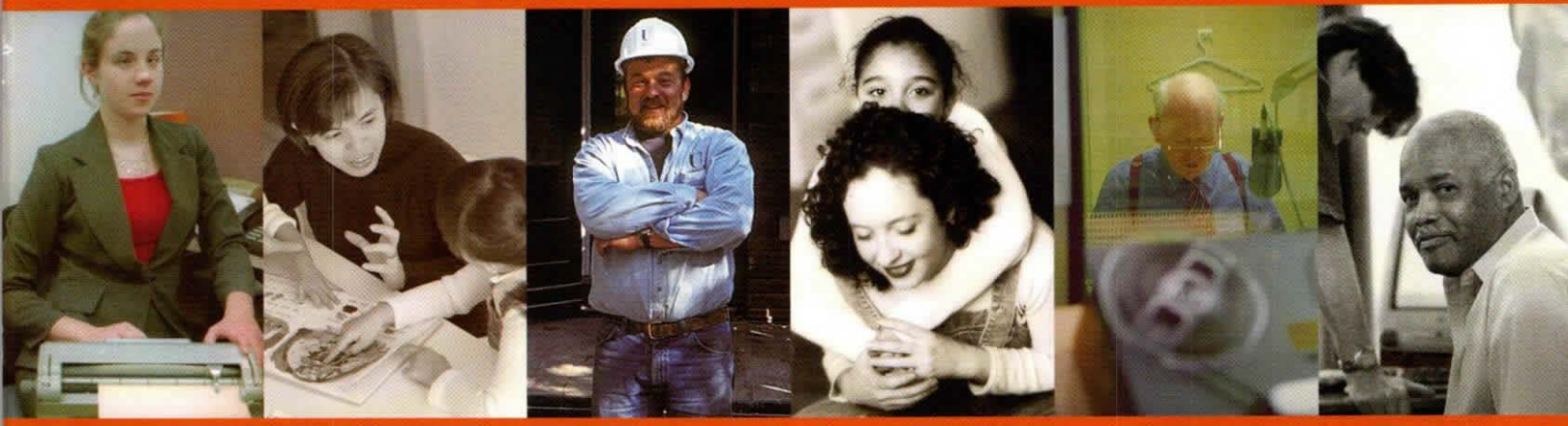

Volunteer Connections:

Creating an accessible and inclusive environment

Foreword

Volunteer Connections: Creating an accessible and inclusive environment is one of four separate, yet linked, volunteer program management manuals prepared by Volunteer Canada. They are designed to assist the person who recruits, manages, oversees and supports volunteers, either as a volunteer themselves or in a paid capacity as a professional administrator of volunteer resources.

These easy-to-use manuals address the challenges that organizations and groups face daily in seeking to involve people with disabilities, youth, and older adults as volunteers.

This manual aims to assist organizations in diversifying their volunteer force to be inclusive of persons with a variety of disabilities, and discusses the impact, opportunities and challenges presented.

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Canada

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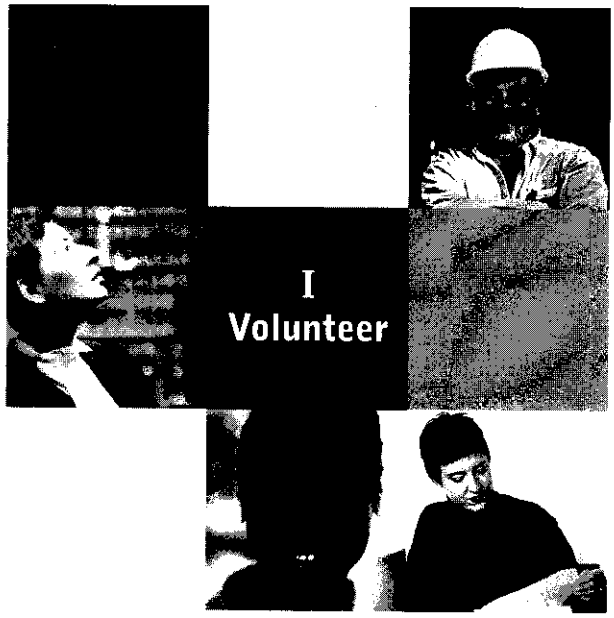
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Introduction

The non-profit sector across Canada has long been a supporter of social justice and equality for all Canadians. In working to improve our quality of life, many organizations strive to create a more inclusive society in which all people have access to the benefits of the country, and equal opportunity for participation. Many aim to create a better world for those seen to be 'disadvantaged' or vulnerable in some way, including people who have disabilities.

However, this philosophy of inclusion for all is not necessarily followed in practice. Despite the many advantages that come with involving all types of volunteers, many organizations are denying themselves the benefit of engaging volunteers with disabilities. They have not yet done what is necessary to remove or remedy the tremendous environmental and social barriers that people with disabilities face when contemplating the volunteer experience. Persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to involvement—whether as paid staff or volunteers—in the voluntary sector.

This is by no means the intention of the sector. The vast majority of voluntary organizations believe that no individual should be denied the opportunity to volunteer if he or she has the skills and the determination to help them achieve their mission. However, the voluntary sector is not immune to the assumption that people with disabilities are recipients of volunteer services, not active volunteers themselves. We must go beyond a passive approach to inclusion, to recognize that we improve our sector and our organizations by striving to include persons with disabilities as volunteers. "As we diversify our volunteer base, a whole range of different perspectives become available to an organization" (Pyle, 1997). We expand our own thinking about how we involve volunteers, and we serve our communities better by being more reflective of those communities.

Consider your organization for a moment. Who are your average volunteers? Are they typically a particular age or sex? Do they tend to be of a certain ethnic background or socio-economic status? Then take a look around your community. What parts of the community are you involving as volunteers? More importantly, who is missing? If you are lacking the input of people with disabilities as volunteers, this manual can help you to be more inclusive and thus better serve your community.

