



Evaluation Report: Engaging Persons With Disabilities in Service

Artwork created by persons with disabilities through VSA Arts of Montana for the Seasons of Service Initiative



he Points of Light Foundation, founded in 1990, is a national nonprofit 501 (c)(3) organization that engages more people more effectively in volunteer service to help solve serious social problems. Today, after more than a decade of steady growth and funding from corporations, foundations, the government, and private citizens, the Foundation has achieved international prominence as the leading advocate for and authority on volunteering. In partnership with the Volunteer Center National Network, the Points of Light Foundation works with over 90 Connect America partners, as well as thousands of business partners and nonprofit organizations around the world, bringing people and resources together to make a significant and positive difference in the lives of others.

disabilities, like all volunteers, have unique talents to contribute and play an important service role in communities everywhere. In September 2000, with funding provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Points of Light Foundation initiated a project to learn how to effectively engage persons with disabilities as volunteers and to create inclusive days of service.



The grant resulted in 2,900 volunteers with disabilities participating in service days through 22 Volunteer Centers and with the assistance of 59 local partners. Guidelines and best practices for engaging persons with disabilities were shared with over 550 different organizations across the United States, including educational institutions, nonprofits, Volunteer Centers, government groups, and faith-based organizations, through a series of trainings and the dissemination of a best practices guide.

The Foundation funded activities managed by 22 Volunteer Centers during the 2000-2001 funding period. Grants were awarded in three tiers:

- Level I 12 service day grants were awarded to Volunteer Centers that undertook a mobilization effort to engage persons with disabilities in at least one service day.
- Level II 8 model grants were awarded to individual Volunteer Centers that developed year-long outreach and recruitment programs utilizing several service days to increase the involvement of persons with disabilities as volunteers.
- Level III 2 statewide grants were awarded to Volunteer State Associations for the purpose of: a) involving at least 75% of their member Volunteer Centers in the mobilization of persons with disabilities in a day of service; and, b) undertaking a statewide effort to publicize a recruitment campaign and the resulting outcomes of their initiatives.

Following is a report on the many accomplishments and lessons learned as a result of this grant. The report is divided into three sections:

- Participation: Everyone Can Serve
- Lessons Learned on Processes to Recruit and Engage Persons with Disabilities in Volunteer Service
- Changes in Organizational Policy and Practice



he goal of this grant, to engage 700 persons with disabilities in days of service, was significantly exceeded, sending a clear message that persons with disabilities are willing and able to serve their communities. Volunteer Centers organized 60 service day opportunities across the United States in which over 2,900 volunteers with disabilities provided service to their communities (see Table 1). In many instances the volunteers with disabilities reported that this was the first time they had been asked to serve.

ake a Difference Day is about bringing people together to make our communities more united. The collaborative project we took part in accomplished this through breaking down stereotypes, and demonstrating that everyone has gifts to contribute." – *Volunteer Center of Brown County, Inc.*, Green Bay, WI

Table 1: Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Service Days										
Day of Service	Number of Volunteers with Disabilities Engaged	Categories of Disabilities C= Cognitive V= Vision H= Hearing E= Emotional L=Learning M= Mobility S= Seizure						7	Examples of Activities in which Volunteers with Disabilities Participated	
		С	V	Н	Е	L	M	S		
Martin Luther King Day	132	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Participants in an Easter Seals adult day care facility worked with other volunteers to make costumes and props for a local theater. As a result of this project, an ongoing program entitled Kaleidoscope was developed which assists youth and adults with disabilities in producing plays.	
National Volunteer Week	208	•	•	•	•	•	•		Painted wooden tables and signs for a children's garden at a local nonprofit.	
National Youth Service Day	574	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Made wheelchair accessible garden boxes for a school serving persons with sight impairments.	
Join Hands Day	243	•			•	•	•		Painted a large mural on the playground blacktop at a charter school for homeless children.	
Make a Difference Day	600	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Assisted older citizens in preparations for the upcoming winter by raking leaves, mowing lawns, and cleaning windows.	
National Family Volunteer Day	128	•	•		•	•	•		Cared for animals waiting to be adopted at the local Humane Shelter.	
Day of Caring	132	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Sorted donated food at the local food bank.	
Other	881	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Participated in a graffiti clean-up activity.	

