

Developing a Support Network for the Inclusion of Volunteers with Disabilities

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Background

This article focuses on volunteers with disabilities. For the purposes of the discussion, we will start by defining volunteering: “Volunteering is a social action in which personal desire and free choice are central elements. It is aimed at contributing to others, to a group or community and gives the individual emotional gratification rather than material reward” (Yaffe, Nave, 2011).

Volunteering is an act of free choice, without financial recompense, in order to benefit others. Volunteering is one of the ways in which people can integrate in the life of the community and society in which they live, and through which they can fulfil some of their needs. Volunteering can meet three human needs: the need to belong, the need for achievement, and the need for power and influence (Gromb, 2011, p. 33). The volunteer enjoys a sense of relevance, belonging, and influence over the direction of his or her life (Naftali, 2012).

Volunteering in the field of disabilities offers volunteers a first-hand acquaintance with people with disabilities, removes social stigmas, shapes inclusive attitudes, and develops a social approach that sees each individual as an integral part of the community in which he or she lives.

There are no accurate data in Israel on the rate of volunteering among people with disabilities, but from data showing the limited degree of social participation of people with disabilities, it can be concluded that very few of them are involved in

volunteer action. For the most part people with disabilities, youngsters and adults, do not have the opportunity to participate in this civil action, and do not take part in volunteer activities. Because they have disabilities, society relates to them as “recipients” and not as people who have the potential, desire and ability to contribute to others. As a result they do not have the right to empowerment and personal development, realization of their abilities, and active social involvement.

Most organizations are not set up to receive volunteers with disabilities, and they lack knowledge and a “work doctrine” in this field. There is no doubt that the right working model, in which special volunteers enjoy the support they need, is an essential condition in order to ensure the successful and effective contribution and integration of volunteers with disabilities.

Beit Issie Shapiro is a strong supporter of social integration as one of its fundamental values, and attributes enormous importance to the integration of people with disabilities in all social circles of the community in which they live. Changing social attitudes towards people with disabilities is one of the main objectives of the organization’s activities, with the aim of creating a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Among other ways, the organization implements this through the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities in its volunteer array.

This article describes models for including volunteers with disabilities, and details the system-wide working model that exists at Beit Issie Shapiro.

Volunteering and People with Disabilities

A society that adopts the values of integration and social inclusion strengthens its community vigor.

The philosophical approach that underlies the idea of inclusion is that people with disabilities have the same rights as people who do not. It is therefore their basic right to be active participants in social action, and a part of the community and society in which they live. This worldview sees people with disabilities as members of the society in which they live, and not as people on the fringes or outside society.

The social approach to disability aims to eliminate social exclusion and enable people with disabilities to live in an inclusive society. This approach diverts the focus of attention from the individual and his or her disability to the social and environmental obstacles that prevent or limit his or her social participation. It sharpens society’s obligation to take steps to change environmental obstacles, so as to prevent discrimination in the opportunities offered to the individual with disabilities.

Inclusion means an attitude of respect towards people who are different, accepting the differences between people, and appreciating the abilities of all people. The idea

of inclusion relates to the participation of people with disabilities in activities of all kinds, in regular community frameworks, with the appropriate assistance and the support required.

Volunteering is an important activity in the lives of many people. The need for volunteer activity, and the desire to contribute to the community, are not diminished among people with disabilities. On the contrary, participation in volunteer activities in the community is likely to offer people with disabilities valuable opportunities for new experiences.

The literature discusses the advantages of volunteer activity for people with disabilities, and emphasizes the opportunities it offers for acquiring new skills, trying out decision-making, and experiencing personal empowerment. It helps to change their social image from that of people in need of assistance to people with the ability to assist others, and gives them the chance to break out of the circle of isolation. (Simkin, H.T). When people with disabilities are given the opportunity to make use of their talents and skills to help others, they enjoy a sense of independence and responsibility, and a feeling of satisfaction and happiness, and this empowers them. (Simkin, H.T). All these increase the sense of self-confidence and self-worth of the volunteers (Pardon, 2003).

Since this is the case, it is not surprising that people with disabilities are motivated to contribute their time to the community, and volunteer for different activities.

The literature focuses on five main reasons driving people with disabilities to volunteer: (1) to be active and busy; (2) to help people; (3) to gain occupational experience; (4) to get to know people; (5) to give back to their community and not only to receive from it (Choma, B.L & Ochocka, J. 2005).

