

THE JOURNAL OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

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Introduction

The articles in this edition of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* highlight the wide spectrum of settings and disciplines encompassed by the profession of volunteer resources administration. Robert F. Ashcraft's commentary makes the case that legitimizing a profession goes hand in hand with higher education programs which focus on that field. Ashcraft provides background on American Humanics and outlines ways in which the partnership between the Association for Volunteer Administration and American Humanics can benefit the profession.

Today, more and more agencies and organizations are making a remarkable shift from viewing people with disabilities as recipients of volunteer services to seeing them as potential volunteers who may have special needs. In "Opportunities for All—The Potential for Supported Volunteering in Community Agencies," Linda L. Graff and John A. Vedell report the results of a community agency survey conducted in the Waterloo Region in Ontario, Canada. Dianne Leipper's article provides a segue from research to program development with an in-depth look at how to incorporate volunteers with special needs into the overall volunteer team.

Just as we are learning that people with disabilities have special needs, we are also discovering that adult learners require various methods of training and education to be successful. Nancy A. Gaston's "Different Kinds of Smart: Multiple Intelligences and the Training of Adults" offers a training design to help trainers explore the many ways adults process information.

An important part of the mission of the Association for Volunteer Administration is to advocate for volunteer resource administration as a respected profession. It is vital that researchers and practitioners continue to write and share these viewpoints—pointing out the power of diversity as well as the similarities that unite the profession.

L. Paige Tucker, MPA
Guest Editor

ABSTRACT

Choosing to offer volunteer opportunities to a broader spectrum of the community, including those people with disabilities, provides unique experiences, challenges, and benefits to the volunteer director, agency staff, and to the volunteers themselves. A review of the program, the management style, and good planning will facilitate success in including people of all abilities in the volunteer program.

Volunteerism—Opportunities for Everyone

Diane L. Leipper

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer programs have traditionally offered individuals an opportunity to become involved in a cause or program that is important to them. Volunteering can build team work and leadership skills. It can facilitate the exploration of options that may not be otherwise available. Opportunities may be found that can lead to personally satisfying endeavors, career changes or paid employment. Volunteering provides the chance to work with people from a variety of backgrounds, educational experiences, and age groups—factors that can increase a person's involvement in the community. A positive volunteer experience can be an important contribution to a sense of self worth, and can enhance self-confidence and provide a feeling of accomplishment. For people dealing with physical or mental challenges, the opportunities provided by volunteer experience can be especially important.

The experiences of involving special needs volunteers described here took place in the early 1990s while managing a volunteer program in a medical center. This organization had the potential to be an ideal setting to involve many segments of the community. The ideas and procedures developed in this setting can assist

other community organizations to benefit from the service of a diverse pool of potential volunteers.

A comment frequently heard from people with special needs was that volunteer service was one of the few occasions they had to be involved with people other than those with similar disabilities. They looked forward to being part of a larger and more varied group and to trying new things.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Attitudes

When considering whether to expand volunteer opportunities to include those with special needs, prior consideration of the issues and potential challenges or barriers is necessary. The most important revolve around what are often referred to as "people issues." These include the feelings, perceptions, concerns, attitudes, and personal philosophies of the volunteer manager. How other staff and volunteers feel about working with people with disabilities will be influenced by how the volunteer director interacts with them. Including the staff and other volunteers in the process of promoting participation of special needs volunteers enhances cooperation and teamwork and helps to ensure success.

Diane L. Leipper, has over 20 years of experience in volunteer management for youth services, health care organizations, and crisis and disaster programs. She has been a program director, a trainer, a board member, and a volunteer for a variety of non-profit organizations. As a partner in Leipper Management Group, she has provided management consulting and training to various volunteer programs and organizations. Diane has been a member of the Association for Volunteer Administration since the early 1980s and is also a member of the International Association for Volunteer Effort.

While time spent can be considered either a cost or an investment, time spent developing volunteers is an investment. The efforts to develop capable volunteers provide returns to the program, to the organization, to the individual volunteer, and the community at large. This investment encourages committed volunteers to continue to provide valuable service to the organization. The volunteer gains personal benefits and satisfaction from their efforts.

