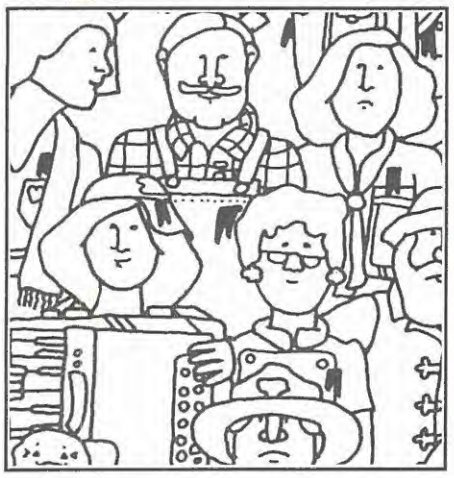

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES: Are You Overlooking an Important Volunteer Resource?

By Joy Peters

So you're desperate for volunteers and you have investigated every possible resource. You say the housewives have gone back to work, the teenagers are more interested in a paying job, and the student interns are barely trained before moving on in their educational pursuits. There is just no other source to consider . . . or is there?

Have you thought about tapping that wonderful volunteer population who has available hours, wants training and is interested in a long-term assignment? No, they are not a newly emerging segment of our society; they are individuals with disabilities who have always been with us. In fact, statistics tell us that as high as ten percent of our total population has some form of disability. Of course, many are under age for volunteering, some have disabilities too severe to allow them to volunteer, and others have very successfully joined the workforce and are not looking for fulfillment through volunteer work.

There is, however, a small but creditable number of adults who have disabilities that leave them with too much time on their hands, yet who possess skills and potential that should not be overlooked.

Consider John*, who could not answer the phone adequately and was unable to read or write because of a severe learning disability. But he possessed a pleasant and poised manner, making it possible for him to assist in an office setting. With training, he very successfully learned to run the copier and became a viable part of that office.

Or take Marty, mildly retarded, who had a love for children. With careful instruction and role modeling, he became a good child care assistant for preschool children.

In another instance, Kelly, a young woman with multiple sclerosis, worked with children who also had physical handicaps. She communicated to them how to succeed in a non-disabled world. Her determination was an inspiration to the children, making her volunteer efforts very satisfying to herself as well.

Obviously, each potential volunteer who is disabled brings with him or her a unique set of skills and limitations. And as with any other volunteer, a volunteer administrator must carefully interview this volunteer to find an appropriate placement. However, the time you invest in this individual may yield a very satisfying volunteer relationship for your agency.

Before tapping into this wide-open volunteer resource, following some basic guidelines can help your planning and preparation:

1. Learn what you can about the particular disability before you interview the prospective volunteer. This will make you more comfortable in your interview and give you a better idea of the possibilities for placement. Ultimately, the success you experience in placing a volunteer with a disability is rooted in your own sensitivity and awareness. Do you have stereotypical preconceptions that need to be re-evaluated?
2. Ask tactful but honest questions of the volunteer to discover specific limitations, needs for accommodations, concerns, etc. People who are disabled appreciate the chance to be frank and to have the opportunity to express their needs.
3. Capitalize on volunteer's abilities. Too often the disability clouds our vision, and we fail to see the capabilities the individual has to offer.
4. Consider the accessibility of the location when you are placing a volunteer with a physical disability. Are steps a problem? Are the bathroom and water fountain easily accessible? Is lifting involved?
5. Check the disabled volunteer's transportation needs. Could you provide another volunteer to drive an otherwise housebound individual to his or her volunteer position?
6. Allow for extra training time to make your placement a success. For example, an individual with mental retardation may require more careful instruction, but the extra time and attention you take will be rewarded by a dependable worker, satisfied in his or her duties. (This, of course, will not be necessary in the case of an individual with a physical disability.)
7. Provide an adequate support system for your new volunteer. Are there attitude barriers that need to be eliminated before acceptance occurs? Is the staff prepared to make reasonable accommodations for the incoming volunteer?
8. Treat a volunteer who is disabled with the same respect you would a non-handicapped adult. Even an individual who is mentally retarded and who may display some immature behavior (e.g., expressed

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*Although the names have been changed, these situations are real.

fearfulness of new situations) should be viewed as a person of dignity.

Be creative and you'll discover where volunteers with disabilities can benefit your program. The next step is to contact the Volunteer Center, vocational rehabilitation centers, or other agencies working with disabled individuals to register needs.

One of the most satisfying elements of successfully placing disabled volunteers is the knowledge that you are contributing to their life in terms of self esteem, while receiving valuable hours of service in return. But isn't that what makes our jobs worthwhile?

MEETING SOMEONE IN A WHEELCHAIR

Meeting someone in a wheelchair should not be an awkward situation. However, many people are unsure of how to act, which can create some embarrassing moments. The rehabilitation staff at Schoitz Medical Center, Waterloo, Iowa, has prepared a brochure as an informational guide on wheelchair etiquette to help prepare people for encounters they may have with wheelchair users. The tips also apply to those who care for patients in wheelchairs.

1. **Ask Permission.** Always ask the wheelchair user if he or she would like assistance. It may be necessary for the person to give you some instructions.

2. **Be Respectful.** A person's wheelchair is part of his or her body space and should be treated with respect.

3. **Speak Directly.** Be careful not to exclude the wheelchair user from conversations. Speak directly to the person and if the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit down or kneel.

4. **Give Clear Directions.** When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, be sure to include distance, weather conditions and physical obstacles that may hinder a wheelchair user's travel.

5. **Act Natural.** It is okay to use expressions such as "running along" when speaking to a person in a wheelchair. It is likely the wheelchair user expresses things the same way.

6. **Wheelchair Use Doesn't Mean Confinement.** When a person transfers out of the wheelchair to a chair, toilet or other object, do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance.