Stories abound of ways in which persons with disabilities contribute to the society we want to create. Despite the continued existence of barriers, people with disabilities are working and volunteering successfully in every sector of society. Have you ever considered:

- a volunteer who is blind reading to children to improve literacy?
- a volunteer who uses a wheelchair doing disaster relief?
- a volunteer with a cognitive disability providing companionship and support to elderly citizens?

- a volunteer who is hard of hearing and uses sign language providing public education about violence against women?

The possibilities are endless, once we remove barriers to volunteer participation. This manual is designed to help managers of volunteers engage volunteers with disabilities, whether as a result of an inquiry by a potential volunteer, or as the result of a specific recruitment initiative. We offer suggestions on how to accomplish this, all while avoiding the trap of involving people with disabilities as 'token' representatives of their 'group.'

In 1991, about 17.8 per cent of Canada's adult population (aged 15 and over) had some form of disability (Fawcett, 1996). If volunteer organizations want to serve their communities—including the almost one-fifth of constituents who have a disability—they must examine their approach to volunteer management and put an end to any exclusionary practices.

There are few hard numbers about the representation of persons with disabilities among Canada's 6.5 million volunteers. Some information from Britain indicates that, while 14 per cent of the British population has a disability, only 6 per cent of volunteers have disabilities. That same study found that most organizations indicated problems of access and attitude/acceptance as reasons why the participation by volunteers with disabilities was low (www.cybervpm.com). While similar statistics are not available for Canada, anecdotal evidence suggests a similar trend.

Canadians with disabilities still face barriers to involvement. It is important to be aware of the quality of life for Canadians with disabilities, as well as the various barriers faced as they strive for inclusion. There have been such significant advances in recent years in the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society that it can be easy to believe that no real barriers to full participation still exist. Yet, in her economic portrait of disability in Canada, Gail Fawcett (1996) found that:

- Persons with disabilities had a higher unemployment rate than persons without disabilities.

A note on terminology:

A **disability** is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity (Human Resources Development Canada, 1991). A **handicap** is an environmental or attitudinal barrier that limits the opportunity for a person to participate fully—that is, the disadvantages experienced by the interaction of impairments or disabilities with an individual's surroundings (Fawcett, 1996). It is important to note that a disability need not result in a handicap. For example, losing a hand would result in a disability. It would not result in a handicap, however, in a situation where only one hand was required to complete a task, such as writing.

- This disparity increased as the severity of disability increased, such that people with severe disabilities experience an extremely high unemployment rate.
- Having a requirement for special work accommodations reduced labour force participation.

While it is difficult for persons with disabilities to gain access to the work force, it appears that, once employment has been secured, the differences between those with and without disabilities are less pronounced, though still problematic. Volunteer work is a key way to gain job skills and, often, paid employment. Many persons with disabilities would be interested in gaining job skills through volunteer positions, as a way to counteract the increased barriers they find in obtaining paid employment. Volunteering is already prevalent among persons with disabilities: "about 20 per cent of persons with disabilities who were out of the labour force in 1991 were active in the unpaid labour force of volunteer workers" (Lautenschlager, 1992). Over half of volunteers with disabilities who were out of the labour force reported that the skills they used in their volunteer work would be useful in finding future paid employment.

> "Volunteers with special needs are one of this country's greatest and most underused human resources. With the proper training, support and encouragement—the same things you would give any volunteer—volunteers with special needs can be the most dedicated, hardworking and caring long-term recruits. Who could ask for anything more?"
>
> (Centre for Disability and Work, 1994)

When persons with disabilities are involved as volunteers, it is often assumed that they want to be involved in 'their' causes—for example, it might be taken for granted that a person who is blind would be likely to volunteer with an organization serving the blind community. Some people may indeed prefer to work as volunteers on issues of particular personal relevance to them. For others, however, evidence suggests that they may be working on 'their' issues because they experience barriers to volunteering elsewhere. There may be a perception that all volunteers who use wheelchairs should want to volunteer to improve building accessibility or otherwise enhance quality of life for persons with mobility disabilities such as their own. Of course, this is not true. Just as not all women want to do volunteer work related to women's issues, and not everyone from a given ethnic community wants to work on cultural issues, not all persons with disabilities want to volunteer with the groups that serve their needs directly. With over 178,000 charities and not-for-profit organizations in Canada, there is a multitude of issues on which persons with disabilities can volunteer.

It need not be an overwhelming task to involve persons with disabilities as volunteers. It involves taking an honest look at your current accessibility and diversity, and systematically eliminating barriers to participation. In doing so, you'll find your whole organization becomes more accessible. For example, by installing a wheelchair ramp so that volunteers who have a physical disability can enter, you've just increased your accessibility to potential staff and clients, as well. You've also made a positive statement about your commitment to serving the community. Take one step at a time; don't feel you need to have all the answers before putting these suggestions into practice. The most important requirements are flexibility, a positive attitude, and the organization's commitment to involve and support persons with disabilities in our volunteer programs (Pyle, 1997).

In addition, funders and donors are increasingly interested in ensuring that organizations serve the community effectively. *The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement* (Volunteer Canada, 2001) requires that "Volunteer recruitment and selection reaches out to diverse sources of volunteers," in recognition of the wealth of information brought to an organization by a diverse volunteer base.

Volunteers often say that they reap great benefits from volunteering, and feel they receive more than they give. This can be especially so in the case of volunteers with disabilities. Volunteer positions can provide a way to acquire job skills, interpersonal skills and an opportunity to decrease isolation. Because persons with disabilities experience such barriers to full participation in society, they are motivated to be exceptionally committed to organizations that take the time and effort to involve them well. Combined this with the fact that volunteer work can be an ideal way to enhance job skills for a group of people that has a high unemployment/underemployment rate, and it is easy to see that persons with disabilities can be a rich volunteer resource.