Volunteering by people with disabilities is also meaningful for society. Organizations with disabled volunteers report that regular employees and volunteers in the organization have developed acceptance and tolerance, and experience their lives in the organization as richer and deeper than in the past. In addition, it is reported that the joint activity produces increased motivation and persistence, which affects the output and quality of the activity (Bar, 2010).

Models for Working with Volunteers with Disabilities

There are a number of organizations around the world that take in people with disabilities as volunteers. This process is called “collaborative volunteers.” Collaborative volunteers are defined as “individuals, with or without disabilities, who cooperate in order to improve the community”.

Below we will present some of these models.

1. "Partnership F.I.V.E"

In the United States the "Partnership F.I.V.E" (Fostering Inclusive Volunteer Efforts) model is in use. This model, funded by the Department of Rehabilitation Services in the Ministry of Education, is intended to promote recognition of the valuable contribution of people with disabilities to their community. The model guarantees them opportunities to realize their right to be fully involved in the community. Many professionals, such as art therapists and volunteer directors, are involved in the process, alongside volunteers with and without disabilities. The program also includes a support network for volunteers, comprised of teachers, family members, therapists, and others.

The model presents six main stages: (1) recruitment and preparation; (2) assessment of wishes, needs, and support; (3) suitability; (4) building support; (5) communication; (6) formative evaluation.

The "recruitment and preparation" stage requires all those involved in the volunteering process to be committed and proficient with regard to volunteering, and the different roles of the volunteer.

In the stage of "assessment of wishes, needs, and support", people with disabilities express their areas of interest, their abilities, and the support that they need.

At the "suitability" stage, after the volunteer director has assessed the preferences, skills, and need for support of the volunteer, the most appropriate task for the volunteer with disabilities is identified. On the one hand, the choice of task takes into account the way in which the volunteer can best serve the organization or the community, and on the other hand, the volunteer director looks at the degree to which the task will allow the volunteer to enjoy the activity and benefit from personal growth.

At the stage of "building support", the volunteer director and a professional identify the support that each volunteer needs, on a personal basis. The support could be adapted equipment, transport, a volunteer mentor accompanying the volunteer during his or her absorption in the organization, and other needs. Ideally, the aspiration is to provide the necessary support in a natural and unobtrusive way, in order not to draw attention to the person's disability.

Communication is important at each stage of the process. It is particularly important for the volunteer director to know how to establish and develop good communication between the volunteer and the professionals or other volunteers with whom he or she is in contact. When problems arise, in particular in the event of

conflict between the partners, the volunteer coordinator must intervene and promote dialogue for a joint solution to the problem.

The “formative evaluation” stage is critical for organizational learning with regard to the absorption processes, support, and operation of the work array. In order to know what works and what does not, and what improvements are required, so as to ensure optimal integration of volunteers with disabilities, the organization must assess the effectiveness of the program (Miller et al., 2005).

2. "Vocteer"

Another model that exists in the USA is called “Vocteer”. This is a program that brings together university students aiming for a career as therapists, and volunteers with severe psychiatric problems. The students are called “volunteer coaches” for the people with disabilities. The students receive study credits, work experience, and a greater understanding of psychiatric disabilities. The volunteers with disabilities gain personal reward, involvement in the community, professional skills, and preparation for independent volunteering.

Similar to the Partnership F.I.V.E model, the Vocteer model comprises a number of stages: (1) recruitment; (2) suitability; (3) training; (4) the volunteer work; (5) evaluation.

The process begins with recruiting places that are willing to take on volunteers with disabilities, recruiting university students wanting to serve as volunteer coaches, and recruiting potential volunteers from mental health organizations.

The next stage is the suitability stage—the volunteers fill out forms that include personal information, areas of interest, and preferences with regard to the volunteer coach (man or woman, age, and so on). The volunteer director recruits and seeks out students who are able to serve as ideal coaches, and matches and connects the volunteers with disabilities and their coaches.

The next stage is training. During a brief training, the volunteer coaches are provided with know-how and information on subjects that will help them create a connection with the volunteers. The areas of training include: knowledge about psychiatric disabilities, laws, maintaining confidentiality, the objectives and goals of the program, recommended coaching methods, clarification of the boundaries of the relationship, and so on. The volunteer and the coach together set operative goals, and report on their progress every month to the volunteer director.

The volunteering stage involves inclusion of the volunteer with disabilities in the place where he or she is volunteering. Volunteer work places are varied, and could include shops, kindergartens, and animal shelters.

The final stage in the program includes evaluation, in which the coaches and volunteers fill out a survey of satisfaction with the program, and recommend the desired improvements. This evaluation enables the program operators to upgrade and improve it over time.

Other models for inclusion of volunteers with disabilities exist in Canada and in Britain. Similar to the previous models, the aim of these programs is to encourage and empower people with disabilities to play an active part in volunteering by providing the appropriate support, education and coaching, both for the volunteers and for the community (Carone & Burker, 2007).

The Working Model Designed at Beit Issie Shapiro

In recent years there has been a gradual but regular increase in the number of applications by people with disabilities wanting to volunteer at Beit Issie Shapiro. Some of these applications come from individuals (directly or through family members), and others come from professionals wanting to include a group of people with disabilities with whom they are working. An examination of the motives for volunteering among people with disabilities applying to Beit Issie Shapiro indicates the same motives as those reviewed in the literature.

Around 18 months ago, a system-wide working model was drawn up in the volunteering unit at Beit Issie Shapiro with theoretical reference to the models existing abroad.

The model involves three inter-connected circles of activity: (1) the circle of volunteers with disabilities; (2) the circle of support volunteers; (3) the circle of staff in the departments in which the special volunteers are absorbed.



To implement the model, a program coordinator was recruited to integrate and adapt the activities in each of the circles. The program was documented, and the knowledge acquired was used to improve the model.

Below is a description of the main tasks of the program coordinator in each of the circles of activity.

1. Support Volunteers

Support volunteers are regular volunteers at the organization, who accompany volunteers with disabilities during their work. The support volunteers mentor the volunteers in the initial stages, train them to carry out the tasks they are given as their volunteer work, listen to their needs, and mediate between them and the absorbing unit. In this way, the support volunteers take on a considerable part of the burden from the staff members, freeing them up for their intensive therapeutic work.

The main tasks of the program coordinator in the support volunteers circle are:

- Recruiting volunteers from the community to support and accompany volunteers with disabilities.
In the first stage, the organization's volunteer coordinator personally approached a number of veteran, committed, regular and patient volunteers who are familiar with the credo of Beit Issie Shapiro and asked if they would take part in the program. Six volunteers were recruited, who saw the program as an opportunity for professional advancement in their volunteer work. In the second stage, an

appeal was made to all volunteers in the organization, and 14 more volunteers joined the program. All the volunteers expressed an interest in the subject of training, and wanted to learn about the field, which was new to them. Some saw the training and being part of the group as an opportunity to expand their social connections. A diverse group formed, which included men, women, young people, adults, new and veteran volunteers.

- Building and operating a training program for volunteers. The training program covered subjects in a range of areas: the social approach to disability, introduction to disabilities, attitudes, inclusion in society, and so on.
- Matching a volunteer mentor to a volunteer with disabilities.
- Training the volunteer mentors, personally and in a group, in order to provide support and tools for coping with difficulties and challenges arising in the process. Building a network of rewards for the volunteer mentors.

An example of the role of the volunteer mentor

A' is a volunteer with a slight intellectual disability, who has worked in the past as an assistant in the kindergarten, and asked to volunteer in the school at Beit Issie Shapiro. A' was allocated to the class in which D', a volunteer mentor who has completed the training course, volunteers. D' received A' and accompanied her as she became integrated in the class. She showed her how to perform the tasks that the staff asked her to do, and helped her when she had difficulty with them. When the classroom staff came across a difficulty they turned to the volunteer mentor and asked for her assistance.

For instance, the class teacher wanted to ask A' to read a story to the children, but did not know what her standard of reading was. She asked the volunteer mentor to help. D' looked into it, under the guidance of the program coordinator, and discovered that the special volunteer was able to read, but needed preparation in order to succeed in this task. In light of this, they prepared together for reading the story aloud, and prepared the lesson. A' was able to read the story to the children successfully. As A' became more integrated in the class, the volunteer mentor reduced her accompanying role. Today A' functions independently and the volunteer mentor is in the background, helping only when the need arises

2. Volunteers with Disabilities

Beit Issie Shapiro receives applications from volunteers with disabilities. Some of the applications are made by the individuals themselves, most of them young people with a range of disabilities, who are looking for opportunities to be involved in activity in the community in an organization that recognizes their characteristics and difficulties. Other applications come from family members, hoping to find a meaningful, contributing and respected activity for their loved ones. There are also applications from organizations in the community, schools, organizations dealing with adults with disabilities, who see volunteering as an opportunity for self-fulfillment and for experience in an activity before going out into the labor market.

