

The Americans with Disabilities Act

How the ADA Affects Volunteer Programs

The Virginia Office of Volunteerism, in cooperation with the Virginia Department for the Rights of Virginians with Disabilities and Steven D. Gravely, J.D., has compiled a monograph to serve as a guide for those leaders who wish to make their programs accessible and fair to volunteers with disabilities.

The publication includes an overview of the ADA, definitions, a list of resources, and specific guidelines for job descriptions, interviewing, and application procedures. Highlights from the publication follow.

How Organizations Benefit from Compliance with ADA

It can help us learn how to handle diversity; we all recognize that diversity in the workplace is inevitable, but this Act offers concrete ways in which we can change our behavior and attitudes to make diversity a reality.

- It focuses attention on each person's uniqueness, rather than allowing us to make general assumptions about who can or cannot do a specific job. This is certainly consistent with what we believe about the importance of matching the right volunteer with the right job, based on individual motivations and abilities.

- It is very consistent with Total Quality Management, with an emphasis on leadership, cooperation and a team approach to getting the work done.

- As we review job descriptions (paid and volunteer) for fairness, it may help us to re-examine the validity of certain jobs and roles, which in turn may make our use of human resources more effective.

- It can help us to provide ways in which others can reach their potential. Rather than viewing persons with disabilities as handicapped, we can look at their potential plus the technological assistance that exists to enable them to be an "asset" to our organization.

Implications for Managers of Volunteers

If we believe that everyone has a right to volunteer (similar to the right of equal employment opportunities), then we as managers of "nonpaid" staff have the responsibility to comply with the intent and guidelines of

the ADA. Here are some questions to help us ensure that we are not discriminating against volunteers with disabilities:

Mission statement: Does it reflect a commitment to diversity? Does it express a genuine desire to provide opportunities for staff (paid and volunteer) to grow and advance according to their proven abilities?

Planning: Are we remembering that attitudes can be barriers the same as doorways and steps? Is our organization receiving etiquette and sensitivity training in order to overcome stereotypes and fears?

Job descriptions: Are the tasks and qualifications written in a way that does not discriminate?

Recruitment: Is our material available in accessible format such as Braille, large type or tape? Do we make unconscious assumptions about who can and cannot do a particular job when we make recruitment presentations? Are we directly offering volunteer opportunities to individuals with physical and mental impairments?

Screening: Are our application forms, interview questions, and screening procedures designed to be fair and non-discriminatory?

Supervision: Do we discuss the potential for involving volunteers with disabilities with our fellow staff? When we recruit a volunteer with a disability, do we make sure that the supervisor and the individual with the disability are involved in decisions about accommodations?

Recognition: When planning recognition events or activities, do we consider the appropriateness for volunteers with disabilities? (I.e., taping a message of appreciation for a visually impaired volunteer, instead of presenting a certificate; holding the event in an accessible facility; providing sign language interpreters.)

Buildings: Where do we interview volunteers? Are work areas, restrooms and break rooms, kitchens accessible? Are we sensitive to the accessibility of computer terminals and controls, desks, phones, drinking fountains, etc.? ■

Excerpted with permission from Volunteering Virginia, the newsletter of the Virginia Office of Volunteerism.