Increasing the accessibility of your volunteer program will allow you to better accomplish your mission, which is what the non-profit world is all about. Next, we examine ways to do this.

> "Participating in volunteer activities produces many benefits. First, it often leads to paid employment. Second, it provides an opportunity to identify skills and aptitudes. With this knowledge, the person can use the volunteer placement to develop and acquire new skills, which ultimately improves his or her marketability in the workplace. Participating in volunteer activities is a valuable way of contributing to society and it improves feelings of self-worth."
>
> (Ontario Advisory Council for Disabled Persons, 1990)

Relating to people with disabilities

There are many practical matters to be considered in engaging volunteers with disabilities. To create an accessible environment, you will need to consider building accessibility, provision of materials in alternate formats (large print or Braille, for example), and so on. The latter part of this section provides key information on accessibility for volunteers with a variety of disabilities. However, all the accessibility in the world cannot overcome attitudinal barriers. By creating a welcoming climate in the organization, you go beyond considering the practicalities and ensure that persons with disabilities are not just able to enter the building and read your materials, but are made to feel truly welcome. Before addressing the particular details of involving volunteers with disabilities, organizations need to examine their attitudes and apprehensions in depth. People with disabilities have repeatedly identified organizational climate and attitudes as key to effective participation.

People without disabilities often hold strong stereotypes about people who are differently-abled. Although based on myth and misconceptions, deep discrimination remains in our society. Attitudes and stereotypes are complex psychological processes that are difficult to change. Most of us hold stereotypical attitudes (both positive and negative) towards specific groups of people, even though we may make an effort not to. Despite our best efforts, these stereotypes may result in obvious discomfort or patronizing attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. As we strive to increase our accessibility, we must be aware that the very act of doing so can push strong prejudices based on ignorance and fear to the fore. One of the most important things to do is to examine honestly and openly our attitudes towards persons with disabilities. It may seem politically incorrect to admit that we hold negative attitudes, and yet if we merely attempt to cover these attitudes, they will shine through in our actions. Much as we might not want to admit it, we may believe that:

- people with disabilities are not well educated.
- volunteers with disabilities may be less reliable because of health concerns.
- volunteers with disabilities are at greater risk of having an accident while volunteering.
- making the workplace accessible is very costly.

All of the above are untrue, yet they are often strongly held beliefs, whether conscious or not. We must begin any attempt at diversifying our volunteer base with a close look at our own beliefs, as organizations and as individuals.

You can begin by talking with your organization's staff and volunteers (board and others) about your current accessibility, and about ways to improve your diversity. Those already working in the organization can assist in identifying barriers, both attitudinal and physical. You may want to ask someone from one or more disability organizations to work with you on this. More information is provided later about staff training and awareness.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

Many people have never interacted with someone they know to have a disability. It can be awkward and can make people nervous. First and foremost, remember that people with disabilities are individuals—everyone is different and has their own preferences. Nevertheless, there are some general points to keep in mind:

1. **The person is not their disability.** They are a person first, and a person with a disability second. Focus on the individual and the issue at hand, not the disability. People with disabilities are interested in the same topics of conversation as anyone else.

2. **Deal with the person as a capable individual.** Always direct communication to the individual with the disability. If they are accompanied, do not direct your comments to the companion. Also, a disabled person's coping skills may be amazing or surprising to you, but it is a daily fact of his/her life. Don't exclaim over a disabled person's ability to do what are often routine tasks for them (www.cybervpm.com).

3. **Offer and provide assistance with sensitivity and respect.** People with disabilities, like all people, are experts on themselves. If you are uncertain what to do, ask. Most people would rather answer a question than be in an uncomfortable situation. Be prepared to have the offer declined. If the offer is accepted, listen to and accept instructions (United Cerebral Palsy website, "Ten Commandments").

4. **Respect assistive devices as personal property.** Leaning on or hanging on to a person's cane or wheelchair is similar to leaning on or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it (United Cerebral Palsy website, "Ten Commandments"). Never pet a service dog unless the owner grants permission.

5. **Don't be overly careful with your words.** Do not worry about using the wrong word to describe an activity. Persons who use wheelchairs go for 'walks,' people with visual impairments 'see' what you mean, and so on. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner; however, that does not mean the words used must be different (Human Resources Development Canada, 1991).

OVERVIEW OF VARIOUS TYPES OF DISABILITIES

Once again, the key is to remember that everyone is different. What one person with a visual impairment can see is not exactly the same as any other person. Be sure to find out what the person needs, and what accommodations, if any, are required.

Hearing impairment

- As many as 10 per cent of people have some hearing loss and approximately 40 per cent of older adults face communication problems caused by some degree of hearing loss.
- People may be Deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing.
  - A person who identifies as **Deaf** has typically been Deaf since birth and identifies culturally with the Deaf community. A Deaf person typically uses sign language as their primary way of communicating. American Sign Language (ASL) uses signs, facial expressions, body language, and fingerspelling. While hearing people often think that ASL is a signed version of English, it is a distinct language with its own grammar and syntax (www.cybervpm.com). Many Deaf individuals, for whom ASL is their first language, have learned English as a second language and may not be highly proficient in English. Start by assuming that their English literacy skills are strong, but be willing to adapt if they are not (United Cerebral Palsy website, "Ten Commandments").
  - A **deafened** person has lost their hearing later in life and may rely on either sign language or speech reading.
  - A person who is **hard of hearing** has some residual hearing and may use any of the following to communicate: speech reading, hearing aids, sign language or writing.
- Many people with a hearing impairment can speech (lip) read to some extent, but even an excellent speech (lip) reader can only glean about a quarter of what the speaker says. The rest of the information must be gained through context and body language.

Tips for working with persons who have a hearing disability:

- Ask for advice on how to improve communication.
- To improve accessibility, the person may need the use of a telephone handset amplifier, a TTY (teletypewriter, also known as a telecommunications device for the Deaf, or TDD), an assistive listening system, captioning or a note taker (Pyle, 1997).

