Ensure Your Project is Inclusive Of People with Disabilities

Creating an inclusive environment ultimately begins with the actions and attitudes of the individuals who are already a part of that environment. A Project Coordinator should always be thinking in terms of what people *can* do, not their limitations. There are several elements needed in order to create an inclusive environment.

An inclusive environment:
- ✓ Ensures the respect and dignity of all individuals
- ✓ Does not pry into people's past medical histories
- ✓ Keeps private information private
- ✓ Fosters a safe environment in which people can speak and listen
- ✓ Willingly and proactively provides accommodations
- ✓ Is accessible
- ✓ Sees a disability as another element of diversity
- ✓ Is flexible

!!! *Remember*: there is no one way to create an inclusive service environment; rather it is a continuous process that is always evolving!

Basic Etiquette

Below is a list of some basic etiquette guidelines you should follow when interacting with people with disabilities:
- ✓ Speak directly to the individual with a disability, even if they have an interpreter
- ✓ Do not assume individuals with disabilities need or want your assistance
- ✓ Never assume a physical disability also implies a cognitive disability
- ✓ Never lean on a person's wheelchair – it is seen as an extension of themselves, as are all assistive devices
- ✓ Try to sit when speaking to someone in a wheelchair to be at their eye level
- ✓ Identify yourself before you begin to speak when talking with someone who is blind
- ✓ Use age appropriate language – just because someone has a cognitive impairment does not mean you should talk to them as if they were a child
- ✓ Look directly at someone with a hearing impairment while talking to them
- ✓ Be aware of barriers
- ✓ Do not let fear of making a mistake, fear of saying the wrong thing, or fear of the unknown make you reluctant to interact with people with disabilities. If you do make a mistake, apologize, and move on

Using "people-first" language

The way that language is used has many implications. It shapes our perception of events. Remember: ALWAYS use "people-first" language when talking about individuals with disabilities to stress that they are individuals first and not defined by their disability. For example, do not say someone is deaf, but rather someone is a person who is deaf or has a hearing impairment. Do not say handicapped people, but rather people with disabilities.

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Inclusive Service Descriptions

Inclusive Service Descriptions contain the same elements as volunteer position descriptions except that they make clear the distinction between essential and marginal functions of a position. [Essential functions are ones that are critical to the position whereas marginal functions are not.] Ensuring that your descriptions are inclusive is a critical first step in creating an inclusive environment. It will also aid you in recruitment, as your descriptions will make clear that your project is inclusive. Beyond this, the same process should be used in interviewing and matching up a volunteer with a disability to a service position as is used with any individual.

Essential vs. Marginal Functions

Service Task 1:

Participants will provide homework help to third grade students at an after-school program. Participants will occasionally fix snacks for students as needed.

Essential Functions:

Ability to read and explain third grade subject matter and the ability to communicate effectively with children

Marginal Functions:

Fixing snacks at the end of the tutoring session

Service Task 2:

Participants will establish committees of residents in low-income housing to promote self-sufficiency and drug/crime prevention programs.

Essential Functions:

Effective communication, diplomacy and tact, planning, organization, and follow through on activities and goals

Marginal Functions:

Answering telephones, computer skills, and boxing and transporting materials to meetings

!!! *Remember*: an individual with a disability who is able to perform the essential functions of the position with or without accommodations is qualified for the job!

Recruiting people with Disabilities

It's great if you are already recruiting people with disabilities in your general recruitment process. However, if you have just begun to promote inclusion, you may want to do some targeted outreach to communities with people with disabilities.

There are some simple guidelines you should follow to ensure that your recruitment process is inclusive:

- ✓ Include images of people with disabilities as service providers in your brochures and other promotional materials.
- ✓ If you have a promotional video, make sure it is captioned
- ✓ Make a clear statement that you are willing to provide accommodations [For example, "Qualified individuals with disabilities who need accommodations may make arrangements by contacting _____."]
- ✓ Include a non-discrimination clause in your written materials

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- ✓ Make clear that you have materials available in alternate formats [i.e. in large print, in Braille, or as an audio]
- ✓ Be sure that your website is accessible
- ✓ Do not ask if a person has a disability in your application
- ✓ Hold your meetings in spaces that are accessible
- ✓ Be aware of resources in your community
- ✓ Make your staff or other members aware of your initiative and get them on board!

!!! *Remember*: you may not ask disability-related questions during an interview nor may you request medical information prior to offering the applicant the position.
If the applicant brings up a specific accommodation needed, then you may inquire further to best answer their question. Otherwise, be sure to ask all of your applicants the same questions!

What is Accessibility?

Accessibility is an umbrella term that refers to all features that make an environment accessible. Accessibility standards are designed to benefits individuals with a range of disabilities and even those who do not have a disability at all! From ramps to power-operated doors to appropriate signage, everyone can benefit from such standards.

Four Areas of Accessibility

1. Architectural Access

This refers to the ease with which people are able to enter, move around in, and leave a building or other physical space. All areas must be "barrier-free," whether this refers to having an alternative to a staircase, making sure hallways are at least 36-inches wide, or that restroom doors are not too heavy.

2. Programmatic Access

Ensure that your project's eligibility requirements or operating procedures are not causing additional barriers. Setting specific times or methods that *must* be used is not a good policy. Transportation is also a big consideration that can be tricky. But be sure to plan ahead and think creatively!

3. Technology Access

In many cases, technology can help you make other aspects of your project accessible. For example, set up a computer to read the information to someone who has a visual impairment. Also be sure that the workspaces are adjustable, and people have easy access to captioned videos, hearing aid compatible telephones and tape recorders. Useful information on website accessibility is available at www.cast.org

4. Communication Access

Be prepared to provide information in alternate formats for people with hearing, visual or cognitive impairments. You should be able to provide equivalent communication effectively. Some examples include: writing notes, interpreters, real-time captioning, taped information, and Braille.

What are Accommodations?

Accommodations refer to all of the technology, services, and changes in policy, procedures, and the built environment that enable individuals with disabilities to perform essential functions. Some accommodations can be very expensive, while others are free. Making a simple statement that

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accommodations are available upon request is a great way to make people aware that you are fostering an inclusive environment. It is important to remember that each individual may have a different style for requesting an accommodation. Some people may be very familiar with what they need while others may look to you for suggestions. You must take each request on an individual basis and never assume that the same accommodation will work for two different people.

!!! *Remember*: an inclusive environment does not presume that a person requires an accommodation, but rather creates conditions that are open and allow for effective communication about needs.

Managing People with Disabilities

Managing people with disabilities in an inclusive environment is NO different from managing any of your volunteers.

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