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### **Disability as a Part of Diversity**

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#### **Abstract**

*One out of every seven people in this country has a disability, 19.1% of our population. Of all people with disabilities 66% are unemployed; 79% of them want to be engaged in meaningful work. It is apparent that there is a huge untapped resource for those seeking volunteers. This article explores barriers to and strategies for incorporating people with physical disabilities into a volunteer pool. It is based on the experience Courage Centers (a rehabilitation facility) has had in working with people with physical disabilities as volunteers and on a presentation made at the Association for Volunteer Administration International Conference in October, 1992.*

#### **(Editor-generated) Key Words:**

disability, diversity, rehabilitation

#### **Introduction**

Courage Center is a nonprofit rehabilitation facility headquartered in Golden Valley, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. Founded in 1928 by volunteers concerned about unmet needs of "crippled children," Courage Center today serves 22,000 children and adults annually through more than 70 different programs. Woven into the fabric of these programs is the dedication of 2,400 volunteers who gave over 82,000 hours of direct client and clerical program support in 1993. Our organization's mission is to empower people who have physical disabilities and sensory impairments to achieve their full potential. We carry out this mission through rehabilitation, enrichment, vocational, independent living and educational services, with the vision that one day all persons will work, learn and play together in a community based on their abilities not their disabilities.

Approximately 20% of Courage Center's 2,400 program volunteers have a

physical disability. Many are current or former clients who have received services. These volunteers work in a wide variety of roles, including tour guides, reception volunteers, activity directors, and assistants, instructors for art classes, ski instructors, swim buddies, couriers, maintenance workers, disability awareness speakers, Board members, tutors, officials for wheelchair athletic events, and general office workers.

In order to include people with physical disabilities as part of your volunteer resource, it may be necessary to make a few adaptations or shifts in thinking, but the investment will reap a multitude of benefits to your clients, your staff and especially to those individuals with physical disabilities who became your volunteers.

#### **How to Get Started**

The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities. Major life activities

include self-care, tasks done with one's hands, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, learning, working and recreation. A disability may be congenital (something one is born with) or it may be acquired through disease or as a result of an accident or injury. In this article we are concerned only with people with physical impairments. In order to successfully incorporate people with disabilities into your organization, it is important to lay some groundwork.

*Assess the physical barriers in your facility*

First, survey your building or office space to determine its accessibility. The survey should include: parking availability, the entrance, your office or interview space, volunteer work areas, bathroom facilities, break room, cafeteria, width of doorways, door handles, and drinking fountains. As you identify physical barriers, you need to look for adaptations or alternatives such as attaching blocks under a table or desk to elevate it to accommodate a person using a wheelchair, or a telephone device for the deaf (TDD) to accommodate people with hearing impairments. See the appendix for a quick checklist and suggested solutions to barriers you might identify. Resources that may be helpful to you include your State Council on Disabilities, occupational therapists at a local hospital or rehabilitation facility, or staff members of an organization that provides services to people with physical disabilities.

*Assess and address attitudinal barriers within your organization*

Secondly, it is important to recognize not only the physical barriers in your organization, but to have an accurate sense about how people *feel* about persons with physical disabilities. Some of the conscious, or often unconscious, attitudes that may exist as barriers in your organization include:

*Fear:* We often fear the unknown. We are afraid of doing or saying the "wrong thing."

When we encounter someone with a disability, such as someone who uses a wheelchair, we may not know where to look or what to say to this person. Getting to know individuals with disabilities, learning WHO they are, what their interests are, activities they are involved in, things which are important to them helps alleviate this fear. Disability awareness speakers who can educate staff about what it is like to live with a disability are often available through your state or local Council on Disabilities, or through an organization that serves people with disabilities.

*Oversensitivity:* When meeting a person with a disability, we may be overly sensitive, seeing only the disability and not the person. We focus our attention on the wheelchair, the scarred face, the missing arm, or the service dog. While it is not possible to deny that the disability exists, it is the individual who needs to be "seen." Again, by getting to know a person as an individual: his/her likes and dislikes, their feelings, their goals and opinions it helps you to see the *person*, not just his/her disability.

*Condescension:* This is a patronizing attitude. An attitude of condescension causes people to treat the person with the disability as if he/she are "less than" an able bodied individual. It is a classic example of focusing on the disability rather than on the individual's abilities.