- If the person is speech reading, get their attention before speaking and look directly at the person. It is easiest for the person to converse one on one as it reduces distraction. Avoid smoking, eating, chewing gum, or covering your face with your hands.
- When speaking to the person, there is no need to shout. In fact, it can cause discomfort to someone wearing a hearing aid. Speak clearly and naturally, perhaps a little slower than usual. Come closer when you speak.
- If you notice that the other person did not catch what was said, try re-phrasing your meaning rather than merely repeating. Hard of hearing people often hesitate to ask, so be alert to help them when they miss something.

Visual impairment

- As our population ages, we are experiencing an increase in the number of people who are vision impaired. For example, by the year 2000, one in eight older Canadians was estimated to be blind or visually impaired, according to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.
- A person who is termed **blind** usually has some vision. To be 'functionally blind,' a person must have significant vision loss, and/or tunnel vision, to a degree that is not correctable by glasses. Vision can range from being able to read large print with a magnifier to only being able to perceive difference between light and dark
- People with vision loss have individual needs for the way they receive information. Large print is often useful for people who have some vision. Less than 10 per cent of people who are functionally blind read or write Braille, but those who do read Braille often rely on it as a primary means of written communication. Many people with vision loss prefer to receive audio taped information.
- Sensitive language includes terms like 'blind person,' 'partially-sighted person,' 'visually-impaired person,' and 'person with low vision.'

Tips for working with persons who are visually impaired:

- When meeting a blind acquaintance, let him/her know when you arrive and when you leave. Identify yourself when you approach the person.
- Provide orientation to surroundings, and give precise directions, perhaps using clock face directions, such as "The paper is at ten o'clock to you, on the near right-hand corner of the table," or "three steps behind you." This works much better than saying, "It's on the table," or "it's over there" (www.cybervpm.com).
- A person who is blind may need you to act as a 'sighted guide.' To do so, lightly touch their arm and let them take your arm at the elbow. Walk half a step ahead of

them and they will follow, using the movements of your elbow as a guide. Remember to announce obstacles such as stairs or overhanging branches.

- Be sure to present information in the preferred format. A visually impaired person may prefer large print, Braille, audiocassette, or text files on diskette. If working with a computer, they may require software to enlarge the print size and/or read the text aloud.

Mobility impairment

- 'Mobility impairment' refers to disabilities that inhibit movement of the body. This category includes people who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices to enable them to move about.
- People with mobility impairments may require designated parking, wheelchair ramps, automatic doors or accessible washrooms (Pyle, 1997).

Tips for working with a person with a mobility impairment:

- Remember that any assistive devices such as a wheelchair or cane are personal property and should be treated as such.
- People with mobility impairments are sometimes treated as if their mobility impairment also affects their cognition. Obviously, this is not necessarily so.
- People with mobility impairments may be frustrated if organizations feel all they need to do to be accessible is to widen doors and build ramps. The person may also need accommodation at their work station, and so on. Let the person advise you of their needs.

Cognitive and developmental disabilities

Cognitive disability refers to any disability affecting mental processes. Examples include mental retardation, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, aphasia, brain injury, language delay and learning disabilities. Diseases like Alzheimer Disease may also be considered cognitive disabilities.

Developmental disability is an umbrella term referring to disabilities present before an individual reaches 22 years of age. Congenital developmental disabilities exist at birth, but developmental disabilities can also be acquired after birth. Examples of developmental disabilities are cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, hearing loss, Down syndrome, mental retardation, spinal injury or brain injury. Though not all of these disabilities necessarily result in impaired intellectual functioning, people often use the term to refer to disabilities that have a component affecting cognitive function.

Tips for working with a person with a cognitive or developmental disability:

- Adults who have developmental disabilities are adults. Assume their life experiences are similar to other adults and speak with them from that perspective.
- Remember that people with cognitive disabilities are often legally competent to sign documents, vote, consent to medical care and sign contracts. Given that it is not always obvious whether an individual is competent to hold a bank account or sign cheques, it may be wise to enquire discreetly before assuming that someone else must sign for them. Naturally, the issue requires judgement and tact.
- If needed, present tasks in a step-by-step manner. Let the individual perform each step after the explanation.
- When appropriate, use pictures or simple photographs to identify rooms, tasks, or directions (United Cerebral Palsy website, "Ten Commandments").
- You may want to assign a staff mentor for the person so that there is one point of contact for any questions that arise.
- People with cognitive disabilities resulting from Alzheimer Disease or from a brain injury may well know that their abilities have declined and can find this frustrating. Always honour the person's past experience, and do not presume that the way they are when you meet them is the way they have been all their lives.

Can a person with Alzheimer Disease be a volunteer? Of course! Ed, who is in the early stages of the disease, can't do complex tasks on his own any more, but still wants to contribute to community. His wife Gabby knits mittens for the homeless shelter to give to clients. Ed contributes to the process by sorting the wool into colours, winding it into balls, and even unravelling old knitted garments for Gabby to recycle into mittens.

Psychiatric/mental illness

'Mental illness' refers to a variety of disorders that cause mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behaviour, sometimes resulting in a reduced ability to cope with the ordinary demands and routines of life.

The most common mental illnesses include:

- **Anxiety disorders:** phobias, panic disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders
- **Mood disorders:** depression; bipolar disorder (manic-depression)
- **Schizophrenia and related:** schizophrenia and schizo-affective disorder.

Mental illnesses are very common: current estimates suggest that one in five people will suffer a mental disorder over the course of their lifetime. The greatest barrier faced by the person with such an illness is often the social stigma that surrounds mental health disorders. It is a myth that all mentally ill people are violent and dangerous, or that they are not capable of holding positions of responsibility. Many mentally ill people undergo treatment and/or medication successfully and hold down challenging jobs (www.cybervpm.com).