The medical center volunteer program proved that the actual time it takes to work with special needs volunteers was really no more than it was to work with other groups. It was another part of the volunteer manager's job and part of the daily routine. The volunteer program included a variety of education and job training programs (JOIN, university students, state social services, etc.). Each one required somewhat different documentation, procedures, and record keeping. Yet, each one included consultations with program facilitators and individualized supervision. Good planning and additional effort in the beginning often paid off by creating programs that practically ran themselves.

Facilities and Resources

Assessment of the physical facilities, available equipment, and job resources of the organization must be made to determine appropriateness for the varying ability levels of volunteers. The U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act requires that public buildings be accessible to people with disabilities. Having special needs volunteers in a building on a regular basis creates challenges not encountered by occasional visitors to the facility. Often, with a little creativity and experimentation, a good solution to these challenges will be found that does not require major expense or renovation.

A woman who wanted to volunteer and learn some basic computer skills provides an example of using available resources. She had suffered a head

injury and had some problems with manual dexterity. The only available computer was an outdated and unused one. A work space was found and the computer was set up. Training in basic operations was provided. This machine enabled her to work at her own pace and develop skills at her own comfort level. The computer had some quirks which she soon figured out how to work around. As she gained confidence, she expanded into new projects and became creative in making the machine do what she wanted. The work she did was a real asset to the volunteer department. She loved the fact that it was "her" machine, that she could experiment with it, and that she could produce useful results.

PITFALLS

Patronizing behavior and tokenism can undermine even the best laid plans. Everyone wants to be recognized for their accomplishments, but the basis for that recognition can make the difference between a sincere and meaningful acknowledgement and one that is superficial and detrimental rather than beneficial. For example, one wheelchair-bound volunteer was involved in several community projects. She was embarrassed by many of the recognitions she received because she believed that the primary reason she was recognized was because she was in a wheelchair, not because of the service she had provided.

On several occasions requests were made to the volunteer program manager to provide volunteers based on what they represented, rather than the service they provided or their ability or interest in a proposed project. This insidious form of patronizing behavior can lead to resentment, can create barriers, and may cause problems within the entire volunteer population. "People are proud if they have done something to be proud of—otherwise it is false pride and destructive. People have a sense of accomplishment only

if they have accomplished something. They feel important if their work is important" (Drucker, 1982).

A local service club asked for a speaker to talk about volunteering in the medical center. A young man, who had suffered a head injury, was asked if he would like this opportunity. He had never been asked to do anything like this before and was very nervous about speaking in front of people. At the same time, he was also excited. He spent a lot of time working on what he was going to say. His presentation went very well. He spoke some about his disability, but the focus was on the work he did and what it meant to him. People asked him questions and applauded his presentation. He was so thrilled to have done something he didn't think he could do, he talked about it all the way back to the medical center and for days afterward. For him, this was a recognition that his volunteer efforts were valuable. It was also a personal achievement knowing that he could succeed at something he had never tried before.

This example illustrates that the skills of the volunteer manager in selecting the right volunteer to do a task is crucial. Choosing the wrong person for the assignment could have been a disaster. Not understanding or supporting this person might have resulted in failure and frustration for the volunteer.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

There are many factors that assist in providing successful placement for special needs volunteers. Some of the more important include program focus, teamwork, consistency, shared expectations, support, communication, and the skills and abilities of the volunteer manager.

Focus on the Individual

The volunteer program focused on the person, not the disability. The premise is

that everyone is special and unique in his or her own way. When interviewed for a volunteer position, the individual was asked questions to determine his or her interests, what he or she wanted to do, and how much time he or she wished to volunteer. Ways were then found to meet these needs while accomplishing the defined goals of the organization.

Teamwork

Through the leadership of the volunteer manager, all of the volunteers and staff worked together as a team. The support of the volunteers and their willingness to accept and assist each other was a major factor in the success of the program. For example, although specially trained volunteers were responsible for the majority of the orientation of new volunteers, everyone was part of the process. The more experienced volunteers helped the newer ones find their way around and explained the medical center policies and procedures. In working with the newer volunteers, the experienced volunteers gained additional insight into the abilities and uncertainties of the newer volunteers. This teamwork enabled the volunteer manager to address potential problems before they became noticeable. By working together, the success of placing volunteers in a permanent assignment was enhanced.