*Spread effect:* This means generalizing about a person's abilities, based on your observation of his/her particular disability. This might be demonstrated by making an assumption that because someone uses a wheelchair, he or she cannot hear or understand. In speaking to that person, you may try to over simplify or talk loudly, believing that you are making yourself more easily understood, when, in fact, understanding is not the issue at all.

*Assumption:* Too often we assume we understand what is wrong with someone without taking the time to investigate. When we see a person with a staggering gait or slurred speech we may assume that he/she are abusing drugs or alcohol, when in fact he/she may be recovering from a stroke or head injury. We may see someone with communication and/or mobility problems due to cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, or Parkinson's Disease, and assume that he/she have some intellectual impairment. Again, learning more about physical disabilities can reduce many of these misconceptions.

*Discomfort:* Disabilities are an uncomfortable reminder that we are all vulnerable to accidents, illness and aging. We do not like to think about how a disability might change our lives. Additionally, we tend to be uncomfortable with physical conditions which are unfamiliar and which we do not understand.

Education and experience are the best approaches in eradicating attitudinal barriers. (See Appendix II.)

Once you have identified and addressed the barriers, you are ready to recruit.

### **Recruitment**

Many volunteer centers include information in their data bases indicating whether placement is appropriate for a person with a disability. Let your volunteer center know that you are interested in recruiting people with disabilities as volunteers. Local organizations that provide services to or advocacy for people with disabilities would be ideal recruitment resources. As you are developing recruitment materials, look at the written and visual messages you are giving about opportunities for people with disabilities to volunteer: are you actively conveying the message that they are welcome?

### **Applying the Basic Principles of Volunteer Management**

#### *The interview*

When interviewing someone with a disability, people often become overly concerned about their language and with what they should or shouldn't do to be helpful to the person with the disability. Common sense and common courtesy are your best guides. If you think the person may want some help, it is all right to ask. People with disabilities are used to instructing others about ways to help them. If you are concerned about your language, tell the person that if you say something that makes he/she uncomfortable to please let you know, so that you can learn to be more sensitive about language. Saying "see" to a blind person, or "walk" to someone who uses a wheelchair is seldom offensive to them. This is an example of being overly sensitive about everyday language. By the same token, there are words like cripple, lame, or victim that have negative connotations and should be avoided. Many of these appear on the handout noted in the appendix.

In discussing an individual's skills and interest, Courage Center uses the same application and interview process as with any volunteer. As we begin to focus on a specific volunteer assignment, we show the potential volunteer the job description and ask whether he or she has any concerns about being able to fulfill any of the responsibilities. At that point, the person being interviewed has the opportunity to share any reservations. It would also be appropriate to ask the individual if any adaptations would be needed in order for him/her to fulfill the responsibilities of the position. Use your creativity here. It is important to be direct, clear and respectful. Two way communication during the interview process gives you the opportunity

to explore the probability of a fit. If one does not exist, you need to be honest and, if possible, help that individual find a more appropriate volunteer opportunity elsewhere.

*Designing the job/making the match*

When assessing the appropriateness of a specific placement, it will be helpful to determine the essential functions of the volunteer assignment, the associated tasks and the performance criteria.

*Functional analysis:* What *functions* need to be accomplished? For example, for a tour guide, the essential functions include speaking clearly, moving around the facility, knowing the organization, meeting a variety of people well. An activity assistant must be able to understand and convey information to the clients, and must be patient and nurturing. If executing the tasks involved is a problem, are there alternative ways to accomplish the tasks other than the way in which they have traditionally been done?

Let me give an example of job-sharing as an alternative method. We had a volunteer who used a wheelchair. Although he was licensed to drive, he lacked the hand strength to operate the wheelchair tiedowns in our vans. We had an able-bodied volunteer who was performing community service but, according to Courage Center policies regarding court referred volunteers, was not allowed to transport clients. We paired them together to drive clients to an activity off site; one drove, and the other operated the tiedowns.

*Task analysis:* In assessing a job, it helps to separate it into the specific tasks that are involved. See the task/skill analysis section (Appendix IV pg. 23).