Mental Illness Case Study

Joanne has been away from work due to her mental disability for a number of years. Once a successful manager of a small publishing business, she was diagnosed with manic-depression at the age of 30. Though her disability is controlled by medication, she finds that she is unable to work to the level that she did before. All the same, she maintains a wealth of knowledge about the publishing field. Joanne approached a local writers' co-operative that produces low-cost books for schools in her town. The group was delighted to have her share her knowledge and skills and she has been able to help them produce higher quality materials at a lower cost. Joanne met with the director of the collective and described the work environment in which she would be most effective, including the accommodations that she would require.

Specifically, Joanne needed a quiet work environment and, while she wanted to meet new people through her volunteer work, she was not able to work in a busy office. The director worked out an agreement whereby Joanne could work from home and attend monthly meetings of the writers in the group. Joanne needs additional time off on occasion, so she and the director have built extra time into their publishing schedule to ensure that her disability does not interfere with her ability to do the job.

Tips for working with a person with a psychiatric or mental illness:

- Interact with individuals based on your experience with that person, not on assumptions about mental illness or a particular diagnosis.
- Every person is unique and experiences mental illness differently. There are many mental illnesses, and each one will appear somewhat different from person to person.
- A person who is prone to panic or anxiety will probably benefit from a calm work environment.
- Work with the person to learn as much as you need to about their challenges, and develop an action plan together in case difficulties should arise.
- Be ready to explain things multiple times: many people with mental illnesses have trouble with memory and concentration, often as a result of medication.
- Find out what skill set the person brings with them. People with mental illnesses bring their academic and/or work background and accompanying skills to their volunteer positions. Depending on the effects of their illness, some of these skills may be useable in the volunteer job. In other cases, their illness may have caused them to leave school early or to have limited work experience.


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Volunteer

Issues related to the role of volunteers with disabilities in an organization

INCREASING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ACCESSIBILITY

The most important way you can make your organization accessible to an individual volunteer is to ask what they require. There are also a number of other steps you can take to make your organization generally more accessible, to increase the chances that a person with a disability would be interested in approaching you as a potential volunteer.

This will require that you put in place the job accommodations that the volunteer with a disability needs to carry out the responsibilities of their jobs. Job accommodation strategies can include:

- the use of specialized technological devices;
- a rearrangement of workplace furnishings and/or equipment; or
- the design of a more flexible work schedule.

Details of specific accommodations can be found later in this section, but their purpose is always to neutralize the impact of the special needs and to maximize the effectiveness of the volunteer's skills and abilities. As with anything else, of course, consider the individual's needs to find the right accommodation(s).

One concern often raised is that of the cost of accessibility. It is one thing to believe that people should be given what they need to do a job, but every organization has a budget to consider as well. One of the greatest misconceptions about accessibility is that it will cost more than your organization can afford. For the vast majority of accommodations, this is not the case.

The Job Accommodation Network indicated that:

- 31 per cent of accommodations cost nothing;
- 50 per cent cost less than $50;
- 69 per cent cost less than $500; and
- 88 per cent cost less than $1,000 (President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities).

Not all volunteers with disabilities require accommodation; in fact, studies have shown that less than half of people with disabilities require any formal accommodation from the employer. For those who do require some accommodation, studies have repeatedly shown that a third to one half of job accommodations cost nothing. This might include, for example, modifying a work schedule to accommodate someone who needs a break every hour. Even for those accommodations that are relatively costly, it is helpful to think of them as investments in your organization's ability to serve its mandate. In a study of accommodation of paid employees, it was found that on average, for every $1 a company

put into making an accommodation for an employee with a disability, the company got back $10 in benefits such as increased productivity (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, 1993). Just as the unpaid work of volunteers enhances your organization, your investment in job accommodations reaps rewards in terms of the work volunteers with disabilities can accomplish on your behalf.

Examples of job accommodations:

It is crucial to consult the volunteer to ensure that the proposed accommodations are both necessary and suitable. Some volunteers may already have their own special equipment available. On-the-job accommodations fall into four main categories:

Type of accommodation	Examples
Physical access	• ramps, rails, wheelchair lifts, power doors, lever-type door handles, non-skid strips for the floor • washrooms adapted for people in wheelchairs • adjustable desks and chairs • workspace arranged to allow space for a guide dog • Brailled or large, raised lettered directional signs and elevator controls • accessible rooms for breaks, lunches and training (Witt, 1992)
Technical aids	• Braille printers, devices to enlarge print, magnifying devices for computer screens • dictating equipment, talking calculators and voice synthesizers (to translate what is written on a computer screen into the spoken word) • amplifiers on telephones and TDDs
Support services and individualized assistance	• a buddy or mentor system that pairs the volunteer with another person • sign language interpreters • readers or drivers
Modifications to policies or practices to allow special work arrangements	• restructuring a position to eliminate tasks that will be difficult for the volunteer and adding others that represent areas of strength • job-sharing, flexible or shortened work schedules • more frequent rest periods • distraction-free work spaces • less frequent travel, allowing the person to work from home or from an office close to public transport • home office

All of this can seem overwhelming. However, help is available for organizations looking to improve their accessibility. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), an international consulting service, can be reached at 1-304-293-7186 (Voice/TTY) or on the Web at http://www.jan.wvu.edu. JAN has a data bank containing thousands of examples of how organizations have successfully accommodated workers with disabilities. Counsellors are also available to provide detailed information and advice on how jobs and work sites can be adapted to compensate for functional limitations of employees or volunteers.

Community agencies and local branches of organizations dealing with specific disabilities will also be able to provide advice on options for accommodation (Human Resources Development Canada, 1991). In addition, as will be discussed later, they are an excellent source of information when considering recruitment strategies. Partnerships with these organizations go a long way to increasing your accessibility and your credibility among people with disabilities and the agencies that work with them.

