

1992

# National and Community Service: Challenges and Opportunities for People With Disabilities to Volunteer in America

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## Recommended Citation

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## National and Community Service

### *Challenges and Opportunities for People With Disabilities to Volunteer in America*

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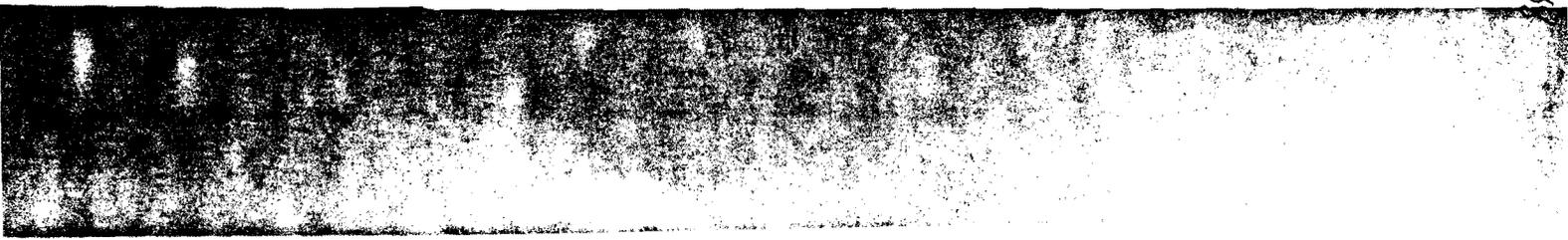
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JOURNAL OF DISABILITY POLICY STUDIES  
Volume 3 Number 2 1992

mwo0655



### ABSTRACT

The recently implemented National and Community Service Act of 1990 calls for Americans of all race, age, ability, and economic status to return to service in their community. To help facilitate this call to service, the National Commission on Community Service has allocated approximately 70 million dollars in grants. The Act focuses on the involvement of youth, including those who are economically disadvantaged and with disabilities. This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by community service program planners and disability organizations, in their efforts to integrate volunteers with disabilities in service to the community. The paper concludes with a discussion of informal and formal approaches to involving participants of varying abilities.

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Nineteen-ninety was a banner year for people with disabilities with the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) (P.L. 101-336). This Act was crafted "to establish a clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability" (P.L. 101-336). The ADA's intent is to provide people with disabilities equal opportunities as they compete for work, participate in public activities, ride public transportation, and use telecommunications. The ADA has received much attention for its potential to create new horizons for America's citizens with disabilities.

Another piece of legislation passed in 1990 was the National and Community Service Act (P.L. 101-610). For disability advocates and people with disabilities, however, this new law was obscured as the merits of ADA were focused on and celebrated. The National and Community Service Act (NCSA) merits further attention as it will have tremendous possibilities for U.S. communities and the people with varying abilities who live in them.

This article briefly discusses the NCSA. It then identifies several challenges to integrating people with disabilities into the various activities called for in NCSA, and offers opportunities for consideration by community service program planners and disability advocacy organizations regarding integration of volunteers with disabilities into community service. Finally, recommendations will be made that could help remedy the obstacles that deter integration of people with disabilities into community service.

### *The National and Community Service Act of 1990*

NCSA was crafted as a result of the involvement of numerous community organizations, such as Youth Service America, United Way, Campus Compact, and Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), who worked with key congressional sponsors, including Sam Nunn, Ted Kennedy, and Barbara Mikulski. Unusual congressional and White House cooperation was forged to ensure the passage of the bill into law.

At the broadest level, the Act seeks to stimulate volunteerism and community service through encouraging Americans—especially youth—to become more involved in service to the community. Some of the objectives include calling young people to serve in programs benefiting the nation and themselves and to review their ethic of civic responsibility. Other objectives include building on the existing organizational framework of federal, state, and local programs and agencies to expand full- and part-time service opportunities for all citizens, young and old, to generate additional community service hours that meet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs, particularly those needs relating to poverty. In summary, the NCSA is designed to promote sustained involvement, personal and community development, and identification with the value of service to the community.

The provisions of the Act are to be carried out by two entities: the Points of Light Foundation (POLF) and the Commission on National and Community Service (CNCS). In addition to POLF and CNCS, the executive branch created the White House Office of National Service to highlight the importance of volunteerism in America. While the missions of these three organizations are somewhat different, their shared vision is "To build a national movement that establishes community service as central to life in America—all citizens, all institutions" (G. Petersmeier, personal communication, December 16, 1991).

The NCSA requires the 21-member Commission on National and Community Service to disburse approximately 70 million federal dollars in FY 1992 to stimulate and support programs that build a national youth-focused service movement. The funds will be distributed via a request for proposal (RFP) grant process initiated and reviewed by peer reviewers, and later by commission members. There are four major grant categories:

*Serve-America* This grant category is available for programs sponsored by schools or community-based agencies to involve school-aged youth in grades K-12. Grants would be made to implement, operate, or

expand school-based service-learning programs, community service programs for school drop-outs, out-of-school youth, and programs involving adult volunteers in schools and private organizations.

*Higher Education Innovative Projects for Community Service* This category is designed primarily for higher education institutions to support student-initiated community service projects. Typical project examples include teaching individuals to read, mentoring single parents, or developing a community recycling project. Grants can also be used to provide teacher training in service-learning principles and skills.

*American Conservation Corps and Youth Service Corps Programs* Conservation Corps programs are designed to include teenagers, young adults, and special Corps members, such as older Americans. Participants are involved on a full-time or summer-time basis. Corps activities provide visible community benefits from conservation-focused activity such as cleaning and managing parks, forests, and waterways. Youth Service Corps are involved in human service settings providing services such as personal assistance, working with the frail elderly, or teaching literacy to those lacking such skills. Participants involved in Corps activities may be eligible to receive job training, education, scholarships, and living allowances.

*Full-time and Part-time National and Community Service Programs* This category of funds will be given to selected states to implement and evaluate national service programs engaging people age 17 and older in full-time and part-time service to the community. Volunteers perform educational, environmental, and public safety projects that are beneficial to the community. Upon completion of their terms of service, volunteers will receive education or housing benefits.

Most grant funds will be awarded to states who will then allocate smaller grants to local community organizations according to criteria set forth in the NCSA. If states decide not to apply for grants, then local organizations can apply for grants on a competitive basis.

Grant proposal criteria specify that program participants should assist in the development and execution of community service programs. While youth are the primary program participants, the sub-groups of economically disadvantaged youth and youth with disabilities should also be involved on more than a token basis.

The next section describes challenges that could deter or prevent involvement in community service by youth with disabilities. The issues

of lack of awareness, architectural and attitudinal barriers, and cost will be addressed.

### *Challenges to involvement*

The NCSA seeks to involve many of America's citizens in community service. However, inclusion in such service poses challenges for youth with disabilities and community service planners who seek to involve the disabled in their programs.

Disabled individuals may have low involvement in community service because program planners have assumed they could not, or would not, want to be involved. Thus, recruitment is often directed toward nondisabled youth. Conversely, program planners may wish to involve youth with varying abilities, but lack knowledge about disabled people and issues that affect them. Community service program staff may not know about resources available to make necessary programmatic changes to incorporate volunteers with disabilities into their programs.

Another challenge to full integration of volunteers with disabilities into community service is the lack of community accessibility. In order for volunteers with disabilities to be active in their communities they need accessible transportation and physical accessibility to meeting places and volunteer sites. Attention should focus on changing the environment to accommodate the person rather than attending to the person's disability or inability to participate. As the environment becomes more facilitative, disabled volunteers will be able to contribute and gain a sense of personal empowerment (Fawcett et al., in press). Under the ADA, programmatic and facility modifications are required to accommodate people with various disabilities. For example, community service program planners must determine how they will accommodate a person who is deaf, or one who is quadriplegic, and wishes to be involved in volunteer activities. Two immediate questions come to mind: (a) What accommodations are needed to assist these volunteers (e.g., personal assistance, interpreter, environmental modifications)?; and (b) Who would pay for these needed accommodations?

Besides the above-mentioned barriers, attitudinal barriers can also deter volunteers with disabilities from participating in community service. For example, the role of "recipient of services" has been traditionally assigned to, and played by, people with disabilities. Recently, however, disabled people have been identifying with positive peer role models who help to make their community a better place to live (Levy, 1988). Communities must realize the full potential of volunteerism of people

with disabilities, if given the proper chance to do so. Frequently then, the role of recipient could be changed to the role of participant, in the delivery of community services.

### *Opportunities for involvement*

Thousands of America's disabled citizens are *currently* committed to community service. Typically, this service is offered through nonprofit organizations, like Independent Living Centers (ILCs). These volunteer services are often directed toward peers with disabilities and include peer counseling, advocacy, and information and referral (Mathews, 1990).

In recent years, volunteers with disabilities have used their time and energies to secure passage of the ADA. These individuals continue to volunteer their services, to ensure that ADA regulations are complied with by local governments, businesses, and other entities.

As the ADA helps to change society (through removal of architectural, transportation, telecommunication, and employment barriers), greater opportunities will exist for volunteers with disabilities to offer their services to the community. As these individuals volunteer to mentor a struggling student, adopt a frail elderly person, or teach English as a second language to recent immigrants, they develop new leadership skills, build their self-esteem, and promote a personal ethic of civic responsibility.

