Making a Difference: How to Become and Remain Active in Your Community - A Guide to Volunteering

“Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.” MLK Jr.
As early as 1955 and continuing until the 1980’s there has been a steady and dramatic decline in the number of persons with disabilities living in public or private institutions. Unfortunately, while many reside in “communities” they are not part of them. Today in the US, more than 54 million Americans live with a disability yet for many social isolation whether by geography, stigma, fear, or lack of social skills is very real for people with mental health, physical and/or developmental disabilities.

Most research indicates that people with strong ties to the community feel more empowered and have greater feeling of control over their lives. People with disabilities often report that developing meaningful community roles has often been difficult for them. Some of the barriers include:

1. Lack of reliable transportation and access
2. Don’t know how to get involved
3. Lack confidence that one person can make a difference.

On the flip side communities often fail to ask for input from persons with disabilities. They often have biases or misunderstandings about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. Add to that a historic belief that volunteerism is a poor substitute for a “real life” and many people end up living their lives in isolation from their neighbors. This manual was designed to do several things:

1. Help decrease feelings of isolation.
2. Increase the number of persons with disabilities becoming more involved in their communities.
3. Increase the number of person with disabilities who vote by showing how to become and stay involved with their communities’ in-between elections.
Why should you get involved?
Just becoming involved can have enormous benefits for an individual regardless of the outcome of the project, issue or agency you work with. When you commit your time and effort to an organization or a cause you feel strongly about, the feeling of fulfillment can be endless. Volunteering can be one of the best ways there is for you to become engaged in your community and to get to know people. Volunteering offers opportunities for everyone regardless of ability or disability to:

- Make important networking contacts
- Learn or develop skills
- Teach your skills to others
- Enhance your résumé
- Gain work experience
- Build self-esteem and self-confidence
- Improve your health
- Meet new people
- Feel needed and valued
- Express gratitude for help you may have received in the past from an organization
- Communicate to others that you are ambitious, enthusiastic and care about the community
- Make a difference in someone’s life
- Improves the likelihood you’re your children will volunteer as an adult

Volunteering also helps you to make:

- **Your Community Stronger.** Organizations and agencies that use volunteers are providing important services at low or no cost to those who need them. When a community is doing well as a whole, its individuals are better off, too.

- **You Stronger.** Volunteerism is a great way for you to have fun. Many people say they don't have the time to volunteer if that's the case, try rethinking some of your free time and select just one or two projects a year.

- **Building Social Networks, Community Memberships, and Friendships.** Volunteering can be one of the most important and useful ways to really get to know your community. For many people with disabilities social outings are often prearranged activities like supervised shopping or attending movies, without any real opportunity to get to know other people. Also although many people with disabilities “live in the community” they do so in isolation and more often than visit the community around them much in the same way a tourist would. Living in social isolation has another major draw back, limited exposure and time to make friends. Making friends requires that people get to know each other over time, have shared interests or activities.
How to Get Started

So, you have made the decision to become involved but, how do you get started? First, ask yourself questions such as:

? **What are my interests?** Think about what matters to you, and be selective about where you spend your time. Choosing opportunities that make you feel good while helping others builds stronger communities, and enriches your own life at the same time.

? **What are my skills?** Can you and do you want to answer phones, solicit donations, or do you prefer to more physical labor types of activities like helping to build a house? Do you have special skills? Can you weld, use American Sign Language, repair motors, or have teaching experience? The important thing is to find an activity you enjoy doing.

? **Do I have any special needs?**
  - Do crowds, loud noise bother you?
  - Do you have accessibility or medical needs?
  - How much time can you work before needing a break?

? **Do I have a reliable method of transportation?**

? **How many hours a week do I want to volunteer?** Stay with a schedule that makes sense for you and leaves you time to enjoy the activity.

? **Why do I want to volunteer?**

? **What I want to learn?** Volunteering can also teach you valuable skills that you can use in other parts of your life. For example, answering phones or soliciting donations can help you develop communication skills.

It is a good idea to write your answers out because more than likely the places, agencies and/or groups you might want to volunteer with are going to ask these types of questions too.

**How to Begin Searching for Opportunities** You may already know what you want to do and where but if you don’t how do you find opportinities? Most agencies, both public and private, have volunteer services programs – just call and ask. You can also research opportunities on-line – *there are literally thousands of opportunities listed*, through the phone book, get information from friends and family, schools, the United Way, hospitals, parks and recreation, museum’s, the choices are limitless. Whatever you decide on make sure the match is good for both you and the agency you volunteer with.
Still Not Sure and Need Ideas What about?