*Performance criteria to consider: Timing:* does this need to be done within a specific time frame or at a specific time? Is *mobility* a consideration? Is *strength* a factor? What about *endurance*? Must the tasks be done in

a specific *sequence*? How important is *attention to detail*? What kind of *communication skills* are required (verbal, written, telephone)? What level of *math or reading comprehension* is necessary? What kind of *social skills* are important? Is *hygiene/appearance* a consideration? What is the *stress level* of this job? How *independent* does this individual need to be?

The checklist in the appendix may be helpful in addressing these questions and assessing the appropriateness of an individual for a specific job.

*Adapting the job:* Once you have identified job tasks that do not match the person's abilities, you need to allow for some reasonable accommodations. These accommodations will fall into three categories:

1. Task modification: changing, simplifying or reordering the steps used to complete the task.  
Examples: could something done manually be done by computer? Try using different materials to complete the task: calculator, checklist as a reminder of the task sequence, or a paper hold to enable someone to staple single-handedly.
2. Task elimination: simply eliminating a task that the person is unable to do.
3. Task reassignment: changing the amount of personal assistance to complete a task, or job-sharing as in the example given for the transportation volunteer.

A local resource to help you in solving similar challenges might be an occupational therapist at a local hospital, school, or rehabilitation facility. Again, the Job Accommodation list in the appendix may be helpful.

Don't be diverted by the existence of barriers. Enlist the potential volunteer to

help until you address them. Be up front with the volunteer that this is a new experience for your agency, and that you need his or her help in blazing the trail. This will establish the relationship you need as you begin together to address the barriers. Start small in order to set yourselves up for success. Assign the volunteer to a staff member who is willing to be a partner in your pilot efforts; enlist his or her support as you move ahead together.

### *Training*

As with any volunteer, the training you provide for a volunteer with a disability can make or break the situation. There are a number of job aids, such as checklists, flow charts, troubleshooting guides, a mentor or experienced partner, a manual that can be employed to facilitate the process of learning the assigned job. (See "Job Aids for Volunteers: Tools to Help Them Successfully Complete Their Jobs" by Susan J. Barkman, *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Summer 1990.) Remember that the best guide for this will probably be the volunteer: As him or her for suggestions; how does he/she best learn?

Keep in mind that the complexity of the person's disability may require an extended learning time for the job.

### *Supervision*

In initially placing a person with a disability as a volunteer in your organization, the creativity and flexibility of the staff supervisor is a key point. Someone who is flexible and open will be a far better person than one who appears to be under pressure or is rigid. It will be important for the supervisor to be explicit about his or her expectations of the volunteer. Communication is critical. In giving the volunteer an assignment, it is important to define the tasks in terms of what is to be accomplished, not just the activities

themselves. It is also important for all volunteers to have a sense of the big picture into which their roles fit.

Communicate parameters for decision-making and the availability of resources, both material and supervisory. Who is available for clarification and problem solving? What is the desired result of the volunteer's work? Frequent and ongoing feedback to the volunteer will be essential: when will it happen, from whom? All of this is part of good supervision, but as you begin to include people with disabilities as volunteers, you want both their experiences and yours to be successful. Extra attention to good supervision is key because many individuals providing supervision to volunteers have had no supervisory experience or training.

### *Recognition*

What kind of ongoing recognition are you providing for volunteers? Socialization may be a primary motivation for someone with a physical disability to volunteer. Is that need being met by interaction with other volunteers and/or with staff? Another motivator may be skill development: are you providing opportunities for growth?

If you typically hold a recognition event, remember to determine whether the site for the event is accessible. Will you need an interpreter for volunteers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing?

This article has addressed person with disabilities as an untapped resource and discussed an approach for ensuring their inclusion. However, each person is an individual, and as such, is your best source of information about how to develop a successful volunteer experience. Persons with disabilities now represent over 19% of our population. They are rich in skills and knowledge, a gold mine of abilities waiting to be asked to make their contribution to your programs!

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## About the Author

*At the time of the article's original publication:*

Lisa Taylor was Director of Volunteer Services for Courage Center, a rehabilitation facility, whose volunteer program was the recipient of the President's Voluntary Action Award in 1990. Ms. Taylor served as a co-chair of workshops for the ICA conference in Minneapolis and was involved in volunteerism over the past twenty-five years.