Given these potential opportunities, the ADA can be used as a stepping stone to contribute—not just to receive—community service. Through service to the community, volunteers with disabilities can help change an ingrained societal attitude that frequently considers the disabled to be less than able. For example, the educational and experiential opportunities that disabled and nondisabled youth will have in working together will contribute to a better understanding of teamwork and each other's potential.

Thus, ILCs, and the disabled population they serve, are natural partners for collaboration with community service planners. ILCs could serve as a referral resource for disabled consumers interested in performing community service. They could also provide needed technical assistance regarding program and physical accessibility.

Another opportunity exists for further involvement of school-age youth in educational and experiential service-learning activities since recent changes were made in the Education of the Handicapped Amendments of 1990. These amendments now require students with disabilities ages 16 and older to have community experiences included in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The 1990 amendments are entitled the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA introduces

transition services as a required component of student programs and indicates that instruction, community experiences, and the development of employment and other post-school adult-living objectives must be part of each student's program.

Besides providing services at the community level, volunteers with disabilities should actively participate in the planning and implementation of community services. Such participation in the planning process could anticipate and reduce problems regarding disability-related issues before they occur. Additionally, as volunteers with disabilities become more involved with community service advisory boards (on both state and local levels), they will have increased opportunities to develop new leadership skills and learning experiences that will later help them as they enter the labor market or further their education.

### *Recommendations*

Programs with a history of community service and newly developed programs need to reflect and plan how they will establish policies and practices that accommodate and integrate volunteers and staff with disabilities into community service activities. Potential barriers, such as a lack of awareness of how to involve people with disabilities in community service and knowledge of how to secure needed resources to help accommodate volunteers with disabilities, will require creative solutions.

Community service planners and relevant coalition partners should contact ILCs, vocational rehabilitation agencies, and Regional Disability Business Accommodation Centers which can provide consultation on best practices to integrate volunteers with disabilities into community service programs. These resources have direct experience in working with disabled individuals and can provide timely, effective, and cost-saving information.

Community service program planners may also be concerned about involving volunteers with disabilities, because of increased cost. For example, who will pay for TDD devices, or interpreters for deaf participants? Recommendations for dealing with these cost concerns range from an informal to a more formal approach. Costs for integrating a deaf person may be kept very low by taking time each day for program participants to learn several new "signs" to communicate with their co-volunteer who is deaf. Using this approach, program participants can learn a sizable vocabulary in sign language. Additionally, a learning and skills experience would be created for both hearing and nonhearing participants. This approach, however, prevents the deaf participant from having the same

accessible communication that other hearing participants receive. Just as physically disabled people need physical access to facilities and programs, those who are deaf or hard of hearing also need full communications access (Barnartt, Seelman, & Gracer, 1990).

More formally, community service planners could allocate money to help integrate disabled volunteers into their programs. Another notion to consider would be the establishment of a modest escrow fund created by the Commission on National and Community Service that would disburse matching funds. These funds could help pay for needed services or reasonable accommodations (e.g., interpreters, environmental modifications) for disabled volunteers working with CNCS grant-sponsored programs.

Another formalized approach might be to work with other federal agencies who are involved with the National Community Service Act Subtitles, such as the Department of Education and Serve-America. Agreements could be made allowing disabled youth in grades K-12, who are involved in community service, to receive P. L. 94-142 funds. Relationships with public school programs might include the development or modification of service-learning school curricula to meet the unique learning styles of some students with disabilities. Activities initiated in the schools should allow students to apply what they learned to the community.

Educational programs are designed to prepare disabled students to live and work in their communities. Volunteering in the community with nondisabled peers could truly be a positive experience in helping youth with disabilities to become more integrated into their communities. These experiences will help both disabled and nondisabled youth to develop increased self-esteem, leadership skills, and civic commitment and increase their chances of a successful future.

### Summary

The National and Community Service Act and accompanying regulations require involvement of people with disabilities, along with other targeted youth populations in offering community service. However, a number of significant obstacles deter youth with disabilities from volunteer service in the community. Typical challenges include bringing about an awareness of how to involve youth with disabilities, determining what accommodations they need, and determining how to pay for them.

Opportunities for disability advocacy organizations and their constituencies to work with community service planners were discussed. ILCs'

involvement in assisting such planners with integration of volunteers with disabilities into community programs was suggested, and the mutual benefits that disabled and nondisabled participants would receive in working together in community service were explained.

Finally, recommendations for increasing knowledge about integrating participants with disabilities into community service programs were addressed as well as formal and informal mechanisms that could be used to reduce the costs of integrating youth with disabilities into community service.

The opportunity to embrace and practice the ethic of civic responsibility through community service must be made available to all Americans, including those with disabilities. To make this opportunity a reality, collaborative efforts must be made by federal, state, and local governments, along with community service planners, disability organizations, and volunteers with disabilities.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The views expressed in this discussion article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the positions of any federal agency or organization.

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