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Inclusive Volunteering Opportunities: Tips to Overcome Common Challenges

When it comes to volunteering, some of the greatest challenges are to find volunteer opportunities that match the of the people you serve, that are unique, that connect people with I/DD meaningfully to other well-connected volunteers in the community, and that support the volunteer's end goal. This tip sheet will provide you recommendations to overcome these common challenges.

Challenge 1: Matching Interests

Learn Your Participants' Volunteer Visions. The "My Volunteer Vision" document can help the person or people you want to volunteer with express what they want out of volunteering and activities that they are interested in.

Brainstorm! Hold a brainstorm session with the people you serve who are interested in volunteering. Ask the group questions to identify what types of activities they might be interested. Questions you may want to ask include:

- What types of things do you like to do in the community?
- What things don't you like to do?
- Are there problems that you see in the community that you want to help fix?
- What places do you like to go to in the community?
- Who do you want to get to know better in the community?

Match up people with similar interests. If you are supporting a group with diverse interests, review comments from the brainstorming session and "Volunteer Vision" form to identify people who would enjoy volunteering together.

Seek out multiple opportunities with organizations. If you have a group of volunteers with diverse interests and preferences, seek out organizations that offer a variety of volunteer roles. This way, you can do your best to identify tasks and activities that fit as many of your volunteers as possible.

Challenge 2: Finding Unique Volunteer Opportunities with I/DD

Get ahead of the game. Sometimes, volunteers with I/DD flock to the same locations because of good word of mouth about a location. Since one purpose of volunteering is to promote social inclusion, get ahead of the game and avoid creating segregated volunteer positions by continuously seeking new and unique volunteering opportunities. The suggestions below can help you find these opportunities.

- *Check out the newspaper and local news.* Keep an eye out for local events in your community. Charity events, concert halls, theaters, political offices or campaigns, pageants, and festivals often recruit many volunteers.
- *Review volunteer databases for new opportunities.* Many organizations post a wide variety of community volunteer opportunities online.

Bust Myths and Offer Support. Volunteer coordinators and volunteer programs may not be aware of all the gifts, talents, and strengths of people with I/DD. When you outreach to volunteer programs, give concrete examples of how volunteers with I/DD have served the community in the past and offer to support volunteers in their activities. Help the volunteer coordinator and program develop a plan for engaging volunteers with I/DD, and offer recommendations on how to implement this plan.

Challenge 3: Connecting Volunteers with Well-Connected Community Volunteers

Consider Where the “Movers and Shakers” Volunteer. One of the biggest benefits of volunteering is to make connections and grow a strong social network so that you can lead the best life possible. Connecting with well-resourced community volunteers can help volunteers with I/DD grow strong social networks and create friendships with people who can help to identify future work and life opportunities in the community. Brainstorm (with other disability professionals, if possible) where well-connected volunteers in your community serve. Volunteers may serve at popular festivals, pageants, political offices, theaters, or other locations. Once identified, reach out to organizers and volunteer coordinators for these events to see how volunteers with I/DD can be involved.

Challenge 4: Volunteering Ends Up as the Destination, Not Just a Stepping Stone

Keep Your Eye on the Prize. It is important to remember that for most people volunteering is not the end goal. It is something people do to find new friends, get a job, or achieve something else. Make sure that you know what each of the people you work with want to have happen because they volunteer. Make sure to talk with them while they volunteer to see if volunteering is helping them do what they want to do. If it isn't, you may need to work with them to tailor their volunteer experience or find a new one that will help them achieve their goals.

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