



Volunteers with Disabilities: What You Need to Know Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 9

Overview

Good news! Tweens, teens, and adults with disabilities may be interested in volunteering at your library. The library and community as a whole benefit when the library staff welcome volunteers with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities have many of the same motivations as volunteers without disabilities: wanting to give back, build a resume, meet a community-service requirement for graduation or an organization, or just fill the hours in a day. However, be aware that people with disabilities do not necessarily have the same opportunities to volunteer because of intentional or unintentional community barriers. If you can position your library as the go-to place for potential volunteers with disabilities, you may find a substantial and consistent source of volunteers. Remember, reading, walking, talking, and so forth are not necessarily requirements for the volunteer job.

Tips

To address the needs of volunteers with specific disabilities, please see the tip sheets on those disabilities. When considering volunteering in general, keep these tips in mind:

- Recruit volunteers in the disability community (see “Resources,” below). People with disabilities may not necessarily think of the library as a place to volunteer.
- Work with the volunteers to tailor the assignment to their strengths and any challenges they want to address.
- Consider individuals’ interests. People work better when they like what they are doing and feel they are contributing.
- Be practical: a volunteer in a wheelchair may not be able to shelve books on the top shelf; a volunteer with classic autism may not be the best greeter.
- Ask volunteers what, if any, accommodations they might need.
- Prepare the staff for the volunteer by making them feel comfortable working with people with disabilities through education and conversation.
- Integrate the volunteer into the workplace. Include him or her in your conversations, coffee breaks, parties, and staff meetings, where appropriate.
- Respect your volunteer’s privacy. Remember that supervisors and coworkers must know the individual’s needs but can only be told the diagnosis if offered by the individual. For example, a supervisor needs to know that Mary needs frequent breaks but not that she has attention deficit disorder.
- Ask the volunteer for contact information in case problems arise during the workday that cannot easily be addressed. For example, if a volunteer with schizophrenia is disoriented one day, whom should be called for assistance?

- Effectively communicate with your volunteer. For example, do not use complex sentence structures when speaking with a volunteer with a developmental disability or turn away from a volunteer who is deaf while speaking to him or her.
- Purchase assistive technologies that will make it possible for them to work in the library.
- Be flexible. Allow someone to work with a job coach; sometimes you get twice the work. Keep in mind that the coaching may be of a professional or informal nature. For example, a wife might assist her husband with mild Alzheimer's in reading to children, while a social-service agency might pay to have a coach teach one of its clients how to read Roman numerals.
- If at all possible, hire those who do a good job.

Resources

American Council of the Blind

www.ACB.org

Membership and advocacy organization which encourages equity in access to all aspects of living for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

www.chadd.org

Membership and advocacy group for persons and their family who have Hyper Activity Disorder/Attention Deficient Disorder. Publishes the magazine "Attention" and hosts workshops and training sessions.

Learning Disabilities Association of America

www.lidaamerica.org

Membership organization which advocates for equity in learning living experiences

Mental Health America

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

This consumer-oriented site, in both Spanish and English, covers topics from many points of views. Particularly helpful is information on dealing with side effects of medications and discussion about national policy issues

National Down Syndrome Society

www.ndss.org

Provides basic information about Down syndrome.

National Federation of the Blind

www.nfb.org

Membership and advocacy organization which encourages equity in access to all aspects of living for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services

www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/index.html

Overseen by The U.S. Department of Education this organization works to assure that persons with disability have the same educational opportunities as those without a disability.

United Cerebral Palsy

www.ucp.org

Non-profit organization which works with persons who have disabilities to ensure they have the same opportunities as those without disabilities.

YAI—National Institute for People with Disabilities

www.yai.org

Non-profit organization which provides a network of services and opportunities for persons with developmental and learning disabilities.

This tip sheet, revised in 2010, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See www.ala.org/ascla.