Politics you can work on local, state or national levels and choose topics that are of interest to you, taxes, health care, crime etc. Contact the headquarters of the party you are interested in working and ask about opportunities to serve. You may want to consider running for office or serving on local state, city or town boards or commissions.

Schools do you want to mentor a child, are you interested in adult literacy or perhaps you would like to work with kids who have disabilities or serve on the PTA or school board.

Church's are you interested in office work, missionary or maybe youth programs.

Homeless Programs would you be interested in working in a shelter, serving on their board or collecting donations of money, goods and services, or maybe working in a soup kitchen.

Evaluation Programs you can be a part of improving the performances of the services public and private agencies provide. You can become involved with collecting surveys and serving on committee’s and boards many have requirements that the people the serve must be represented and encourage participation.

The possibilities for volunteering are endless. You can work at: food banks, for your neighborhood association, the local library, the YMCA/YWCA, local museums, health care organizations, senior programs, advocacy organizations, child care programs, health and mental health programs, correctional facilities, community gardens, organize clothes or book drives,

The reward of volunteering enhances ones sense of belonging, increases your sense of purpose and improves self-competence and self-confidence!
### Work Sheet

This worksheet is intended to help you organize your thoughts in one place if needed.

#### Why – Check all that apply

- [ ] Make important networking contacts
- [ ] Learn or develop skills
- [ ] Teach your skills to others
- [ ] Enhance your résumé
- [ ] Gain work experience
- [ ] Build self-esteem and self-confidence
- [ ] Improve your health
- [ ] Meet new people
- [ ] Feel needed and valued
- [ ] Express gratitude for help you may have received in the past from an organization
- [ ] Communicate to others that you are ambitious, enthusiastic and care about the community
- [ ] Make a difference in someone’s life
- [ ] Improves the likelihood you’re your children will volunteer as an adult
- [ ] Other ______________________

#### Interests

- [ ] Politics
- [ ] Energy/Environment
- [ ] Advocacy
- [ ] Education
- [ ] Health Care
- [ ] Housing/Homeless
- [ ] Veterans
- [ ] Children
- [ ] Animals
- [ ] Conservation
- [ ] Safety and Security
- [ ] Other ______________________

Once you have made your selections determine what about the topic interests you. For example if you picked **Animals** - do you want to do rescue work, volunteer at the zoo, or perhaps learn to train assistance animals. When you have finished, rank them in order of interest to help determine where to begin.

#### Skills

- [ ] Computer literate
- [ ] Type
- [ ] Sales
- [ ] Construction
- [ ] Teaching
- [ ] Proficient in ASL
- [ ] Engine Repair
- [ ] Artistic
- [ ] Athletic
- [ ] Management
- [ ] Cook
- [ ] Other ____________
- [ ] Other ____________
- [ ] Other ____________

Look to your past, if have you had a job or volunteered before – what do you do well.

#### Special Needs

- [ ] No Crowds/Loud Noises
- [ ] Accessibility
- [ ] Medical Needs – equipment, meds. Allergies etc.
- [ ] Stamina
- [ ] Other ______________________
It is important for you to consider what special needs you might have. If you don’t you may find yourself in a situation where neither you nor the organization are getting their needs met.

**Transportation** - Do you have reliable transportation? □Yes □No
Reliable means that you can drive and have access to a car, you can count on a friend or family member to drive you or you have access to public transportation – like the bus system.

**Time**: How much time can you reasonably give? Over committing builds resentment. Take into consideration your health, family obligations, the time of others if they are doing things like providing transportation.

**Learn** For many volunteering is a two-way street. The agency, organization or cause gets your time and in return you gain valuable experience. Are there specific things you are hoping to learn while volunteering? If so write them down and be sure to let the volunteer coordinator know. People are not mind readers, If you have expectations but don’t share them you set yourself up at best a disappointing experience and at worst a resolve to never volunteer again

I want to learn:
1)
2)
3)

**Agency/Organization/Cause Expectations** Once you figured out what you want to do and why listed your skills, determined your goals, time you can give etc. you need to develop a list of questions for the volunteer coordinator. For example:
What do they expect from you?
Is there a minimum amount of time they expect from a volunteer?
Will you need any special equipment or clothing? Do they provide it or do they expect you to?
Can you talk with a current volunteer about their experiences?