Collaboration was important in a situation involving a new volunteer who came to her first day of training with her best friend. The friend had not attended orientation, and the trainer asked the volunteer manager what to do about the friend. The new volunteer was uncomfortable about not speaking English well and was nervous about being by herself. She felt more comfortable with her friend participating in the training. After the volunteer manager, the trainer and the two friends discussed the situation, it was decided that both friends would continue the first day of training and later, orientation would be provided for the one who had missed it. The result was two great new volunteers

instead of one. Although the first one wanted to volunteer away from people because of her lack of confidence in her language skills, they both ended up participating in health fairs and other activities where their multiple language skills made them valuable assets.

Consistency in Program Parameters

All volunteers, regardless of background, physical capabilities, age, or other factors, followed the same basic process to become a volunteer. Some modifications, such as shortened tours of the facility, orientation in shorter segments, or more targeted training, were made to accommodate certain limitations or specific requirements. All volunteers were held accountable for adherence to core requirements such as health clearance, dress code, confidentiality, and other standard policies.

Shared Expectations

The orientation and training process provided ample time for new volunteers to understand the policies, procedures, and expectations of the volunteer program and the organization. It gave the new volunteer numerous opportunities to clarify his or her goals, needs, and expectations. Open, frequent, and varied communications helped ensure everyone was working together toward common goals. Everyone understood that they were expected to provide a high quality of service to the medical center and to perform to his or her best ability.

Partnerships with Local Services and Organizations

Partnerships with services and organizations in the community that provide assistance in the areas of social work, counseling, and rehabilitation played an important role in placement of special needs volunteers. Staff from these organizations are often very willing to assist in assessment, placement, training and evaluation. Many times counselors came to the medical center to work with the vol-

unteer and the staff of the department or area where the volunteer was placed. They assisted the volunteer in learning the job and contributed to a cooperative work environment for the volunteer and staff.

Communications with Staff

Presentations at meetings and conversations with individuals helped build the support of the administration and staff for the volunteer program overall. Staff provided training and direction to volunteers working in their departments. A significant concern of staff was that volunteers would be "dumped" on them. When staff realized the volunteer program would give serious consideration to their needs and would continually monitor placements, they became much more enthusiastic. Over time, department staff and volunteers formed a more cohesive team and required less and less intervention from the volunteer program manager.

Involvement of a Professional Volunteer Manager

Professional education and experience in volunteer management provides the leadership and management skills needed to create a successful program. An education in social work or a related field affords an understanding of accepted standards of human behavior and a knowledge of describing, measuring, and reporting program effectiveness. Experience working with people in a variety of settings encourages adaptability and flexibility. Involvement in professional volunteer management associations provides opportunities for networking with peers. Taking advantage of the training opportunities and learning experiences offered by professional associations enhances skills and provides exposure to current knowledge, trends, and ideas.

Leadership, team building, negotiation, delegation, interpersonal and coaching skills all play vital roles in the development and maintenance of volunteer programs. An understanding of regulatory

and policy issues, in particular as they pertain to volunteers, provide a foundation that minimizes potential risk for the program, the organization, and the volunteers. An awareness of the unique aspects of managing volunteer programs enhances effectiveness and increases the satisfaction of all participants.

INVITATION TO SERVICE

Anyone interested in volunteering at the medical center was invited to an interview. If the person understood and agreed with the basic premises of the program, he or she was invited to attend an orientation. The only expectations that had to be met were that anyone who wished to volunteer must have transportation to the facility, be able to get around the facility on his or her own, and be able to manage personal necessities such as eating and using the restroom. The mission was to provide service to the patients and clients of the medical center, so the energies and efforts of all volunteers had to focus on fulfilling that mission.