7. **Children Are Okay.** Don't discourage children from asking questions. Most wheelchair users are not offended by questions children ask them about their disabilities or wheelchair.

8. **Some Wheelchair Users Can Walk.** Some users can walk with aid, such as braces, walkers or crutches and use wheelchairs some of the time to conserve energy and move about more quickly.

9. **Wheelchair Users Aren't Sick.** Don't classify persons who use wheelchairs as sick.

10. **Relationships Are Important.** Remember that persons in wheelchairs can enjoy fulfilling relationships that may develop.

11. **Wheelchair Use Provides Freedom.** Don't assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy. It is a means of freedom that allows the user to move about independently.

—From PANPHA PLUS, *newsletter for volunteers and auxiliaries of Pennsylvania Association of Non-Profit Homes for the Aging*

HELPING DISABLED VOLUNTEERS FEEL AT HOME

It is important to be sure you really *invite* the people you want to become involved. Talking among ourselves doesn't invite new people into the system. You can send your information and requests to newsletters that go to people with disabilities. Information about both national and local newsletters is available through the independent living projects, rehabilitation and service agencies closest to you. This special effort will be effective in reaching people with disabilities and will emphasize your desire to include them.

We need to remember that deaf people do not often get information from radio and TV and that blind people are usually not aware of your beautiful poster and printed materials. People with problems in mobility need the assurance that your facility is accessible.

Architectural barriers are a terrible bore: They are all around us and we don't even notice them until we try to plan. They become incredibly frustrating when we try to plan for their removal in the abstract. We must think with *real* people toward *real* solutions in *real* situations. Often there are practical alternatives.

Some independent living projects have individuals who can build low-cost ramps or can give advice on the most economical way to solve problems. You may want to build a ramp or use other strategies, but bring in your local wheelchair expert.

—From "Volunteers Who Happen to be Disabled," President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped

CHANGING OUR SPEECH HABITS

Habits of speech, which reinforce myths and stereotypes about people with disabilities, can be powerful barriers. Language reflects a mental picture that develops, in part, out of our attitudes. It is important to evaluate our use of language to avoid phrases that trap people into stereotypes.

The further we get from calling Mrs. Jones and Betty and Joe by their names, the more evident it is that we have placed them into categories. The phrase "Mrs. Jones is weak" may cause us to wonder why she has this condition. We look for explanations: Is it always true and what causes it? Can her condition be improved and how has she organized her life to compensate for physical limitations?

Our response tends to be different as we clump people together. "The handicapped are weak." This phrase has removed the concept of a person with unique qualities from our thoughts. This kind of stereotyping language stops us from thinking creatively. A first step to removal of language barriers has been taken when we put the concept of *person* first.

It is usually best to use the phrases "a person with a handicap" or "an individual with a disability." Both these words can be used. Preference is based on geographical location. However, there appears to be greater acceptance of the word "disability" among advocates. They tend to associate the word handicap with "cap in hand," as in begging. There is an assertion that any physical or mental condition that limits function can be referred to as a disability and that a person is handicapped only when that condition causes problems. In other words, people are handicapped by a lack of resources available to them.

- People with orthopedic disabilities may be handicapped when there is no ramp into a building.
- People who are blind are handicapped when only ink printed instructions are offered.
- People who are deaf may be handicapped when there is no interpreter available in a court room.

Here is a list of some words that trap people behind stereotypes.

Suffers. This word, used in such phrases as "he suffers from polio," would seem to indicate that someone is in constant pain. This is rarely true. Polio is associated with a lessened sensation. Even when disabling conditions involve certain levels of pain, people are usually able to control its effect by a variety of processes. Don't impose unsolicited pity on anyone.

Invalid. This word has many meanings, all of which are negative. It means nonvalid, not qualified or unfit. This emphasis is inappropriate. Totally paralyzed individuals have a wide range of positive characteristics.

Normal. Sometimes we call non-disabled people "normal" and imply by that usage that anyone else is abnormal. This is inappropriate. Save this word to use when you are talking about numbers or temperatures.

Patient. When people are in the hospital or being treated by a medical professional, it may be appropriate to refer to them as "patients"; however, most disabled people do not need that kind of attention any more than able-bodied people do. People who are living in the community and are developing self-reliance are offended when they are called "patients".

Victim. We usually associate this word with the idea of a "dupe," as of a swindler or of someone sacrificed. Very few of the people you will meet have been "sacrificed." Do not use this word when talking about disabled conditions.

Crippled. The picture this word creates involves a helpless and non-valid person. It carries the message of incapability. It has rightly fallen into disuse. Don't revive it; it deserves to die.

Afflicted. The phrase "afflicted with a disability" implies continued pain and torment. It suggests a misfortune that is intolerable. Don't inflict this label on people.

Case. Often in social service agencies we find ourselves using this word, but it sounds like something you file away. People resent being filed away.

Dumb. When used as "deaf and dumb," this word is nonsensical. Deaf people may be verbal or nonverbal in their communication but they are not stupid. This out-of-date phrase should be considered only as historically interesting. The word, used alone, does not describe anyone.

Unfortunate. The implication of this word involves the idea of bad luck or lack of success. You may think a person was unlucky to have become disabled but you only add to the problem by using a phrase that minimized personal self-reliance.

Confined. The phrase "confined to a wheelchair" is used so often it almost seems like one word. The implication is that the chair is an essential part of experiencing the person. In fact, many people make a choice to use this tool of mobility and efficiency. They might be able to get about by other means but would needlessly exhaust themselves. They prefer to use a chair for efficiency. Others may not have the luxury of a choice. They may have to depend upon a chair for their mobility, but it is probably one of several tools they use.

—From "Volunteers Who Happen to be Disabled," President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped