditionally volunteered their time. A local volunteer center, nonprofit agencies, and advocates collaborated to overcome the real and perceived barriers that have traditionally prevented people of diverse abilities from giving back to their communities. One of the most effective of all strategies to broaden the volunteer pool was by asking people who had never been asked before, to become involved. The

Scoglio family is a prime example of how we could build community capacity by recognizing all community members as assets, and as potential givers to their community, rather than always being the recipients of others' volunteer efforts. From being "holed up" at home and riding the medical roller coaster, as many families who have children with disabilities experience, this extraordinary family broke all stereotypes and made substantial impacts in their community. However, we are not certain that "win-win" says it all. Inclusive volunteering benefits more than individuals with disabilities and the communities in which they serve; inclusive volunteering enriches all of society.

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Mrs. Pam Scoglio is the mother of two and recently grandmother of one. She has never let disability define her children. She lives with Mike and her husband John in Greensboro, NC.