

Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities: A Qualitative Study

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THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS WITH DISABILITIES

Many volunteer administrators often wonder what they can do to increase their volunteer base and improve the efficiency, longevity, and morale of their current volunteers and staff. One virtually untapped, and certainly underutilized, population from which new volunteers may be recruited comprises individuals with disabilities. Volunteer coordinators with limited-to-no experience engaging volunteers with disabilities may be concerned, however, that increased time and money to supervise may be required, or special accommodations may be needed, to engage this population. These concerns are commonly cited by volunteer coordinators as barriers to successfully engaging volunteers with disabilities (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme, 2000; Graff & Vedell, 2003; Miller, Schleien, & Bedini, 2003). Nevertheless, many agencies have deemed these barriers worthy of addressing and overcoming.

The current study addresses the benefits of engaging volunteers with disabilities as perceived by volunteer coordinators who took part in this practice. This research focuses specifically on the benefits that volunteer administrators perceived, both personally and for their agencies, through their engagement of volunteers with disabilities as compared to engaging volunteers who are not disabled.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Including Individuals with Disabilities

Few studies on volunteers have addressed the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. This may be due partly to the fact that volunteers with disabilities only account for 5.7% of the volunteer pool (Miller et al., 2003) although approximately 20% of the population has some form of disability (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). While the overall number of volunteers with disabilities is relatively low, Miller et al. (2003) discovered that 77% of agencies surveyed had engaged volunteers with disabilities at one time. Of these, a majority would consider future placement of additional volunteers with disabilities in their agencies (Graff & Vedell, 2000; Miller et al., 2003).

Overcoming Barriers

Graff and Vedell (2003) found that agency representatives believed that certain strategies needed to be implemented in order to successfully include volunteers with disabilities. Most important, a good match between the volunteer's abilities and his or her assigned duties was essential. Next, it was necessary to identify and provide special accommodations and supports for volunteers. Lack of time, resources, and knowledge of how to support volunteers with varying abilities was com-

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monly reported. Other strategies included the provision of disability awareness training to staff, access to an ongoing source of information and support for volunteers with disabilities, convincing administrators about the value of inclusive policies, and creative insight in job design and accommodations. Involving volunteers with disabilities does not have to be a difficult task. Most organizations that engage volunteers with disabilities report that they are involved in the same tasks and activities as volunteers without disabilities (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme, 2000).

Potential of Volunteers with Disabilities

Previously, Miller et al. (2003) found that 62% of volunteer coordinators surveyed perceived the benefits of inclusive volunteering to far outweigh the barriers. It was reported that one third of all volunteers with a disability required no additional supports (Graff & Vedell, 2000). When necessary, accommodations were usually minimal, ranging from physical accessibility, patience by the volunteer coordinator, larger and easier to read labels for a volunteer with limited sight, and audiotaped minutes of meetings (Graff & Vedell, 2003). Fitting the task to the person, rather than the person to the task, can help foster a successful experience (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, 2000). With a positive attitude, perseverance, and creativity, volunteer coordinators can support inclusive volunteering to benefit both the agency and volunteers alike (Miller et al., 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Procedures

A cover letter introducing the survey was sent electronically to all AVA members with e-mail addresses on file and to cybervpm, UKVPM, and OZvpm electronic mailing list subscribers. The letter stated the purpose of the survey, voluntary nature of participation, and the confidential nature of the data collection. The letter also contained a link to the online survey. In an attempt to elicit a more international response, a similar notice was also published in newsletters distributed by Volunteer Vancouver, Scottish Association for

Volunteer Managers, and Northern Ireland Volunteer Development Agency. No tracking of individual responses occurred, with all respondents remaining anonymous.

Survey Instrument

A self-designed, online survey instrument was used consisting of two demographic questions addressing agency mission and the total number of volunteers, and specifically, the number of volunteers with disabilities engaged by the agency in the previous 30 days; nine questions on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* concerning volunteer coordinators' overall perceptions of volunteers with disabilities; 12 questions using a Likert scale addressing the benefits associated with engaging volunteers with disabilities; and three open-ended questions on perceived benefits that were only answered by volunteer administrators who had experience engaging volunteers with disabilities. The open-ended questions included (a) Have volunteers with disabilities been an asset to your agency in a way that is different or varies from volunteers without disabilities? Why or why not? (b) What benefits has your agency received as a result of engaging volunteers with disabilities? and (c) Of these benefits, which has been the most important? Content validity of the instrument was established through careful review by a consultant in volunteer administration and by the board members of the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA). The survey took an average of 8 minutes to complete.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the open-ended questions. In a previous article, Miller, Schleien, Brooke, and Merrill (2005) described the results of the quantitative survey data.