To help you keep organized the space below can be used to record the agency/organization your are interested in working with, a contact name, phone number and email.

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<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Phone</th>
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RESOURCES

If you decided that you want to build your project but need help getting started tool kits are great resources to help you get started. Below is a list of tool-kits that are available on available on-line as well as additional sites to help you find out about opportunities to volunteer.

Education Help close the achievement gap and reduce “summer learning loss” by reading with kids or organizing a book drive  Toolkit: Read with Children  Toolkit: Organize a Book Drive | en Español

Health Promoting healthy lifestyles in your community is key to preventing costly disease and improving our nation’s health. Toolkit: Support Community Gardens | en Español Toolkit: Starting a Walking Team | en Español Toolkit: Promote Back to School Health | en Español

Community Renewal At a time when many Americans are struggling with the loss of their job or their home, you can help meet some of their most basic needs by working to reduce hunger, secure donated clothing and strengthen community resources. Toolkit: Support Local Food Banks | en Español Toolkit: Organize a Clothing Drive | en Español

Energy and Environment Join your friends and neighbors to reduce energy by auditing your home and helping maintain public lands. Toolkit: Audit Your Home | en Español Toolkit: Maintain Public Lands | en Español

Safety and Security Support military families and veterans who have served our country and help your community prepare for disasters. Toolkit: Connecting Veterans to Community Services Toolkit: Preparing Your Community for Disasters

Create Your Own Project Work with your neighbors to identify local needs and find solutions that work. Toolkit: Create Your Own Project

Search Opportunities Serve.gov is your online resource for not only finding volunteer opportunities in your community, but also creating your own. Use Serve.gov to help you do your part. America’s foundation will be built one community at a time – and it starts with you.

http://www.liveunited.org/about/ The United Way is a worldwide network in 45 countries and territories, including nearly 1,300 local organizations in the U.S. It advances the common good, creating opportunities for a better life for all, by focusing on the three key building blocks of education, income and health. The United Way movement creates long lasting community change by addressing the underlying causes of problems that prevent progress in these areas. LIVE UNITED is a call to action for everyone to become a part of the change.

http://www.volunteermatch.org VolunteerMatch strengthens communities by making it easier for good people and good causes to connect. The organization offers a variety of online services to
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support a community of nonprofit, volunteer and business leaders committed to civic engagement. Our popular service welcomes millions of visitors a year and has become the preferred internet recruiting tool for more than 75,000 nonprofit organizations.

www.SmartVolunteer.org SmartVolunteer's mission is to connect skilled professionals with volunteer opportunities that utilize their professional expertise. At the same time, SmartVolunteer matches nonprofits and charities with the individuals necessary to fill the critical needs of their organization.

http://www.americorps.gov AmeriCorps is an opportunity to make a big difference in your life and in the lives of those around you. It’s a chance to apply your skills and ideals toward helping others and meeting critical needs in the community. AmeriCorps members address critical needs in communities all across America. As an AmeriCorps member, you can: Tutor and mentor disadvantaged youth, Fight illiteracy, Improve health services, Build affordable housing, Teach computer skills, Clean parks and streams, Manage or operate after-school programs, Help communities respond to disasters, Build organizational capacity. For all AmeriCorps programs, members receive a modest living allowance, and some programs provide housing. You may not save much money during your year of service, but most members find the living allowance to be adequate to cover their needs. AmeriCorps members who complete a term of service also receive an AmeriCorps Education Award. After successfully completing a term of service, AmeriCorps members who are enrolled in the National Service Trust are eligible to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. You can use your education award to pay education costs at qualified institutions of higher education, for educational training, or to repay qualified student loans.

http://www.nationalservice.gov/ Corporation for National and Community Service plays a vital role in supporting the American culture of citizenship, service and responsibility. We are a catalyst for change and champion for the ideal that every American has skills and talents to give. The Corporation is the nation’s largest grant maker supporting service and volunteering. Through our Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs, we provide opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to express their patriotism while addressing critical community needs.

http://sc.google.nicusa.com/search?q=volunteer&access=p&output=xml_no_dtd&sort=date&ie=UTF-8&client=southcarolina&oe=UTF-8&proxystylesheet=southcarolina&site=southcarolina takes you the state of South Carolina website where you can find literally thousands of volunteer opportunities.

This guide was brought to you by the South Carolina Department of Mental Health Office of Client Affairs