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Planning for Including People with Intellectual Disabilities in Volunteer Programs

People with disabilities give back to their community in many ways and have a variety of talents and gifts. Below are tips and examples that you can use to help make sure people with disabilities feel welcomed and are effectively included in your volunteer program.

1. Presume that volunteer can competently do volunteer work.

People with disabilities are engaged in many types of volunteer activities. As you recruit and engage prospective volunteers with disabilities, presume that they can effectively participate in the volunteer activity.

Sometimes, people with disabilities may need to request additional support to complete volunteer activities. ***Be as clear as possible about the type of work that needs to be done and what you expect out of your volunteers.*** Clearly communicating your needs and the work required will help prospective volunteers decide whether they can carry out the tasks requested independently. If they cannot, it is the responsibility of the volunteer with the disability to inform you of this and ask for support.

2. Always use respectful and inclusive language when speaking to people with disabilities and in your training for your volunteers.

Sometimes, people unknowingly use terms that are not respectful of people with disabilities or don't know what etiquette they should use to interact with people with various types of disabilities. This tip sheet provides more information on respectful language and how to respectfully interact with people with disabilities (<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>).

3. Plan for success with the volunteer and his or her supporters.

Plan with a volunteer with a disability and his or her supporters about ways the volunteer will contribute to your program. This should include the tasks he or she will participate in, how he or she will be trained to do this, and who in your program may act as a mentor to help him or her learn the ropes and make friends in the group. It may also include other issues, like how the volunteer will get to/from the position, as well as notes about any medical or diet needs or accommodations. The other side of this sheet shows you an example of a volunteer action plan.

4. Ask the volunteer and his or her supporters what works best for them to overcome challenges.

We all experience challenges in our life, and we all have different preferences about how we want to overcome them. If a volunteer or his or her supporters mention that he or she is having trouble with a task or a part of volunteering, ask the volunteer for recommendations on how to address the issue. Often, the volunteer will already have ideas of solutions to overcome the challenge. If they don't, brainstorm solutions with the volunteer and his or her supporters. You can find many examples of solutions that people use to overcome work/volunteer challenges at the Job Accommodation Network (www.askjan.org).

5. Consider the volunteer for a job

People with disabilities can volunteer and can also be eager and excellent employees! Don't forget to consider volunteers with disabilities for any available job opportunities you have.

Jenny's Volunteer Plan

Volunteer activities: Jenny will volunteer as a greeter and coat checker at a local theater.

Volunteering Days and Times: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 2-5pm

How Jenny will get to/from volunteering: Jenny's friend Ilyse will take her on Monday and Friday; Jenny will take the bus on Wednesday

Jenny's Strengths: Very friendly and likes to organize things

Jenny's Challenges: Jenny needs to take a short break every hour to sit down because she gets tired very easily; Jenny has trouble reading small print and needs a bit more time to understand training

Medical/Diet Needs: None

Accessibility Needs: Jenny needs to read large print for training. Training materials need to be in 18-point font or larger. Jenny may also need to ask questions when she doesn't understand what is said during the training. Mary, the head greeter, will help explain anything she has questions about and sit with Jenny in the breaks.

Engagement Plan: Mary and the volunteer coordinator will meet after the initial training to identify a greeter who can mentor Jenny. The mentor will be trained on how to interact with people with disabilities and will be another person that Jenny can reach out to if she has questions, or if she needs help.

Employment Goals: Jenny is interested in becoming an usher. Jenny and Mary will make sure Jenny can meet and connect with the ushers at the theater, will seek opportunities for Jenny to shadow an usher during shows to learn more about the job, and Jenny will be able to apply for any usher positions that become available.

Jenny's Activities:

1. Greeter

What to do: greet people as they enter the theater in a friendly manner; help them get where they want to go in the theater

How Jenny Will Learn: Jenny will attend the regular training on June 19th

What to do if Jenny has questions: Jenny should ask Mary, the head greeter, or her mentor if she has questions or wants more practice

2. Coat Check

What to do:

- take people's coat as they give them to you;
- work with other coat check staff to make sure the coat has a number on it and give the person the same number;
- work with other staff to make sure the coat is put in the right spot;
- help give people back their coats after the show.

How Jenny Will Learn Skills: Jenny will attend the regular training on June 19th and she will practice with Ilyse and Mary on the 22nd before working as a coat check volunteer to make sure she has it down

What to do if Jenny has questions: Jenny should ask Mary or her mentor for help.

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