THE CONCEPT OF 'REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION'

While most accommodations do not require a great expense, it is still possible that you will be faced with a situation where your organization feels it can not afford the accommodation required by the volunteer. Here, we must consider what constitutes 'reasonable accommodation.'

What would it be reasonable to expect a voluntary organization to offer? The nature and cost of the accommodations must be weighed against the overall size of the organization, its financial resources and the availability of human resources (both staff members and volunteers). The criteria for assessing whether a particular accommodation is reasonable are not absolute. What might be considered reasonable for one organization may create undue hardship in another. For example, while it could be argued that it is reasonable to

Quick things you can do to increase your organization's accessibility:

- Have your business cards made up in large print and Braille as a standard procedure.
- Run your website through Bobby, a Web tool to ensure sites are accessible for persons with disabilities. Bobby is located at http://www.cast.org/bobby/.
- Make sure any video materials are closed captioned.
- Save text files of all documents you produce so that you can produce alternate formats.
- Hold your meetings in accessible locations.
- Make sure you advertise volunteer positions in at least two formats.

expect a large, established charity to provide one-to-one support for a volunteer, this kind of accommodation would likely create undue hardship on a very small agency.

For this reason, each organization should develop its own guidelines on what constitutes reasonable accommodation. The guidelines can then be shared with potential volunteers. While everyone has the right to volunteer, charities are bound to using their dollars responsibly to deliver services. Spending thousands of dollars on an accommodation for a new volunteer who intends to volunteer only one hour per month for three months is likely not a good use of funds. This is not to say that this person can not be involved as a volunteer, however. Perhaps you can think of alternate ways to accommodate the person, or find a volunteer position that does not require such expensive accommodation (Human Resources Development Canada, 1991).

Simple accommodations that lead to better organizational results

Lois, Deaf herself, had worked in the deaf community for many years when she decided to volunteer on the board of Nelson House, a women's shelter. She worked with the board to educate them on Deaf issues, including her own needs for sign language interpreters. She found that she learned a lot about violence against women, and was able to bring this knowledge back to the Deaf and hard of hearing community. At the same time, the ability of Nelson House to serve its constituents who were hearing impaired improved through Lois' involvement, and more hearing impaired and Deaf women became clients of the shelter, enabling them to leave abusive situations. The Ottawa Deaf Centre, with which Lois was also involved, used Lois' knowledge and contacts to develop a videotape for the deaf community on the topic of violence against women.

Lois noted that the key to effective involvement as a volunteer was patience on everyone's part, and a willingness to learn. While she had a positive experience, she noted that it would have been even more beneficial if there had been at least one other Deaf volunteer at the shelter. That way, volunteers can share their experiences, and educate the organization together. At the same time the organization would have witnessed how easily, comfortably, and naturally they communicated with each other and gained a better understanding of the Deaf community.

When looking to increase your organization's accessibility, consider opportunities for pairs or groups of persons with disabilities to become involved. It's always easier to start in a new environment if you don't feel alone.

Readying your organization and its people

One of the most important things you can do is ensure that your board, employees, and volunteers are supportive of your initiatives to involve people with disabilities. Involve them in making your organization's climate welcoming.

RAISING AWARENESS

Raise awareness about the existing diversity of your organization. Have volunteers and staff identify gaps in your volunteer work force and start thinking about barriers that may exist. An open discussion with your current employees and volunteers will help you chart a plan of action.

They may already be very knowledgeable about and comfortable with the area of disability. If not, determine what kind of education they require. You may want to:

- contact one or more disability organizations in your area to provide you with information, attend one of your organization's meetings, or provide a presentation for you. They could provide training to:
  - dispel stereotypes and stress the value of individual differences in order to ensure that each volunteer with special needs will be regarded as a productive individual with many skills and talents.
  - increase understanding of specific kinds of special needs and their implications for the volunteer workplace (Lautenschlager, 1992).
- ask a person with a disability—whether an outsider or someone already involved with your organization—to provide some information on the types of barriers and opportunities they may have encountered in volunteering.

TRAINING ON PRACTICALITIES

Have disability sessions that are geared for specific disabilities, such as visual, mobility, Deaf or cognitive. You could train your staff and volunteers how to:

- use TTY/operator assisted relay service
- locate and hire sign language interpreters
- prepare various alternate formats for materials (for example, large print)
- identify meeting places that are accessible (Finisdore, 2000)

POLICY AND BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

Once your staff and volunteers are knowledgeable about disability, your organization will have a more welcoming climate. You should also consider ways in which your policies or procedures may need to be adapted to increase accessibility. Think about how to:

- reimburse out-of-pocket expenses where there is an economic barrier to volunteering for individuals with special needs.
- ensure the requirements for your volunteer positions are essential, and avoid creating artificial barriers for potential volunteers (Lautenschlager, 1992).
- set funds aside in your budgeting process for responding to accessibility needs, such as interpretative services and alternate format provision.

Involving volunteers with disabilities: an organizational profile

When working with your staff and volunteers to raise awareness about accessibility, consider the following questions for discussion:

1. How many volunteers are involved with your organization?
2. How many of these volunteers have disabilities?
3. What disability awareness training / staff development has your organization conducted?
4. What accommodations would you be willing to make to increase your accessibility?
   - Making physical facility accessible
   - Modifying work areas
   - Adjusting work schedules
   - Restructuring tasks
   - Providing assistive devices