The volunteer program included people with wide variations in skills and physical ability levels. Some volunteers had cerebral palsy, scoliosis, Parkinson's disease, and severe arthritis; others had suffered head injuries, and some had limitations due to back injuries or illnesses. The program included a volunteer with Down's syndrome and one who suffered from multiple personality disorder. Some used wheelchairs, one was blind, and others had speech difficulties, limited manual dexterity, learning disabilities, psychological/emotional difficulties, or chronic medical conditions.

During interviews, special needs volunteers were asked what they wanted to do. Many didn't know how to respond to this question and didn't have any idea about what they wanted to do. With experience, it was discovered that these volunteers had seldom been asked what they would like to do. Instead, they were most often told what they could do. They were

surprised that someone wanted their opinion. When they discovered that there was a willingness to try to adapt a job that interested them to their abilities, they were enthusiastic, and even provided ideas that helped create a good placement. When people have input into the jobs they do, whether as volunteers or as employees, there is increased productivity and satisfaction. This certainly applies to special needs volunteers.

PLACEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

The motivation of a volunteer to do a task to the best of his or her ability is greatly influenced by his or her interest in the task and the challenges it provides. "A volunteer will move away from an assignment if he is belittled or made to feel inadequate" (Morrison, 1983). The volunteer manager must be aware of issues that can negatively impact motivation. They include:

- Making assumptions about the tasks a volunteer will be interested in or what he or she may be capable of doing because of apparent limitations.
- Ignoring a volunteer's interest in a job for one which is more conveniently available.
- Trying too hard to be helpful. Providing too much or inappropriate assistance can discourage efforts to overcome challenges. It can undermine self worth and stifle opportunities for personal growth and satisfaction that comes with achieving success.
- Unwillingness to modify or adapt a task of interest to the volunteer. The reasons often are because of the perception that it would take too much time, cost money, or the attitude that this constitutes rehabilitation services which are not part of the focus of the organization.

These issues can show up in a variety of ways. They create dissatisfaction and poor performance and seem to be especially prevalent when working with special needs volunteers.

A volunteer with visual impairment wanted to run errands throughout the entire facility. During her initial tour, she was coached by her counselor in how to find her way around. Her first errand on her own concerned other volunteers. When she bumped into the door, they wanted to run and open it for her. They were asked to stay back and let her figure it out herself. Many of the volunteers assumed she would get lost or run into something and wanted to follow her to help out if needed. When she returned after successfully completing the errand, everyone had learned important lessons about jumping to conclusions, the importance of allowing for experimentation and learning from mistakes.

Work Environment

Socialization is a primary motivation for many volunteers. The physical environment in which the volunteer works is crucial to socialization and in turn, job satisfaction. In some programs, specific groups of volunteers are provided work areas separate from the general volunteer population. Although some tasks or people may require separate space, it is clear that the greater the opportunity for interaction among the entire volunteer population, the more beneficial it is for everyone. Isolating people can increase a sense of not belonging, and can inhibit assimilation into the volunteer team.

Setting up various projects in different parts of a large room encouraged involvement from others not specifically assigned to the project. In some cases, it provided the opportunity for the volunteer doing the project to teach other volunteers. Support from the group increased enthusiasm about trying new things, and working together facilitated the awareness of each individual's ability to contribute meaningfully to the organization.

A volunteer with speech impairment gained numerous benefits from work-

ing in an environment with other volunteers. When he first started, he rarely said more than two words in his four-hour shift. After several months, he became much more verbal and even laughed and joked with the other volunteers. He also took more pride in the task he was doing. The quality of his work and his productivity increased.

Defining the Task

Creativity, openness, and support are crucial to the placement of volunteers with special needs. "To make the worker 'achieve' demands that managers look upon labor as a resource rather than a problem, a cost, or an enemy to be cowed. It demands that managers accept responsibility for making human strengths effective" (Drucker, 1983). A volunteer manager has the responsibility of assessing the non-paid human resources in the organization and matching them appropriately to tasks in a way that will enhance the work of the organization while providing a satisfying experience to the volunteer and to any staff or clients involved.