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Persons with disabilities were engaged in just about every type of volunteer activity, ranging from neighborhood clean-up projects to book drives. Following are a few examples of day of service projects with significant outcomes.

FIRSTLINK, Columbus, OH – For Make A Difference Day, FIRSTLINK worked with several community groups to develop a service project that involved persons with hearing impairments, older adults, and elementary school children. Participants from Deaf Initiatives, an organization that supports and encourages activities that strengthen the career potential of young adults who are deaf or hard of hearing, worked along with volunteers from the Ohio Department on Aging STARS program and students from two elementary schools to create two "themed" quilts. The quilts, which were focused on the themes of peace and diversity, were displayed in various locations throughout the city of Columbus, including the Ohio State House. The project organizer noted, "this project is a wonderful collaboration among young volunteers, older adult volunteers and volunteers who have disabilities. The public display of these quilts around the city of Columbus will give a wide and varied audience an opportunity to recognize the very powerful way in which these groups can give back to their community."





Missoula Aging Services, Missoula, MT – Working with VSA Arts, an international organization that creates learning opportunities through the arts for persons with disabilities, Missoula Aging Services coordinated an opportunity for persons with disabilities to take art classes. The artwork that was produced was then exhibited at Missoula's Community Rehabilitation Center, a rehabilitation center for patients with serious injuries. According to the project coordinator, "one artist had a severe brain injury. It was inspirational for the patients to see this person with a severe injury who was able to create such wonderful art. They could see hope through his art."

Volunteer Services of Manatee County, Bradenton, FL - For Join Hands Day, a high school student led volunteers of all abilities in the assembly of two all-terrain wheelchairs. The wheelchairs were designed by the student and later donated to a summer camp for children with disabilities. The donated wheelchairs will allow camp participants with physical disabilities, for the first time, to maneuver through hiking trails. The blueprints for the wheelchairs have been distributed throughout the state of Florida, and other groups have begun replicating the wheelchairs.





Lesson One – Building a Strong Foundation: Setting Aside Ample Time to Plan

olunteer Centers consistently found that investing ample time in the planning phase led to accessible and successful volunteer projects. Every Volunteer Center, whether organizing a single day of service or multiple days of service, reported that they set aside time to plan prior to the event. The number of staff members dedicated to the project varied widely, largely due to the different number of service day commitments required of each sub-grantee level. On average, Volunteer Centers spent just under four months planning for each service event and involved three of their staff members, with varying proportions of their time spent on planning.

Volunteer Centers implemented specific strategies during the planning phase to accomplish the goal of engaging persons with disabilities in days of service. The three key planning activities identified by sub-grantees included forming advisory committees, identifying and tracking volunteers, and ensuring the accessibility of sites.

ACTIVITY ONE: DOING IT TOGETHER – THE FORMATION OF ADVISORY COMMITTEES

n the past, volunteer service days have followed a clear pattern: the Volunteer Centers helps to design a project, the nonprofit agency hosts the project, and the Volunteer Center connects volunteers with those opportunities. The advisory committee has now become a staple in planning all of our Seasons of Service Days, and the difference is astounding. The projects are now planned independently by members of the advisory committee, and staff resources are used more for coordination purposes. Having fresh ideas and input has changed the scope of our projects." - The Volunteer Center, Inc., Charleston, SC

his project increased the confidence of the planning committee members with disabilities, increased their interest in volunteering, and empowered them." – *Volunteer Service Clearinghouse*, Aberdeen, SD

Over half of the Volunteer Centers utilized an advisory committee comprised of members with and without disabilities to assist in planning service events. Generally, 20 percent of the committee members were persons with disabilities while 70 percent represented community agencies that support persons with disabilities. Including persons with knowledge in disabilities issues on the committee resulted in increased leadership opportunities for persons with disabilities and ultimately a more thorough planning process.