Policy and procedure questions for your organization to consider

1. Have volunteer recruitment strategies been developed to target the recruitment of individuals with disabilities?
2. Are volunteers with disabilities actively recruited for volunteer openings?
3. Are all staff members and key volunteers provided with disability awareness training?
4. Are all board members provided with disability awareness training?
5. Do program planning and design reflect input from volunteers with disabilities?
6. Are resources allocated to support specific program initiatives for volunteers with disabilities?
7. Does the organization's strategy for program evaluation include receiving feedback from participants with disabilities?
8. Are staff development/training and mentoring opportunities available to volunteers with disabilities?
9. Have volunteers with disabilities been promoted or placed in positions of higher responsibilities in the organization?
10. Has the organization been successful in recruiting and retaining volunteers with disabilities?
11. Are there are any policies that limit the number of volunteers with disabilities in the organization?
12. Have networks been developed that can be used to access potential volunteers with disabilities?
13. Are staff who are active in advancing the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities recognized, supported and acknowledged?
14. Is an exit interview conducted when a volunteer with a disability is leaving the program to learn about practices that may be more successful in retaining volunteers with disabilities? (Pyle, 1997)

With this preparatory work completed, your organization will be better equipped both philosophically and practically to involve persons with disabilities as volunteers. We will now examine the steps of the volunteer management cycle as they relate to volunteers with disabilities. Volunteer managers will be familiar with these steps of recruitment, training, supervision, and recognition. Of course, general principles of volunteer management also apply to managing volunteers with disabilities, and will not be reviewed here. For information on volunteer management in general, see *A Guide to Volunteer Program Management Resources* by Volunteer Canada.

Recruiting

Once you have worked with your team to create an open environment and attitude, you have already made your organization more accessible. You are now better prepared for volunteers with disabilities to come through your doors.

However, people with disabilities may still not know that your organization is inclusive. Having experienced possible negative reactions to previous attempts to volunteer, they may not reach out to you unless you display your accessibility proudly and prominently.

You can evaluate your organization's openness through your recruitment materials and through your interviewing practices.

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Look at your volunteer recruitment materials and any other standard information you distribute. Chances are they do not explicitly mention or show your commitment to diversity among your volunteers. To remedy the situation, you can:

- include images of people with disabilities in brochures, flyers, application packets, videos and other recruitment tools.
- ask local organizations that deal with disability to review your materials for accurate language use and positive portrayals of people with disabilities.
- include a TTY (Teletypewriter) or operator relay service number, and encourage individuals who are Deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired to call. Make sure that the person answering the calls is familiar with the TTY and/or relay service.
- include a statement to indicate that you are willing to provide your materials in alternate formats.
- use the international access symbol (a stylized wheelchair) on your materials.
- prepare an accommodation statement to appear in all published materials. It could run something like this: "Organization X welcomes all members of the community, regardless of race, sex, national origin, colour, political affiliation, religion, age or disability" (Finisdore, 2000).

Once your materials reflect your commitment to and interest in involving volunteers with disabilities, consider the way in which you distribute and use those materials. How can you take an active approach to ensuring people with disabilities approach your organization as potential volunteers?

You may wish to consider specific outreach into the disability community, so that potential volunteers know about the opportunities that exist at your organization, and that you would welcome their participation. Clearly, the recruitment strategy would not be to look for, for example, blind volunteers. Rather, it would be to recruit people who are blind into volunteer positions that would be open to anyone.

To proactively inform both potential volunteers and organizations working with clients with disabilities, you can take the following steps:

- Contact self-help groups, social service agencies and other organizations that work on behalf of people with disabilities and let them know of your volunteer opportunities.
- Contact the Student Disability Services Office of your local colleges and universities.
- Consider advertising your volunteer opportunities in journals and newsletters specifically targeted towards readers with a disability.
- Provide local disability organizations with a sample volunteer opportunity ad that could be placed in their newsletter, or ask if they will include your recruitment materials in an upcoming mailing to their clients (Ontario Advisory Council for Disabled Persons, 1990).
- Notify your local volunteer centre that you are willing to place volunteers with disabilities. The centre may already have strong relationships within the disability community.
- Hold volunteer information sessions in accessible locations. If there is an organization that you are particularly interested in working with, offer to hold a volunteer information session at their offices, or in conjunction with them.
- Be sure to make your materials available in alternate format, such as Braille, large print, floppy disk or audiotape. At a minimum, this should be done on request. A more proactive approach, however, would be to ensure that a few copies are always available and offered in alternate format. You may find that many volunteers will request large print, for example, if they know it is available. Otherwise, they may assume that they need to make do with regular size print.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing someone with a disability is not that different from a standard volunteer interview. Your goal is to share information about the volunteer position and learn about the volunteer, in order to determine whether a good match exists.

You will want to ensure that your questions do not focus unnecessarily on the person's disability, while giving them the opportunity to let you know what accommodations, if any, they would require to fulfil the volunteer role. If the interviewer is not familiar with disability issues, he or she may feel or seem uncomfortable. It is fine to acknowledge this in the interview and stress that this is an open, learning environment. The following is a list of some simple but important suggestions to help ease that sense of awkwardness:

- Make sure that you find out in advance what type of materials or environment are needed for the interview itself. For example, if not all of your meeting rooms are wheelchair accessible, be sure to book an appropriate setting for a potential volunteer who uses a wheelchair. Ask in advance whether there are any special requirements for the interview.
- While your questions must focus on the job, not the disability, questions pertaining to a person's limitation *as it relates to their ability to do the job* are appropriate (Ontario Association for Community Living), and will not be resented by your potential volunteer, provided they are asked in a respectful way. Remember not to make assumptions about limitations caused by the person's disability. If you can't envision how a person who uses a wheelchair could be a volunteer driver, ask them how they would carry out the position rather than presuming they can't.
- Feel free to ask the person how you should communicate, if you have any doubts about the correctness of your actions. The disabled individual will understand that this may be your first encounter with someone with his or her condition, and will usually feel quite comfortable in letting you know what behaviours are needed or expected. Remember that volunteer interviews often make potential volunteers nervous as well, so you may both be uncomfortable.
- Give the person the opportunity to explain to you how they envision themselves doing the job. If they cannot do the entire job as you originally envisioned it, ask if they can envision a way to modify the job description to make it more accessible.