Respondents

The online survey instrument was accessed by 755 potential respondents. Fifty-two individuals accessed the survey but chose not to answer the questions, thereby reducing the number of usable surveys to 703. Respondents overwhelmingly resided within the

United States (82.5%) and Canada (5.8%). Other respondents resided in England, Australia, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Italy, Nepal, Singapore, United Kingdom, Netherlands, and New Zealand (in order of response rate). Only respondents who had experience engaging volunteers with disabilities could respond to the open-ended questions. Of the 703 usable surveys, 531 (75.5%) responded to the open-ended questions. Analysis of the responses led to the conclusion that country of origin did not influence the nature of their responses.

The respondents to the open-ended questions were volunteer coordinators working in a wide variety of agencies. Agency missions included social services (n=94, 18.7%), health (n=82, 15.4%), working with children (n=42, 7.9%), working with seniors (n=38, 7.2%), cultural arts (n=35, 6.6%), other (n=34, 6.4%), environmental (n=33, 6.2%), working with people with disabilities (n=33, 6.2%), volunteerism (n=19, 3.6%), hospice (n=15, 2.8%), government (n=14, 2.6%), education (n=11, 2.1%), working with animals (n=10, 1.9%), public safety (n=10, 1.9%), emergency response (n=9, 1.7%), faith-based (n=8, 1.5%), blood bank (n=6, 1.1%), public library (n=5, 0.9%), community development (n=5, 0.9%), recreation (n=5, 0.9%), military welfare (n=5, 0.9%), retirement (n=3, 0.6%), and museum (n=3, 0.6%). There were no data related to agency type on 12 (2.3%) of the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Responses to the three open-ended questions were deemed similar in nature and were analyzed as one comprehensive data set. Two researchers scrutinized the data to identify themes and for comparative purposes. They conferred on the identification of 11 themes, which were further validated by a consultant in volunteer administration. Themes included disability awareness, unique skills, diversity, equality, personality traits, availability, work ethic, personal satisfaction, match, negative perspectives, and win-win solutions (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Prevalence of Themes in Open-Ended Responses

Themes	# of Responses	% of Total Responses
Personality Traits and Work Ethic	329	20.56
Disability Awareness	228	14.25
Unique Skills	227	14.19
Diversity	220	13.75
Equality	220	13.75
Availability	162	10.13
Personal Satisfaction	98	6.13
Match and "Win-Win"	77	4.81
Negative Perspectives	39	2.44

Responses were then coded based on the identified themes. During the coding process, many of the responses were placed into more than one category, depending on fit. Reliability of the coding was verified by comparison to a second researcher's coding of 25% of the responses. The themes "personality traits" and "work ethic," as well as "match" and "win-win," were later collapsed into single themes due to the significant amount of overlap in the coded responses determined by the initial coder and validator.

A note of precaution must be made before presenting the response summaries. Respondents diligently reminded us that there are positive and negative qualities to every volunteer, regardless of ability. Furthermore, everyone is unique; personal characteristics cannot be applied to all individuals labeled as having a disability, as if they were all part of one group or class of citizens. As one coordinator stated, "Volunteers with disabilities are just like volunteers without disabilities. Some of them are good. Some are bad." Identified themes and summary statements appear next in order of response rate from most to least frequent.

Personality Traits and Work Ethic

Respondents most commonly spoke of volunteers with disabilities as having great personality traits and strong work ethics. When describing volunteers with disabilities, volunteer coordinators often used descriptors such

as inspirational, loyal, dedicated, tolerant, nonjudgmental, enthusiastic, punctual, productive, willing, and appreciative of the opportunity to contribute. The commitment of volunteers with disabilities to their positions was described in a variety of ways, but the terms “dedicated” or “dedication” were used by 74 respondents. For example, “The volunteers with disabilities that we are engaged with are very dedicated to their jobs and developed excellent reputations at the agencies where they serve.” An additional 36 respondents referred to the volunteers’ high levels of commitment to the task at hand, organization, or mission. For example, “I think their commitment, willingness to learn, and energy level is amazing.” Loyal was a descriptor used by another 23 respondents.