The main tasks of the program coordinator in the circle of volunteers with disabilities are:

- Recruiting volunteers with disabilities in the program (National Service volunteers, special education classes, and independent volunteers).
- Personal interview with each of the volunteers with disabilities in order to get to know them personally, understand their volunteering preferences, identify their abilities, and define the support they will need.
- Matching a volunteer mentor to the volunteer with disabilities. It is important that, as far as possible, the program coordinator will identify the volunteer mentor who is best suited to the volunteer with disabilities and his or her wishes.
- Allocating each volunteer with disabilities to a unit that offers the tasks most appropriate to the volunteer's capabilities, and in which the atmosphere is appropriate to his or her needs.
- Maintaining regular follow-up of the integration of the volunteer with disabilities in the volunteer activity, and dealing with problems, obstacles and difficulties arising in the process.

Examples of absorbing a group of volunteers with disabilities:

A special education class from one of the high schools in the city came to volunteer at Beit Issie Shapiro. The class came regularly, together with the home-room teacher and assistant, for an hour and a half once a week, to volunteer in different units of the organization.

Before they started to volunteer, the program coordinator held a personal conversation with each of the students with regard to their preferences, abilities, and areas of interest. She also held a conversation with the homeroom teacher and the school psychologist, to find out about the disabilities and difficulties of each of the youngsters, and how she could arrange the best volunteer framework for them.

A student with emotional and communication problems, and with a good ability to learn languages, was allocated to the overseas resource development unit. She helped update the unit's database in English.

A hyperactive student with attention and concentration problems asked to volunteer in the therapeutic pool. Only therapists and patients go into the pool, and so there was some creative thinking with regard to the appropriate role for him. After giving the matter thought, together with the manager of the pool, it was decided it to give the student an underwater camera with which to film and document some of the treatments, so as to assess the progress made by the patients. The student was allocated to a regular group of children, and documented their treatments with the hydrotherapist. This new role suited the preferences of the volunteer, and gave the pool staff better follow-up of the progress of their patients, as well as providing a new service for parents – photographic documentation focusing on the children and their treatment in the water.

3. Staff in the department in which the person with disabilities is volunteering

The inclusion of volunteers with disabilities is liable to arouse hesitations, fears and questions among the staff. The professionals feel that they need to focus on their regular work and meet the goals and targets to which they are committed. The

heavy burden of work throughout the organization, and in the therapeutic units, which deal with children and/or adults with disabilities on a daily basis, is both physically and mentally wearing. One of the fears among the staff members is that the inclusion of a volunteer with disabilities will require them to devote considerable time to providing support to the volunteer and will affect their regular work with the patients. There is a fear that volunteers with disabilities will create an additional burden on the staff.

In addition, some staff members fear that the volunteers will not be able to carry out the tasks given to them, and will not contribute sufficiently to the children or the older patients, and to themselves.

Deciding on the appropriate tasks for volunteers with disabilities requires creative thinking and building new roles. In light of this, preparing the intake system and presenting the working model of support volunteers who are responsible for accompanying the volunteers and their absorption are essential components of the working model. Enlisting the cooperation of the managers and staff members of the absorbing units is an essential condition for the success of the program.

The main tasks of the program coordinator in the circle of staff members in the departments in which people with disabilities will be volunteering are:

- Introducing the idea to all the organization's employees, from the field workers to the senior managers.
- Marketing the program to the different departments of the organization – at the level of the unit managers and their staff.
- Including the subject in internal departmental training.
- Mapping the needs of the organization – which units are in need of volunteers, what are the different roles that volunteers can perform in each unit?
- Providing guidance for the managers and staff in choosing the appropriate tasks for special volunteers.
- Helping the staff organize for absorbing the special volunteers and their mentors.
- Helping the departments make the necessary adjustments in order to include volunteers with disabilities.
- Preparing and training the staff of the units on the subject of absorbing volunteers with disabilities and the volunteer mentors, giving a detailed explanation of their needs and how the system can organize to absorb them optimally.
- Intervention and dealing with problems that arise in the course of the volunteer work.

