

**Not Just Recipients of Service:
Including People with Disabilities in Volunteer Abroad Programs**

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Abstract

Volunteer service has the power to contribute to the vitality of communities, countries, and people around the world. It also has the power to transform volunteers in the process, leading to increased confidence, a strong sense of personal accomplishment, new professional aspirations, and more. International volunteerism can be a particularly empowering experience for people with disabilities who traditionally have been recipients – not providers – of volunteer service. Like all volunteers, those with disabilities bring a unique knowledge and skill set to any program or project. Volunteers with disabilities also help dispel stereotypes and change perceptions about what people with disabilities can and cannot do in countries and communities with fewer opportunities than the United States. In return, volunteers with disabilities, as well as their fellow volunteers without disabilities, can gain insight into their own culturally based perceptions of disability through the lens provided by interactions and experiences in a different culture. In this article, the authors introduce volunteer resource managers to information and resources on how to create inclusive volunteer abroad programs, as well as success stories from international volunteers with disabilities, compiled by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE). Sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, the NCDE is a comprehensive resource on advising and tools for people with disabilities, professionals, educational institutions and organizations on increasing disability inclusion in international study, volunteer, teach and other exchange programs.

Key Words:

volunteers, international, disability, accessibility, inclusive

Introduction

Volunteer service has the power to contribute to the vitality of communities, countries and people around the world. It also has the power to transform volunteers in the process, leading to increased confidence, a strong sense of personal accomplishment, new professional aspirations, and more. Motivated by these gains, volunteers with disabilities also help dispel stereotypes and change perceptions about what people with disabilities can and

cannot do in countries and communities with fewer volunteer opportunities than the United States.

In Paraguay, where Shannon Coe served as a Peace Corps volunteer, local people with physical disabilities are not often seen in society because the inaccessible infrastructure makes it difficult for them to leave their homes without a companion. “When I pushed myself around my community, people stared at me curiously. Many had probably never seen an

independent woman in a wheelchair before. Every time I heard, ‘Qué quapa (you are hard-working)!’ when going to work on my own, I knew that I had changed another person’s perspective.” Like Coe, people with disabilities have valuable contributions to make as international volunteers, yet historically have been underrepresented or underutilized in volunteer abroad programs. Those programs often focus on serving the disability community rather than engaging volunteers with disabilities as leaders and contributors to accomplish volunteer program goals. People with disabilities have the same desire to contribute, give back and gain skills as their non-disabled peers. With simple accommodations, creativity and a can-do attitude, any international volunteer program can be made accessible to volunteers with all types of disabilities.

Designing and Implementing Inclusive Volunteer Abroad Programs

Volunteer resource managers (VRMs) should be proactive within their organization and with overseas partners to ensure they are operationalizing values of diversity and non-discriminatory practices. VRMs can use the following tools to assess their ability to include participants with disabilities in their overseas programs:

- *Self Assessment and Action Plan on Inclusion of Participants with Disabilities* (available at <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/tools/inclusionassessment>) are informal assessment tools designed to guide organizations in determining strengths and weaknesses at the programmatic and staff preparedness level, and helps organizations articulate strategies and action steps for including people with disabilities in their programs.
- *A Practice of Yes! Working with Overseas Partners to Include*

Students with Disabilities (available at <http://www.miusa.org/publications/books/poy>) focuses on overseas program sites, partner agreements, knowing your participants, assessing risk versus empowerment, and more.

People with all types of disabilities have volunteered in cities, towns, and villages around the world. Martha Harris, who is blind, volunteered with at-risk young adults in Guatemala. Elyse Rolino, a deaf student at Gallaudet University, volunteered with children in Costa Rica. As a wheelchair user, Megan Smith’s volunteer experiences in Nepal, Costa Rica, and Peru led her to a career in international affairs. Making programs accessible means different things for different individuals depending on disability type, individual needs and personal preferences. “Accessibility” may entail removing physical barriers, providing sign language interpretation, or simply finding tasks appropriate to each person’s individual skills. In many cases, the same adjustments that make volunteer sites accessible to older individuals, including those well into their 80’s, make volunteer sites accessible to people with disabilities of all ages. Thinking ahead and being open and welcoming to all participants is easier if these issues are addressed in the initial design stages of a volunteer abroad program. The following are a few questions to consider when creating an inclusive volunteer program:

