

## **Retention: Volunteers and Service Members with Disabilities**

Retaining good service members and volunteers can be a challenge regardless of whether the volunteer has a disability or not. There are some strategies that you can undertake to ensure that individuals with disabilities are successful in your program and are able to complete their term of service.

First, here are important elements. As you think about specific issues regarding retention, be sure to evaluate the issue at hand to determine whether it is a retention issue specific to disability, or whether the volunteer or service member is facing issues not related to disability at all.

Volunteers and service members are retained when the following exist:

- They perceive that what they are doing is valuable.
- There is a sense of excitement and fun.
- There is a feeling of belonging.
- There are opportunities for personal growth.
- Mutual expectations are met.

These same factors are true for individuals with disabilities.

There are some things that will contribute to an experience not being valuable or fun for persons with disabilities and may create difficulties in retention:

- If appropriate reasonable accommodations are requested and not provided, it will prove very difficult for a person to succeed and to contribute in

a valuable and productive way. Be sure to not only provide accommodations when requested, but to also keep the lines of communication open, and to ensure that the accommodations remain appropriate and effective.

- If a service member or volunteer with a disability is disregarded, and his or her lack of participation is not of equal concern as anyone else's. It is often easy to say "don't worry about it" or "just sit this one out" when creating an inclusive environment proves challenging. When you do so, you are in effect saying that the volunteer's full and active participation is not important.

Example: A program is doing park clean up on a Saturday afternoon. There is a very steep hill to the area that is being worked on. The team leader tells John, a volunteer who uses a wheelchair, that he does not have to come, that day because it will be too hard.

- Praise and positive feedback is important to everyone. Praising a person with a disability for tasks or achievements that you would not praise others for is often perceived as insincere or as a result of having lower expectations.

There are many things that you can do to help assure retention of volunteers with disabilities:

- Create a truly inclusive service environment.
- Hold volunteers and service members with disabilities to the same levels of accountability as other volunteers.

- Develop clear expectations and hold volunteers and service member to these expectations.
- Keep the lines of communication clear and open.
- Develop clear position descriptions that outline tasks, essential functions and expectations.
- Take action when you see that a service member is not participating.

An inclusive program can successfully retain a greater number of talented qualified individuals with all types of abilities to serve and make communities stronger.

Submitted by the National Service Inclusion Project  
(NSIP)

For NSIP Technical Assistance call toll-free at 1-888-491-0326 voice/TTY or email at [nsip@umb.edu](mailto:nsip@umb.edu).