- Providing reinforcement for staff members absorbing volunteers with disabilities in their units.

Examples of adapting roles for volunteers with disabilities:

I' is a woman with a physical disability. The left side of her body is paralyzed and she has a head injury that affects her memory. I' wanted to work with computers and mentioned that she likes working in a quiet environment and carrying out short and simple tasks. She was allocated to the community unit at Beit Issie Shapiro and helped convert presentations and documents from an old format to an up-to-date and new format.

Y' is a young volunteer with communication problems who wanted to volunteer with the children. At first he was allocated to the movement and sports center and helped the staff with the sports classes. After a while he asked to work with younger children of kindergarten age. Thinking together with one of the kindergarten teachers, it was decided to include him in a specific task in which volunteers had not been involved previously: practicing walking on a treadmill in the gym in the movement and sports center, for children needing additional practice. This role enabled Y' to contribute from his past experience in the movement and sports center, and at the same time be involved in an activity that gave him a personal connection with the children.

Evaluation of the Program

The program is accompanied by an evaluation study. The study has not yet been completed, and so at this stage we are not in a position to present its findings. In addition to the study, throughout the process the program coordinator has held feedback and learning conversations with all the circles of the working model: the volunteers with disabilities, the support volunteers, and various staff members. These conversations have made it possible to upgrade and improve the model, even in the course of its implementation.

An example of a feedback conversation with a volunteer with disabilities:

G' is a young, English-speaking volunteer who came to Israel from the United States for a two-month visit. G' suffered a stroke at the age of 21, which left her with a significant disability in her left arm and leg. At her request, G' volunteered in a class of the Beit Issie Shapiro School, together with an English-speaking National Service volunteer who accompanied her as a mentor. At the end of her stay as a volunteer, a feedback conversation was held. In this conversation, G' brought up ideas that helped when absorbing other volunteers. For example, she emphasized that it was important for the volunteer with disabilities to explain to the staff about his or her disability. Because G' is paralyzed in her left side, she explained to her mentor that she could only feed children from the right side. She asked her mentor to help her tie back her hair in the mornings when she arrived at the school, so that the children would not pull it. G' said that it was important for the program coordinator and the staff of the unit to which the special volunteer was allocated to have a good understanding of the nature of the volunteer's disability, his or her abilities, and the areas in which help was needed.

Summary and Recommendations

At the most basic level, volunteering is a very important activity for the development of individuals with and without disabilities, and for the different communities and organizations.

Volunteering gives people with disabilities a positive outlet for their leisure hours, significantly improving their feeling of self-confidence and their sense of social value. It gives additional significance to their lives, reinforces the feeling that they belong to the community, and promotes real social inclusion.

People without disabilities who volunteer alongside people with disabilities acquire knowledge and a new understanding of disability, and demonstrate considerable willingness to support and include this population. By means of "collaborative volunteering", misconceptions are corrected and there is increased awareness among people in the community of the ability of people with disabilities to live a full and contributing life.

Successful and good absorption of special volunteers requires proper and effective planning. The absorption of people with disabilities as volunteers in an organization requires the organization, at all levels, to be completely committed to the idea and to recognize inclusion and integration as a social and organizational value.

In order to include volunteers with disabilities in a good, beneficial and effective manner, flexible and creative thinking is required in a number of aspects:

- The development of a wide range of roles will allow the organization to enrich the range of tasks offered to the volunteers.
- It is of enormous importance to coordinate expectations, and to develop creative ideas with regard to how to implement the tasks.
- Developing the organizational ability to provide volunteers with the support required for them to fulfil their tasks is the central component in organizing for their absorption.

It is no less important that the roles and tasks defined for the volunteers are of genuine value and benefit. Volunteering in tasks that are of no real contribution to the organization is liable to turn into a frustrating and painful encounter between the volunteer and the organization, and with the act of volunteering itself. These tasks put across a message of charity and not equality and respect, and are liable to lead the volunteer to drop out.

The real challenge of the program coordinator is to “tailor” a personal and unique task that is of real value and contribution to each volunteer with disabilities.

We hope that the preliminary model presented in this article will encourage a broad and inclusive dialogue, in which people with disabilities and representatives of organizations will participate together. This dialogue will allow the existing models to be revised and improved, and new models to be developed.

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