- Is the physical environment hilly? Is the ground firm? Are there alternative routes? Can someone locally orient volunteers to the site?
- Is there an accessible toilet, or can a portable toilet be installed, at the site? For people who are blind, can a guide rope from housing to the outdoor toilet be installed? Is there

- accessible housing? Can a portable ramp or a shower chair be used?
- Is accessible transportation available? What do local people with disabilities use? What does the individual use in less-than-perfect accessibility situations?
 - What materials (e.g., computer disks, large print, MP3 audio, etc.) can be produced in alternative formats if needed? Could someone assist as a reader?
 - Are there sign language interpreters available? Can a pen and paper be used informally and an interpreter found through a local organization of people who are deaf?
 - What are participants' dietary needs? Is refrigeration available at the site?
 - Are rules and project instructions stated concretely and clearly? Can these be written down, repeated or stated one at a time, orally and/or visually? Can peers act as a team to work together?

Practical Next Steps

When a motivated individual with a disability applies to participate in a volunteer abroad program, a VRM should:

- Have the volunteer communicate directly with overseas partners to establish a personal relationship and to discuss his or her access needs. Some volunteers may find it useful to provide a video illustrating how s/he accomplishes tasks in everyday life to dispel some of the assumptions overseas partners may make about his or her independence level.
- Enlist the volunteer to research access in the host country by contacting local disability organizations. The NCDE website features a searchable database

(available at <http://www.miusa.org/orgsearch>) of disability organizations worldwide. Local partners can also do this proactively.

- Identify specific barriers overseas partners are concerned about and determine which are attitudinal versus infrastructural. Contact the NCDE for specific ideas about ways to remove or mitigate barriers.
- Find allies in the host community (e.g., someone who has a family member with a disability or an advocate within a disability organization) to step forward and say, "I will host this volunteer," or a fellow volunteer who says, "I will support him/her in the first week." By demonstrating broad community support to your overseas partners, you are conveying a positive message that will likely translate to a successful experience for the volunteer.

Cultures are neither static nor stagnant in their views of disability. The historic United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been signed by 144 countries. Engaging volunteers with disabilities at overseas sites and partnering with local disability organizations to arrange accommodations and identify local needs is a powerful way to educate partners on changing perspectives and laws (even within their own communities).

Budgeting for Inclusion

The investment of financial resources represents a critical benchmark of an organization's commitment toward diversity. Most disability-related accommodations are simple and low-cost (e.g., the purchase or rental of a portable ramp, making program materials available electronically or in large print, etc.).

However, forward-thinking volunteer abroad programs incorporate a “disability accommodation” line item into every program and administrative budget to ensure that financial resources are available to make programs accessible to people with disabilities who require more expensive accommodations to participate fully in an overseas program. Examples include providing a sign language interpreter for a deaf volunteer or arranging for wheelchair accessible transportation at a program site. See *Budgeting for Inclusion* (available at <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/tools/budgeting>) for more information and strategies on planning ahead to support the full inclusion of volunteers with disabilities in volunteer abroad programs.

Providing Accommodations at Overseas Sites

The following are a few of the many creative adaptations and approaches that have been used in the past by volunteers with disabilities at overseas project sites. Most are inexpensive and involve readily available materials.

- A broomstick with a sponge on the end can be used to clean wide tabletops from a wheelchair.
- A paintbrush on an extension can be used to paint ceilings or high walls.
- With proper orientation, a participant who is blind or visually impaired can help with lifting, building or painting.
- A participant who uses a wheelchair may be able to carry heavy loads on his/her lap.
- A participant with limited strength in his or her arms may be able to do fine woodcarvings or sign painting.
- A participant who has difficulty walking or standing can use a chair to work sitting down.

- A participant who cannot do heavy physical labor can help organize logistics, such as selecting groups, assigning projects, or organizing kitchen duties.