A vital resource for the Volunteer Centers, advisory committees filled various roles during the planning process including:

- Providing guidance for media outreach efforts and helping to ensure that appropriate language and themes were utilized. Additionally, the committee aided in the design of registration and sign-in forms, making certain that the format of each form was appropriate for different populations the Volunteer Center was attempting to engage.
- Educating Volunteer Centers on ways to make project sites accessible. Some conducted site visits prior to the project to ensure that the site was accessible to persons with disabilities.
- Reviewing training materials developed by Volunteer Centers. One Volunteer Center used their advisory committee as a pilot audience for the training they had developed for nonprofits on how to engage volunteers with disabilities.

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ACTIVITY TWO: DEVELOPING WAYS TO IDENTIFY AND TRACK VOLUNTEERS WITH DISABILITIES

During the planning phase, Volunteer Centers established new processes that included ways to identify and track volunteers with disabilities. These procedures prepared Volunteer Centers to respond appropriately to the special needs of volunteers. Virtually all Volunteer Centers worked closely with agencies or schools serving persons with disabilities to plan effective ways to identify and track volunteers with disabilities.

- In many cases, the partner agency or school serving persons with disabilities was responsible for identifying and tracking the number of volunteers with disabilities who participated in the service activities.
- In other instances, Volunteer Centers were able to capture this information through registration forms that asked volunteers if they needed any specific accommodations.

ACTIVITY THREE: ENSURING THAT PROJECT SITES ARE ADA ACCESSIBLE

Additionally, Volunteer Centers made certain that project sites met ADA requirements for accessibility. Volunteer Centers identified a variety of approaches to finding accessible projects including:

- Selecting sites such as city, local and national parks that are already accessible;
- Visiting sites (often with the help of advisory committee members or staff of an agency serving the disabled population) before the project is approved to determine their accessibility; and,
- Purchasing necessary equipment to make the project site accessible to all populations.

Lesson Two – Strategic Participation: Finding the Right Team

Volunteer Centers helped to ensure the existence of future volunteer opportunities for persons with disabilities by creating volunteer clubs allowing persons with disabilities to volunteer on an on-going basis.

Volunteer Centers worked with many organizations, especially organizations that already support the disabled community, stimulating the development of at least 59 new or expanded local partnerships in the 22 sub-grantee communities. The local partners of Volunteer Centers identified in Table 2 played the following roles:

• Preparing for the day of service by recruiting persons with disabilities, providing matching grants, helping to ensure that sites are accessible, advertising the day in their newsletters and fliers, providing Volunteer Centers with training and technical assistance, and serving as liaisons for the Volunteer Centers to other organizations who serve persons with disabilities.

Unanticipated Outcome

On more than one occasion, Volunteer Centers noted changes in the way partner agencies viewed their clients with disabilities. These agencies began seeing their clients not just as service recipients, but also as people who possess the capacity to give back through service.

- Assisting in the implementation of projects by supplying transportation for persons with disabilities and oversight for projects. Many partners also took on the responsibility of coordinating and even hosting projects.
- for persons with disabilities by creating volunteer clubs allowing persons with disabilities to volunteer on an ongoing basis; working with Volunteer Centers to design and deliver training for other nonprofits on engaging persons with disabilities as volunteers; and, holding focus groups with their clients to reflect on the service opportunity, providing a service-learning component for their volunteers with disabilities.

Volunteer Centers partnered with many different types of organizations to plan and implement days of service that were accessible to volunteers with disabilities. Partnerships established prior to this grant were strengthened and solidified as a result of the grant activities.

Table 2:Volunteer Center Partnerships							
Partner Organization	Number of Volunteer Center Partnerships	Examples of Roles Fulfilled by Partner Organization					
United Cerebral Palsy	4	Provided transportation for wheelchair clients to and from the day of service.					
The Arc	8	Helped identify accessible project sites and assisted in recruitment of volunteers with disabilities by advertising days of service in their newsletter.					
Independent Living Centers	9	Supplied trained staff to assist in oversight of the day of service.					
State Commissions	5	Awarded a matching grant to the Volunteer Center for the day of service.					
AmeriCorps	9	Provided leadership on the day of service by pairing up experienced volunteers with first-time volunteers.					
SeniorCorps	6	Hosted a day of service project in their service community.					
Learn and Serve America	3	Awarded a service learning grant to enhance the day of servic project.					
Mental Health Organizations 11		Educated Volunteer Centers on effective ways to recruit volunteers with cognitive disabilities.					
Goodwill	4	Served as a site for a day of service project.					