Individuals with disabilities are not only dedicated to their volunteer positions and the agencies in which they work, but they are also motivators of others. One volunteer coordinator stated,

Whenever our volunteers with disabilities are seen doing whatever they are capable of, it motivates people who think they do not have anything to offer to volunteerism. They are the most loyal [volunteers] and continue to come each and every week.

Another coordinator stated, “We have been able to enjoy dedicated, hard-working, volunteers, which challenges our traditional volunteers to strive even harder.”

Willingness is another term that was consistently used. Whether referring to their willingness to perform a variety of tasks, meet new challenges, learn new skills, or “do whatever it takes,” willingness was used to describe these volunteers by 56 respondents.

Several volunteer coordinators expressed their thoughts on why such powerful terms as dedicated, committed, loyal, and willing are apparent when describing volunteers with disabilities. One coordinator stated,

Some work extra hard to prove themselves. They derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from being appreciated for their contributions and for being

included as part of a team. Apparently, people with disabilities can't assume inclusion or appreciation and so they value these rewards and go the extra mile to earn them.

Or as another coordinator stated, “I think that they sometimes feel that they must perform better than their peers.”

Disability Awareness

An agency that engages volunteers with disabilities provides paid staff, clients, and fellow volunteers with an opportunity to become more aware of the issues facing individuals with disabilities. Disability awareness can be categorized as increased awareness of disability issues, creation of an environment that is accepting of people of varying abilities, increased physical accessibility, and increased readiness to serve all members of the community. As one coordinator stated,

Volunteers with disabilities have helped us as a staff and institution be more connected and aware of the needs of the members of our community with disabilities. They have also enabled us to build relationships and a reputation in our community that makes us more valuable as a partnering agency.

Furthermore, volunteers with disabilities have proven to be great role models regarding respect for others and for individual differences. As one volunteer coordinator stated, “Using volunteers with disabilities, we do not usually have to train them in respecting others with disabilities because they already know this information. They are also able to educate us.” Staff and volunteers alike can take the lead from individuals with disabilities when it comes to respecting the many differences in people.

Many volunteer coordinators have learned how to solicit the feedback of volunteers with disabilities to make their agencies more physically accessible. A coordinator stated, “One volunteer who uses a wheelchair has been able to do assessments of the accessibility of our special events, buildings, etc., to help us

better understand ease of entry/flow rather than just stick to ADA guidelines.” Another coordinator reported that, “because of the input of our volunteers with disabilities, we have been able to design our site well enough to have received an award for accessibility.”

“Both paid and volunteer staff learn about barriers in the community for people with disabilities ... it educates our staff who may or may not be aware of people with disabilities and the challenges in their lives.” When an agency is more aware and knowledgeable, it is better prepared to serve a broader segment of the community. Simply stated, “We are better able to understand how to serve those in the community with disabilities.”

Unique Skills

Multiple respondents indicated that volunteers with disabilities have unique and specialized talents, such as the commonly cited ability to perform repetitive tasks for extended periods of time. Forty-five volunteer coordinators indicated that these volunteers were more willing to perform tasks that other volunteers deemed to be boring, mundane, “non-glamorous,” or just not interesting or challenging enough, but that are actually essential to the agency’s functioning. For example, “They do some work that other volunteers would tire of more easily because of the repetition,” and “They have been willing to do some mundane, necessary tasks that other volunteers wouldn’t be interested in.”

In some cases, volunteers with disabilities have been not only more willing to participate, but more capable and productive. For example, “A group of mentally disabled [sic] adults has demonstrated remarkable accuracy and speed in large mailing projects.” Another stated,

I have several disabled [sic] volunteers who are much better at checking mailing lists to determine complete addresses than nondisabled volunteers. They actually enjoy finding addresses with missing elements, while nondisabled workers (including me) quickly grow tired and less efficient.

A disability advocate may be quick to say, “Here we go again, sticking people with disabilities into stereotypical, low skill roles.” However, the reality is that some individuals with cognitive impairments have a remarkable desire to perform repetitive tasks and do so with incredible accuracy.