To make a productive and satisfying placement, creativity is needed to analyze tasks that need to be done and determine the best method for accomplishing those tasks. "Work analysis does not begin with identifying operations. It begins with defining the desired end product" (Drucker, 1983). When thinking about a placement for a volunteer, consider the ultimate goal of that placement and use creativity to find a variety of ways that the goal can be achieved. The product is a service to the organization and to the growth of each volunteer.

SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENTS

Successful placements for volunteers are not accidental. They are the result of careful planning, attention to details, and awareness of the needs and motivations of each individual. A successful placement starts with the very first contact between a potential volunteer and the

organization. The training process is especially important in the establishment of a long-term, successful placement. Careful attention was paid to linking new volunteers with specific trainers. Matching a trainer's personality and training style with the volunteer increased effectiveness, created a better rapport, and established a stronger bond with the organization.

Some successful placements included:

- A wheelchair-bound volunteer with limited manual dexterity worked three days per week, four hours per day in Central Processing. She put materials together in plastic bags and put labels on them. She also did other miscellaneous errands.
- Two wheelchair-bound volunteers, specially trained by the Senior Center Insurance Counselor, visited with senior patients and provided information on insurance, Medicare, and other programs.
- A volunteer who had suffered a head injury, was in a wheelchair, had limited manual dexterity, and had a speech impairment worked in the day care center with three- to five- year-old children. He helped with activities, prepared lunch, and put mats down for naps.
- A blind volunteer worked in a new program in the pediatrics unit. Duties included assisting with play therapy and providing comfort to the patients. She also worked in the volunteer service room and delivered medical records and flowers and took wheelchairs to admitting.
- Other wheelchair-bound volunteers delivered medical records, transported small equipment and supplies, answered the telephone, and helped with special projects.

Volunteers with disabilities were also involved in numerous special projects, events, and one-time service requests. They assisted at health fairs by registering participants, helping with testing proce-

dures and running errands. Special needs volunteers worked with other volunteers to act as greeters at special events. They performed clerical duties such as assembling information packets, collating manuals and labeling. They also assisted with a variety of computer-related projects, including documenting volunteer hours, entering survey information and word processing.

All opportunities for volunteers were open to any active volunteer regardless of individual differences. The determining factors were the requirements of the job, who was interested in doing it and how it would be completed successfully.

The medical center staff's willingness to work with the volunteer program was a major factor in providing challenging and meaningful placements. Most importantly, the entire volunteer population supported the philosophy of enabling volunteers of all ability levels to provide services to the patients and clients of the organization.

When the program began to involve people with special needs, a question that was often posed by other volunteers and staff was "What can that person do? They can't do..." As more special needs volunteers became active members of the program, these questions became less frequent. As the volunteer team became more inclusive, the differences became less visible. An illustration of this occurred when a group of volunteers was discussing a project that involved mobility. They had forgotten that one of the group members was in a wheelchair. When they realized it, they automatically found a way around the wheelchair constraints so that the whole group could be included in the project.

SPECIAL PROJECTS PROGRAM

Taking advantage of opportunities that arise unexpectedly can be beneficial. When a potential new volunteer with a background in special education wanted to utilize her experience in the volunteer program, this interest resulted in the Spe-

cial Projects Program (SPP). The focus of this program was to assess potential tasks based on the specific physical, mental, and skill requirements. Tasks were also assessed on the amount of supervision needed, the availability of the physical resources necessary to accomplish the task, and the tenure of the assignment. This information was then used in placing the appropriate volunteer. An assessment tool for volunteers was developed based on the job requirement section of the facility's employee application. A memo was sent to various department managers which introduced the SPP volunteer coordinator and provided an overview of the program.

The SPP coordinator set up appointments with department managers to discuss tasks which might be appropriate for volunteers. The assessment tool was used to define the requirements for the task. With this information, a list of tasks was prepared so that the skills and abilities of individual volunteers could be matched to the tasks. When an interested volunteer was found, the SPP volunteer would make arrangements for an introduction and then assist the new volunteer in learning the job. The hands-on approach of the Special Projects Program, working directly with the staff and providing support for volunteers, was instrumental in its success. This approach enabled continuous monitoring of progress and resolution of problems before they became significant.