In addition, Volunteers Centers partnered with other local organizations such as the public school system, government groups, and other nonprofits and businesses. One Volunteer Center noted that smaller organizations were their best partners because often they had fewer commitments than larger organizations and therefore more time to dedicate to the day of service project. Examples of local organization participation included:

- A local government temporarily closed off streets during the day of service to ensure the safety of volunteers.
- A public school created a video to train others on how to engage persons with disabilities.
- A local business incorporated volunteers with disabilities into its annual service project.

Lesson 3 – Sustained Engagement: Recruiting Strategies for Multiple Days of Service

Ten sub-grantees (Level II and III) were responsible for hosting multiple days of service that engaged persons with disabilities as volunteers. Four key strategies were identified.

Strategy 1: Don't reinvent the wheel; build upon what you are already doing.

One Volunteer Center reported that they were able to build upon their experience engaging youth as volunteers when developing recruitment strategies to engage volunteers with disabilities. Their first experience engaging volunteers with disabilities revealed that some of these volunteers face the same challenges that youth volunteers experience, such as finding transportation to and from service projects. For their second day of service, the Center used what they had learned from their first service day to redesign their recruitment strategies for engaging persons with disabilities. The Center advertised the availability of transportation to and from service events and included persons with disabilities in the project planning.

Strategy 2: Personal contact is key when recruiting volunteers.

Several Volunteer Centers reported that they were more successful in recruiting volunteers with disabilities when they personally spoke to them about the service opportunity as opposed to mailing information. Many Centers found that personal recruitment efforts such as presentations were much more effective because they allowed people to ask questions about the volunteer opportunities. This was also true for recruiting partner organizations supporting individuals with disabilities.

Strategy 3: Consult caregivers when determining time and place for volunteer activities.

Other Volunteer Centers found that involving caregivers in the determination of time and place for service events was fundamental. In some cases volunteers with disabilities relied on their caregivers for transportation to and from service events, so it was crucial that the event occurred during a time that caregivers were available. One Volunteer Center reported that the volunteer activities scheduled Monday through Friday in the middle of the afternoon yielded the highest number of volunteers with disabilities. They found that persons with specific types of disabilities are often involved in some type of structured activity – whether it is through a school, a day care center, or a group home – which could facilitate their participation in service projects. Many of these groups they participate in are able to provide transportation to and from the project locations.

olunteer Centers learned that they were able to sustain the engagement of volunteers with disabilities by (1) building upon their existing experience in volunteer recruitment; (2) using personal recruitment efforts to allow people to ask questions; (3) involving caregivers in the determination of time and place for service events; and, (4) ensuring an inclusive planning process.

Strategy 4: Create a representative advisory committee that includes volunteers with disabilities and agencies that support persons with disabilities.

As noted earlier, an inclusive planning process can lead to positive outcomes, including: (1) leadership opportunities for persons with disabilities; (2) a thorough planning process because the experts are involved from the beginning; (3) increased requests from volunteers with disabilities for ongoing service opportunities; and, (4) more accessible events.

Lesson 4 – Training: Educating Others on the Abilities of Those with "Disabilities"

hesitation in dealing with volunteers with disabilities. The hesitation could be attributed to the fact that some people do not know what valuable resources volunteers with disabilities can be or about their high levels of passion and commitment. Overcoming this challenge simply required agency responsiveness and training." – Volunteer Center of San Diego, San Diego, CA

In addition to hosting multiple service day events, Level II and Level III sub-grantees trained over 200 people representing 127 different organizations on successfully engaging persons with disabilities in service (see Table 3). By providing training to various community organizations, Volunteer Centers were able to educate organizations about the often-untapped potential of volunteers with disabilities.