The NCDE website includes a wealth of step-by-step information and resources on accommodating individuals with all types of disabilities on overseas programs. See *Tools for Exchange Professionals* (available at <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/tools>) for links to helpful tips sheets, forms, and articles on recruitment, participant advising, overseas placement and other suggestions on designing and implementing inclusive programs. Note that many volunteers with disabilities will participate fully without requesting any special arrangements.

Success Stories of Volunteers with Disabilities

People with disabilities have volunteered in nearly every country in the world, and many have shared their stories online through the NCDE website. For a complete list of stories by and about volunteers with disabilities, see *Volunteer and Teach Abroad* at <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/exchngetype/voltchabd>.

- The Volunteer Abroad issue of NCDE’s *A World Awaits You* online journal (available at <http://www.miusa.org/publications/books/volunteeraway>) includes information and stories written by people with disabilities who embarked on life-changing journeys to countries and communities around the world, volunteered their time, skills and passion, and had the cultural experience of a lifetime. Volunteers share tips on everything from choosing a program to fundraising to foreign languages and reflect on the challenges and rewards of volunteering far from home.

Volunteer program administrators at organizations such as Cross-Cultural Solutions (CCS) and the Cultural Restoration Tourism Project (CRTP) discuss their commitment to including volunteers with disabilities in their programs and strategies for making accommodations at overseas sites. Special sections highlight international volunteer opportunities in the United States, international work camps, and more.

- *DeafBlind Traveler and Volunteer Touches the Developing World* (www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/roschaert) was written by Christine Roschaert, a young woman who volunteered in Nigeria for a year as part of the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) organization, and has since traveled throughout Oceania and Asia.
- *Diversity in the Peace Corps* (www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/houston) was written by Pamela Houston, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who served in the Republic of Kiribati, where she was the only volunteer with a disability at the time.
- *Faith, Service, and Community in Israel and India* (www.miusa.org/ncde/stories/rogozen) was written by Nehama Rogozen, an American who is deaf who studied in Jerusalem and lived on a kibbutz while abroad in Israel, then traveled to India to help build a school.

Conclusion

Part of any volunteer abroad experience is learning to adapt to new situations. All volunteers, including those with disabilities, may have to adjust to living and working conditions that are new to him or her. Sometimes it is not possible to make overseas program sites fully or ideally accessible. People with disabilities have the right to choose adventure and risk, and to find their own ways to contend with difficult conditions. The role of the volunteer program administrator is to provide potential volunteers with complete and accurate information about program sites, and to encourage those with disabilities to discuss possible accommodations and make informed choices about their participation. A person with a disability who is willing to be flexible in less ideal situations should be able to join any program that fits his or her interests and skills. This is often referred to as a philosophy of “Challenge by Choice” which can guide the individual, the organization and its overseas partners in adopting a positive attitude toward inclusion and the rights of the individual to participate.

NCDE provides personalized, free technical assistance services to international exchange professionals, including volunteer program administrators, on designing and implementing inclusive overseas programs and projects. For more information or assistance, contact the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange at Mobility International USA, 132 E. Broadway, Suite 343, Eugene, Oregon 97401, USA, Tel/TTY: 541-343-1284, FAX: 541-343-6812, E-mail: clearinghouse@miusa.org, or via an online form that may be found at <http://www.miusa.org/ncde/aboutncde/infoquestionnaire>

About the Authors

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Stephanie Gray is a consultant for Mobility International USA. In this role, she has provided support and training to international exchange organizations regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities on academic and cultural exchange programs in the United States. She also has written and edited articles and publications for the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange including the book *Building Bridges: A Manual on Including People with Disabilities in International Exchange Programs*. Previously, Ms. Gray served as International Exchange Program Coordinator for Mobility International USA and Program Officer for the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research in Moscow, Russia. She has managed all aspects of program administration, including participant recruitment, program planning, budgeting, evaluation and workshop facilitation. Ms. Gray holds a Master of Arts degree in International Affairs from The George Washington University.