PROBLEM RESOLUTION

Concerns that arise when involving special needs volunteers, although sometimes different from those encountered in the general volunteer population, were no more frequent. Differences in expectations, lack of understanding or the need for clarification of policies, and behavior inappropriate for the volunteer program, were common causes of problems that could affect any volunteer.

Out of approximately 100 special needs volunteers involved with the program

over a five-year period, only two had to be dismissed from volunteer service. Difficulties that were resolved included: a wheelchair bound volunteer who didn't want to use a catheter, but expected other volunteers to assist her in the restroom; an individual who had difficulty eating and would sometimes eat too fast and spit up his food; a volunteer who had occasional emotional outbursts because of difficulty with medications; and several who had personal grooming habits that were offensive.

When dealing with undesirable behavior, it is always best to be honest, factual and open to discussion. Devising pretenses to exclude the volunteer and then filling the job with someone else is insincere and benefits no one. A "problem" volunteer usually knows there is something wrong, but may not know what the problem is or how to improve. Dismissing that person without at least trying to discuss the issues involved can create more confusion and resentment. People who may have already experienced other rejections, may find dismissal from a volunteer job devastating. If the need to dismiss any volunteer arises, the basic rules such as good documentation and well-defined procedures always apply.

When a volunteer does not seem to fit in, this can be seen as an opportunity for introspective review of program practices. What could have been done to prevent or reduce the problems? Could better planning, more training or closer supervision have made a difference? Are there options that were not considered? Are there preconceptions that may have influenced the situation? Was an important behavioral signal missed or misinterpreted? Differences in values and expectations that are often the basis of problems involve more than an individual. Eliminating the individual will not solve the problem and will not benefit the program if the underlying factors are not considered. An honest look at the program and its management are an integral part of problem resolution.

THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The program described in this article was developed by a volunteer manager who strived to support the ethical values expressed in the *Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration* published by the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA). Over time, volunteer managers can include people with disabilities in the volunteer program, using resources available in almost any setting or size of organization.

Resources

Resources available for this program were limited. The values and philosophy of the volunteer manager and the strong belief that people with disabilities had something to offer and could be productive volunteers enabled effective use of the few available resources. Patience, perseverance, and a willingness to overcome the "resistant attitudes and perceptions on the part of co-workers and top management," (AVA, 1999) and to think outside the box also helped. In this setting, planning combined with efforts to make the most of what was available achieved results that might be considered ideal, but are also attainable by other volunteer program leaders.

The volunteer manager in this particular situation worked a standard 40-hour week, had one small office, had no additional paid staff support, no outside funding and no budget. She managed a program with close to 400 volunteers recruited from the community at large, several educational institutions and social service programs. These volunteers provided services in over 60 areas or programs. The medical center in which this program was developed did not provide any additional space or resources for these volunteers. For instance, computers acquired for special needs volunteers were generally old and discarded. When space was needed, it was squeezed out of corners, hallways, the volunteer manager's office and temporarily unoccupied offices.

Outside resources were developed over time. Most of the people with disabilities who came to volunteer at the medical center were associated with other community resources such as an independent living center or rehabilitation facilities. Part of the rehabilitation process often included involvement in community and work experience opportunities. When counselors found a program willing to accept and work with their clients, they were eager to help. There seemed to be very few organizations or businesses that would work with them, and they were desperate for good opportunities for their clients.

Building Support

When the volunteer program began incorporating special needs volunteers who became more visible in the organization, there were many concerns. Lack of support, and even resistance, by the administration, the staff and also the volunteer manager's supervisor created hurdles which had to be overcome. Other volunteers were hesitant and at first tended to avoid or exclude volunteers with disabilities. Concerns included the image created by having people with disabilities visible to patients and clients on a regular basis and the possibility of dealing with uncomfortable or personal issues. Oddly enough, concern over potential liability and policy issues was minimal. It often seemed administration preferred that the special needs volunteers work out of sight. The only time administration seemed interested was when they wanted to showcase people with disabilities for some publicity event.