Another unique skill identified is the ability to relate and empathize with those facing difficult situations in ways that many others cannot. One coordinator stated, “We deal with patients with medical issues. Many times they [volunteers with disabilities] are more empathetic than volunteers without disabilities.” Another coordinator stated, “They relate to hospitalized children’s families really well.” An additional example included, “We work with children with cancer and the children can relate to anyone who appears different because they feel different themselves.” This ability to relate to others was especially important when volunteers with disabilities had the same disability as those being served. A coordinator in a disability-related organization stated, “Many of the people we serve have disabilities themselves and feel more comfortable speaking with another person with disabilities.” One respondent stated, “The volunteer who is legally blind leads a group of seniors who are losing their vision. She teaches them coping skills that a fully-sighted volunteer would not have.”

Those volunteers with sensory impairments were viewed as having unique skills that have allowed agencies to expand their services. For example, “We are able to offer services to our patrons who are deaf that we could not do before.” One coordinator stated, “Our volunteers with disabilities often have skills that those without [disabilities]...do not have. An example is Braille skills that have been a huge asset to the agency.”

Many coordinators viewed volunteers with disabilities as role models. This was particularly true in agencies whose missions included serving individuals with disabilities. One respondent commented, “Because the disabilities of some volunteers are similar to those of our residents, I believe that these volunteers have been role models and have encouraged some residents to continue to live and to try

new things.” One volunteer coordinator stated that volunteers with disabilities tend not to have “preconceived notions about our children. They interact with all our children, not just the ones that can verbally communicate. They are role models.”

One volunteer coordinator cited an example of how the perfect match between an individual’s very unique, specialized talent and the needs of an agency can be an extraordinary find. The coordinator stated, “Another volunteer who has a form of autism works with our tax division and can do the work of two people because of his ability to handle numbers.” Most likely, this individual is often seen as lacking in functional ability. However, with a strong match between abilities and needs, some individuals have the capability to shine in a unique way that can be beneficial to the agency and community.

Diversity

Respondents were adamant that having volunteers who represent the diversity of the community will facilitate good public relations, new perspectives in the workplace, diversified services, and increased tolerance and awareness of people of varying abilities. One volunteer coordinator stated, “They [volunteers with disabilities] are directly involved with the public and this reflects positively on our organization and the community. They better reflect our community and make visits to our facility more comfortable for guests with disabilities.” Another coordinator stated that engaging volunteers with disabilities “gives us a volunteer corps that more closely reflects the makeup of the community we serve. They show visitors that this is an inclusive organization.”

Twenty-four respondents indicated that increased diversity resulted in good public relations, increased publicity, and an improved public image, although many respondents also pointed out that these were not the original reasons why they engaged volunteers with disabilities. For example, “Volunteers with disabilities are high profile, so in addition to the obvious loyalty, hard work, and skill factor, they are also great PR.” Also, “Volunteers [with disabilities] have gen-

erated a great deal of positive press for us.”

Many also recognized that the increased diversity led to new insights and perspectives: “Including volunteers with disabilities gives a voice to a group who all too often don’t have one. They bring new ideas and perceptions that are often overlooked.” “Volunteers [with disabilities] bring life experience ... a new perspective to their work.”

The diversity effect is not easily quantifiable since outcomes are usually demonstrated in feelings and attitudes. As one volunteer coordinator explained, “The experience for staff and volunteers to work alongside someone with a disability is a priceless benefit. It celebrates diversity and highlights sensitivity.”

Equality

Many volunteer coordinators stated that all of their volunteers were considered equal; the presence of a disability was irrelevant. Most volunteer coordinators held all volunteers accountable for the same duties and responsibilities. They were grateful for all of the important contributions that were made and were appreciative of the time and energy that volunteers gave. One coordinator stated, “All volunteers are equal regardless of their limitations and/or competencies. Each person offers their own unique skill level. Most are excellent workers. We don’t even really think of them as people with disabilities, just members of the volunteer team.” One volunteer coordinator stated, “All volunteers contribute equally according to their abilities. Each brings his or her unique skills and enhances the program according to those skills.” Another coordinator stated more bluntly, “They tend to have the same assets and problems as abled volunteers.”

Availability

Many volunteers with disabilities have weekday availability and more flexible schedules. These characteristics allow an agency to complete more tasks and fill volunteer positions that are often left unfilled. Weekday availability also enables paid staff to work on other projects. One coordinator stated, “We have a few office volunteers who are very dedicated to a weekly schedule. It’s hard to find

volunteers who can help during regular business hours, and this group is very dependable and hardworking.”