Appendix I: Quick Look Barriers Checklist

This checklist is designed to give businesses a quick appraisal of potential problem areas for accessibility.

| ITEMS TO BE PERFORMED   | YES   | NO    |
|---|-------|-------|
| <b>Building access</b>  |       |       |
| 1. Are 96" wide parking spaces designated with a 60" aisle?                       | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Are parking spaces near main building entrance?                                | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Is there a "drop off" zone at the building entrance?                           | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Is the gradient from parking to building entrance 1:12 or less?                | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Is entrance doorway at least 32 inches wide?                                   | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Is door handle easy to grasp?  | _____ | _____ |
| 7. Is door easy to open (less than 8 lbs. pressure)?                              | _____ | _____ |
| 8. Are other than revolving doors available?                                      | _____ | _____ |
| <b>Building corridors</b>   |       |       |
| 1. Is path of travel free of obstruction and wide enough for a wheelchair?        | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Is floor surface hard and not slippery?  | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Do obstacles (phones, fountains) protrude no more than four inches?            | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Are elevator controls low enough (48") to be reached from a wheelchair?        | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Are elevator makings in Braille for the blind?                                 | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Does elevator provide audible signals for the blind?                           | _____ | _____ |
| 7. Does elevator interior provide a turning area of at least 51" for wheelchairs? | _____ | _____ |
| <b>Restrooms</b>  |       |       |
| 1. Are restrooms near building entrance/personnel office?                         | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Do doors have lever handles?   | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Are doors at least 32" wide?   | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Is restroom large enough for wheelchair turnaround (52" minimum)?              | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Are stall doors at least 32" wide?   | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Are grab bars provided in toilet stalls?                                       | _____ | _____ |
| 7. Are sinks at least 30" high with room for a wheelchair to roll under?          | _____ | _____ |
| 8. Are sink handles easily reached and used?                                      | _____ | _____ |
| 9. Are soap dispensers, towels, no more than 48" from floor?                      | _____ | _____ |
| <b>Personnel office</b>   |       |       |
| 1. Are doors at least 32" wide?   | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Is the door easy to open?  | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Is the threshold no more than 1/2" high?                                       | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Is the path of travel between desks/tables wide enough for wheelchairs?        | _____ | _____ |

Appendix II: Job Accommodation Ideas

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Job accommodation problems with proposed low-cost solutions from the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

We present these "problems" and "solutions" to start the creative process. They can be used to give a person who is inexperienced in hiring people with disabilities and idea of some accommodations that have actually been achieved. They make it easier to begin the process of working together for change.

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Problem: A person has an eye disorder. Glare on the computer screen caused fatigue.

Solution: An antiglare screen was purchased. (\$39.00)

Problem: A person with a learning disability worked in the mail room and had difficulty remembering which streets belonged to which zip codes.

Solution: A rolodex card system was filed by street name alphabetically with zip code. This helped him to increase his output. (\$150.00)

Problem: An individual with dyslexia who worked as a policed officer spent hours filling out forms at the end of each day.

Solution: He was provided with a tape recorder. A secretary typed out his reports from dictation while she typed the others from a handwritten copy. This accommodation allowed him to keep his job. (\$69.00)

Problem: A person who used a wheelchair could not use a desk because it was too low and his knees would not go under it.

Solution: The desk was raised with wood blocks, allowing a proper amount of space for the wheelchair to fit under it. (\$0)

Problem: An employee who used a wheelchair could not use the restroom.

Solution: The toilet facilities were enlarged and a handrail was installed. (\$70.00)

Problem: A person who worked outdoors had a medical condition which caused his hands to be unable to tolerate the cold.

Solution: The individual used gloves with pocket hand warmers such as those used by hunters (\$50.00)

Problem: A person with an unusually soft voice was required to do extensive public speaking.

Solution: A hand-held voice amplifier did the trick. (\$150.00)

Problem: An employer wanted to make the elevator accessible to a new employee who was blind and read Braille.

Solution: Raised dot elevator symbols that were self-adhesive made the elevator accessible. (\$6.00 each)

Problem: A person with a condition that required two-hour rest periods during the day.

Solution: The company changed her schedule and allowed her longer breaks, although she worked the same number of hours. (\$0)

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For specific assistance, call the Job Accommodation Network 1-800-ADA-WORK