Relationships and trust among volunteers and staff members developed over time and enabled the volunteer manager to encourage more placements of volunteers with disabilities. In the beginning, support was built slowly with a few staff. Eventually, the volunteer program received recognition from the rehabilitation department for its work with people with disabilities.

A belief in the responsibility of a volunteer administrator to "...create a social climate through which human needs can be met and human values enhanced" (AVA, 1999) is crucial to overcoming obstacles such as lack of resources and staff resistance. Over time and through successful examples, staff became more willing to work with special needs volunteers. As positive results became more evident, it was easier to get necessary resources. As people began to see special needs volunteers as individuals, rather than a disability, they became more supportive and willing to get involved. As community services organizations which worked with people with disabilities became aware of the positive changes in certain individuals, they referred more clients as potential volunteers, and service agency staff and counselors were more willing to assist.

"Some problems cannot be solved by money but rather by people" (AVA, 1999). Sometimes there is a tendency to think that starting any new project or program needs to involve a great deal of time, a large grant, new equipment or extra supplies. Yet, often the best results come from humble beginnings. Involving special needs people in a volunteer program requires two basic components: a committed volunteer manager who is willing to learn, try something new, and take things one step at a time, and a person with special needs who wants to volunteer. There are no other requirements or limits. As with any volunteer program, it is important that the program fills a need, supports the mission of the organization, suits the size of the organization, and fits in with the capabilities and resources of the volunteer director and other staff.

CONCLUSION

When trying to develop a similar program involving volunteers with special needs:

- Think about the mission of the organization and how different individuals can support that mission in a variety of

different ways.

- Determine the reasons for incorporating special needs volunteers in the program. Be honest. If it is just to promote the image of equal service and opportunity, that will be short-sighted.
- Review preconceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Be honest about discomforts and uncertainties.
- Determine the commitment needed in terms of time, energy, and the physical resources of the organization.
- Be aware of the need to develop positive working relationships with other staff and administration, and increasing outside support over a long period of time.
- Start slow. Build upon successes.
- Work within the resources available.
- When considering a specific special needs person for a volunteer position, focus on what the person is able to do and build a job around those abilities.
- Deal with problems and concerns immediately in a constructive manner.
- Develop a program with self-governance in mind. For example, create partnerships among volunteers where each one helps the other get the job done. Create management-type positions that utilize the skills and capabilities of appropriate volunteers to train, supervise, and assist special needs volunteers.
- Ask for advice, suggestions and ideas from peers, administration, other staff, community contacts involved with people with disabilities, and most of all, from the special needs volunteers themselves. Listen to this advice with an open mind and optimistic attitude.

Everyone, including the volunteer manager, can receive great rewards from working with special needs volunteers. The experience of working with this population reinforces the necessity of sound planning. A willingness to invest the effort needed in the initial phases of the volunteer experience to ensure a successful placement is also needed. The smile on

a volunteer's face, the change in attitude, the visible sense of accomplishment, and the positive and supportive reactions of other volunteers and staff make it all worthwhile. Keeping the focus on the person, not the disability, provides opportunities for the volunteer with special needs to grow as a unique individual.

A young man who had suffered a head injury had just such an opportunity for personal growth. He had some paralysis on one side, and mental limitations. When he started volunteering, he was rather defensive and uncooperative. His personal grooming habits left much to be desired. He would arrive in a dirty uniform with unkempt long, stringy hair. He often had body odor. If he didn't get his way, he would cause a disturbance in the cafeteria. Many of the other volunteers were not impressed and avoided him when possible. In consulting with him, observing his interactions with others, and listening to comments from other volunteers, it became apparent that some of the problems stemmed from others excusing his appearance because of his disability. Therefore, he did not see the need to put much effort into personal grooming. Instead of firing him, options were tried and consultations continued. One day he came in with a new pair of pants and a very clean uniform. He had cut and washed his hair. Other volunteers noticed and complimented him on how he looked and talked with him. He was smiling from ear to ear. He seemed to rediscover pride in himself, in what he was capable of accomplishing, and in his ability to be a contributing and accepted member of the volunteer team.

For more information about involving people with special needs in volunteer programs, contact Diane Leipper at 775-972-5011 or leipper@attglobal.net.

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