Another respondent whose agency provided meals commented about the “great delivery people at lunchtime. There was a time in our agency history when we couldn’t have got ... all of the meals delivered if it weren’t for our partnerships with agencies that work with developmentally disabled people.”

Personal Satisfaction

While this theme did not yield as many responses as several of the others, it did generate strong positive feelings among the respondents. Many volunteer coordinators believed they were fulfilling a need for individuals with disabilities and increasing the sense of community by engaging them as volunteers. They also enjoyed observing the interactions between agency staff and volunteers. One coordinator stated that an important benefit of engaging volunteers with disabilities was her “personal satisfaction that we have helped individuals feel good about themselves and what they can contribute to our organization.” Another stated, “The benefit of working with excellent people who really want to help and get joy from working is highly motivating.” Volunteer coordinators found it personally satisfying to observe volunteers completing meaningful work that brings them joy. Coordinators also enjoyed getting to know and respect the volunteers with disabilities as individuals.

Match and Win-Win

Volunteer coordinators clearly indicated a need for finding good matches between volunteers’ abilities and interests and the needs of the agency to create win-win situations. One stated, “All volunteers have abilities—our task is to place all of our volunteers in positions that benefit those we serve, help our organization, and fulfill the needs of the volunteer.” Another coordinator stated, “What is more important is matching the potential volunteer with the right task. A good match will result in a win-win situation for all involved.” One of the respondents who provided several exceptional examples of

thoughtful matches between individual abilities and interests and agency needs expressed the benefit as, “By focusing on a person’s abilities, not disabilities, you are able to take people out of the slot-filling mentality of volunteer job descriptions and create opportunities that an agency may never have thought of before.”

Two strategies for making such appropriate matches were presented by respondents. One approach was by carefully working with the volunteer directly. By working together to find an appropriate match, both the volunteer and the agency have much to gain. One coordinator stated, “They have shown how much can be accomplished with minimal accommodation or alternate equipment that does not set them apart from the rest of the staff (paid or unpaid).” An additional strategy identified was that of having an agency that works with individuals on a regular basis, such as an advocacy organization, screen the volunteers for their abilities and interests. For example, “The volunteers with disabilities come to us through a special organization that can screen them for the tasks that we need done.”

A few respondents also discussed the fact that not all volunteer roles are appropriate for everyone. For example, “Disability or no disability, people are recruited on their ability to conduct the volunteer service in a health care setting. Not everyone, disabled or not, is an appropriate candidate to volunteer.” Another stated, “We are also very honest with them if there is no opportunity at that time for their skills.”

The importance of a good match cannot be overemphasized, as is evident in the few negative perspectives that were offered.

Negative Perspectives

Although asked to reveal the benefits of engaging volunteers with disabilities, respondents offered a small number of negative perspectives, many of which reflect what can occur when a good match is not made. These statements included the fact that it was more time-consuming to train and supervise them. Also identified were issues of unreliability, limited abilities, and additional transporta-

tion requirements. These situations led to the volunteers with disabilities gaining more from the experience at the agency's expense and, therefore, not resulting in win-win scenarios. For example, "Some are great assets, have wonderful enthusiasm, great attitudes, etc. . . others are more of a challenge and at times [I] think they may get more out of the experience than we do." Another respondent stated, "though dependable, the volunteers with disabilities that we have used do not always follow directions, and require more training than our staff is willing to give." It is hoped that only a few agencies had similar experiences to the respondent who stated,

They are not able to work independently and actually frustrate the staff more than they help. However, occasionally we get one who does an exceptional job. Unfortunately, the ones who cause more problems than they solve run about eight to one.

One respondent reminded us that some problems associated with volunteers with disabilities are also relevant to a much broader group: "There have been times I have had to deal with issues like body odor, transportation, [or] family matters, but this is [also] the case with many regular adult volunteers."

DISCUSSION

One respondent summarized the positive and negative perspectives of inclusive volunteering with the statement, "Depends on the right match—as with ALL volunteers." When an appropriate match occurs between the abilities and interests of the individual volunteer and the needs of the agency, good things happen. As an agency becomes more diverse and representative of the broader community through an inclusive volunteer pool, it is able to meet the needs of more community members and thus develop a positive reputation as a welcoming and inviting environment. Also, needed tasks are accomplished by a corps of willing, dedicated, and committed volunteers. Skills are brought to the agency that meet basic needs and, many times, expand existing services.