For example, if the job description for a driver of elderly clients requires carrying a cell phone in case of emergency, could a hearing impaired person use a beeper or pager instead, that can send or receive text messages? If your building is not wheelchair accessible, could a volunteer in a wheelchair volunteer from home or another accessible location instead of from your office?

- If the volunteer is not a good match with the organization, provide clear and honest feedback to that effect, and don't forget to offer a referral to another organization you feel might be appropriate. Remember that you should neither accept nor decline the person on the basis of their disability. As with any volunteer, your decision should be based on whether the person's volunteer involvement would further your organization's work (Pyle, 1997).

Online opportunities: Virtual Volunteering

New technologies and programs, such as the Volunteer Opportunities Exchange (www.volunteer.ca or www.voe-reb.org), allow volunteers to indicate that they would like to conduct their volunteer work virtually. For example, a lawyer in Toronto might offer her legal services to rural organizations in Northern Ontario. While she may never meet her volunteer manager in person, the organization can screen, train, supervise and recognize her work, all from hours away. In this way, she can provide services to an underserved community without having to leave her home or office.

Online volunteering programs can allow for the greater participation of people who might find volunteering difficult or impossible because of a disability. Harris poll results from June of 2000 report that 48 per cent of people with disabilities who have access to the Internet believe that it has significantly improved their quality of life, compared with 27 per cent of adults without disabilities. Therefore, people with disabilities already see the true value of online communications, and are in a prime position to provide volunteering via the Internet (http://www.serviceleader.org).

Just as building designs can help persons in wheelchairs to navigate doorways, there are ways to accommodate persons with disabilities to serve in virtual volunteering programs. By rethinking job descriptions, a volunteer who uses a wheelchair can work with an organization that has not yet moved into an accessible building.

Training

Training for the volunteer with a disability should be fundamentally the same as it would be for any other volunteer. Your goal is for the volunteer to have all the information and tools they need to fulfil their role with your organization. Set a tone that encourages your new volunteers to ask questions and express needs.

Rather than designing special training for persons with disabilities, ensure that your training sessions are inclusive for all. You can then address any individual issues that relate to the volunteer position—such as a disability—with each person.

Your training materials should include information for volunteers with disabilities. For example, if you include information about parking for volunteers, be sure to indicate the location of any disabled parking spots. If you require volunteers to log the time they spend with clients, indicate how they could submit a report by computer, or by audio tape, if their disability makes it impossible to fill out a hand-written form.

If the volunteer will be working with any kind of assistant such as a sign language interpreter, driver, or reader, it would be wise to include this person in training as well.

If you rely on visual aids a great deal, be sure to describe them aloud if you have volunteers who cannot see the materials. It may also be useful to distribute materials in advance so that they can be put into alternate format or read to the person if necessary. If you have a volunteer with a mental illness or cognitive disability who cannot absorb the information in a large group format, some one-on-one training may be in order.

Supervision

A volunteer with a disability requires no more and no less supervision than any other volunteer. However, you will want to include in supervision some ways of ensuring that the volunteer feels welcome and accommodated in your organization. This can include asking questions on how your organization could improve its volunteer involvement practices, or how they feel you could expand your diversity through increased accessibility.

If you have done the work ahead of time to establish an environment of open communication and transparency, the volunteer should feel comfortable expressing any congratulations or concerns they may have. As in any other aspect of the volunteer management cycle, a discussion around disability should occur only if it is relevant to performance.

Hospice Case Study

Elaine Campbell is a committed volunteer with the Canadian Hearing Society. She and a group of Deaf friends had recently lost a friend to terminal cancer. They realized that hospice care was not provided in sign language, and saw a need for Deaf people who are terminally ill to have support of people who can communicate in their language. She and her friends took two courses in palliative care at Ottawa's Algonquin College, before volunteering at the May Court Hospice.

The group got tremendous support from the college for the provision of interpretive services for the courses. They went on a tour of the May Court Hospice and found that that organization was also very supportive, ensuring that the tour was interpreted in sign language. The hospice quickly realized that involving Deaf volunteers allowed them to better serve their clients from the hearing impaired community.

However, both Elaine and the hospice realized that Elaine's contribution as a volunteer could go far beyond relating specifically to Deaf clients. By examining and modifying volunteer job descriptions to remove barriers related to disability, the hospice could involve Elaine in other volunteer activities, such as providing transportation for patients (both Deaf and hearing) to and from the hospice. Hospice staff worked closely with Elaine to ensure that she could do her job well. Most drivers carry cellular phones to allow them to communicate with the hospice while in transit, if necessary. Because of her deafness, when she is in transit with a patient, Elaine can use a text-based pager as a different, but equal form of communication.

Recognition

Volunteer recognition aims to thank your volunteers for the time and effort that they contribute to your organization. Be sure to include all your volunteers in your recognition program. It is best not to single out persons with disabilities for special recognition. You want to recognize their work, not their disability.

If you have built a particularly strong partnership with disability organizations in the community, consider recognizing those organizations for their commitment to volunteerism and to your organization. Model partnerships, and the way they extend your organization's work, are worthy of recognition. In the same way, of course, you could recognize model partnerships with other groups such as businesses and youth organizations. Again, you are recognizing the work and results of the partnership, not the disability.

However you recognize your volunteers, be sure that it is accessible for all volunteers. Produce your volunteer newsletter in alternate formats and hold your recognition events in accessible locations. Ensure that notices about upcoming recognition events are published in ways that are open to all. Consider transportation needs and accessibility when choosing the location of the event.

Above all, remember that the most effective recognition occurs when the volunteer's individual contribution is celebrated. By knowing what matters to your volunteers, you will be able to recognize them in a way that ensures they know that their contribution is appreciated.


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http://www.cybervpm.com (a website for Volunteer Program Managers).

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