The respondents in this study described the involvement of volunteers with many different types of disabilities, including individuals with physical disabilities, sensory impairments (i.e., deafness, blindness), intellectual disabilities (e.g., mental retardation), autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, mental illness, multiple sclerosis, renal failure, just to name a few. In the authors' five-plus years of studying inclusive volunteering, we have observed that volunteer coordinators, generally speaking, are more comfortable engaging volunteers with physical disabilities rather than those with mental illness or intellectual disabilities. This may be due to fear of the unknown or the fact that accommodations often require more than just physically rearranging the environment for greater access. This study was not able to gauge whether volunteer coordinators who engaged those with mental illness and/or intellectual disabilities entered into these working relationships hesitantly. However, it was uncovered that regardless of previous experiences or levels of confidence, when a good match was made between the individual's abilities and preferences and the needs of the agency, it typically resulted in a positive volunteer experience for the individual and the agency. The common denominator across most if not all of these positive experiences was the focus on the volunteers' abilities and preferences, and not their limitations.

Implications for Practice

Volunteer administration has continually promoted the core values of inclusion, diversity, human dignity, and the giftedness of every person. The managers of volunteers cited in this study reinforced the benefits of working with volunteers with varying disabilities while noting the importance of good volunteer management practices such as identifying skills, appropriate placement and training, and ongoing supervision. While several spoke of the importance of a balanced exchange between the volunteer and the organization, of particular interest are the implications for organizations to expand their reach to a broader client base by engaging volunteers with special skills, such as the volunteer

who was legally blind working with seniors who are losing their vision, or a volunteer who is deaf providing signing for clients who are also deaf. All volunteers augment the work of paid staff. Volunteers with special skills, precisely because of their disabilities, can provide services and accessibility that are beneficial to the organization and the community served.

It is disconcerting to note that some volunteers with disabilities “work extra hard to prove themselves,” or “feel they must perform better than their peers.” Such comments do not tend to appear in volunteer satisfaction surveys, and managers of volunteers should make every effort to help both volunteers and their organizations have realistic expectations.

The positive comments in this study reflect the continuing emphasis on the synergy that occurs through diversity and inclusion at all levels. Managers identified the negatives and positives associated with all volunteers. Successful volunteer programs, regardless of the abilities or disabilities of individual volunteers, are built on good, consistent management practices that result in positive benefits for the organization and the volunteers.

The study documented the balanced benefits of engaging volunteers with disabilities. The qualities of loyalty, dedication, and work ethic are positive and desirable. The payoff for the organization, however, comes from the increase in disability awareness among staff, clients and other volunteers, improved agency accessibility, the potential for greater emotional connection with clients, and the potential to expand client services. These are bottom-line benefits that enhance the performance and mission of the organization.

Dr. Jean Houston, keynote speaker at the 1993 International Conference on Volunteer Administration, termed volunteer administrators “social artists,” saying,

There are levels and layers and dimensions of beingness, frames of mind, and modes of intelligence that most of us do

not tap. People who did not find their place are being called forth to find a new place. You give to others their greatest of gifts—you give them back their giftedness. You offer the lure of becoming.

Dr. Houston went on to say that “people wander into volunteerism to find their giftedness.” Managers of volunteers have the opportunity to reach out and grab that giftedness. They need not wait for an individual to wander in. This study identified tangible benefits to support the targeted engagement of volunteers with disabilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study has added to our understanding of the engagement of individuals of varying abilities as volunteers. It has challenged practitioners and researchers alike to move beyond the mere documentation of barriers that prevent participation. Barriers and other inhibitors are easy to document and they grab our attention quickly. Assets and other outcomes, on the other hand, can be more difficult to ascertain. Additional research is needed that addresses diversity in its many forms, and how it benefits individuals, agencies, and entire communities.

Responses to the survey indicated that the positive outcomes were robust when individuals were matched with appropriate volunteer roles. A thorough understanding of the matching process is necessary for inclusive volunteering to be successful on a wider basis. The implications are broad since a better understanding of the process of making an appropriate match for the more “difficult” volunteer will lead to more effective matches for the more “typical” volunteer as well. Since there is strong evidence that appropriate matches lead to more productivity, efficiency, sense of accomplishment, and retention of good volunteers, agencies have much to gain from this knowledge base.

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