Training focused on developing inclusive volunteer opportunities and covered topics such as volunteer recruitment, partnership building, transportation, liability/risk management, accessibility, and project oversight. Most Volunteer Centers reported that they will continue to offer the training focused on including volunteers with disabilities after the grant has ended. In addition, other Volunteer Centers plan to integrate this focus into training they are currently offering, such as Volunteer Management training sessions.

One Volunteer Center found that by pairing an expert on disability issues with an expert on facilitating training, they were able to create a training that was both informative and engaging.

Table 3: Organizations Trained by Volunteer Centers							
Organization Type	Number of organizations trained	Number of individuals trained					
Educational institution	23	50					
Nonprofit providing support to people with disabilities	24	41					
Other nonprofit	72	101					
Government	3	5					
Community organization – not an IRS designated 501(c)3	2	3					
Faith-Based	3	5					
TOTAL	127	205					

One Center noted that to provide an effective training on engaging persons with disabilities as volunteers, they had to involve several types of experts in the design and delivery of the training. They found that it was necessary to involve not only experts on disability issues but also experts on facilitating training. By pairing an expert on disability issues with an expert on facilitating training, they were able to create a training that was both informative and engaging.



Il ten of the Level II and Level III sub-grantees that engaged volunteers with disabilities in multiple days of service observed some change in organizational practice. Because the time interval in which change was noted is short, conclusions must be drawn with caution. However, the observations noted below can serve as a guide to understanding how Volunteer Centers can institutionalize certain practices that may lead to increased access to volunteer opportunities for persons with disabilities.

CHANGING TRANSPORTATION PROCEDURES TO MEET NEEDS

Volunteer Centers reported that they observed changes in the way their organization dealt with transportation issues for service days. Since many volunteers with disabilities do not have access to vehicles or are unable to drive, transportation to and from service events was a volunteer recruitment barrier for many Volunteer Centers. To overcome this challenge, Volunteer Centers adapted existing policies and procedures to increase accessibility. Volunteer Centers made the following changes:

 Stopped offering only mileage reimbursement to volunteers and expanded the policy to provide tokens for accessible public transportation and reimbursement for taxi cabs.

- Added a city transportation official to the Volunteer Center advisory committee that was convened to help engage more persons with disabilities in service.
- Increased media efforts to educate volunteers about the availability of accessible transportation to and from service events.

CREATING NEW STRATEGIES TO RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS

All sub-grantee Volunteer Centers reported that they observed changes in the way their organization recruited volunteers with disabilities.

While some Volunteer Centers had recruited volunteers with disabilities in the past, all sub-grantee Volunteer Centers reported that they observed changes in the way their organization recruited volunteers with disabilities. This is a significant organizational change, given that volunteer recruitment is one of the four core competencies of all Volunteer Centers. Observed changes included:

- Recruiting from grassroots groups made of caregivers.
 One Center reported, "We learned of a parent network at one of the alternative schools that would be important to contact in the future." In the past, the Center had only relied on the school to help recruit volunteers with disabilities, but in the future they plan to expand recruitment to include the support group.
- Identifying the right questions to ask. One Volunteer Center reported that they were in contact with a certain agency for two to three months before they found out that clients were not available on weekends. In order to effectively recruit volunteers with disabilities, they found that the first questions had to be about the specific considerations that may be unique to agencies as well as potential volunteers.

ew strategies that were developed to recruit volunteers include recruiting from grassroots groups made of caregivers, and identifying the right questions to ask about the specific considerations that may be unique to agencies as well as potential volunteers.

ADAPTING SYSTEMS TO MEET LIABILITY REQUIREMENTS

Most Volunteer Centers found that engaging volunteers with disabilities did not require them to change their existing liability policies. *Only two Volunteer Centers reported that they observed changes in the way their organization approached liability issues.* These Volunteer Centers found that they needed to purchase additional first aid kits and cell phones in order to be better prepared in the event of an accident. However, as one Center indicated, this is something Centers should do for all volunteer events, regardless of who is volunteering.



IMPROVING PROJECT OVERSIGHT BY PAIRING EXPERIENCED VOLUNTEERS WITH NEW VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers with disabilities sometimes require specific support to participate in service projects. Often the considerations Centers need to make when engaging persons with disabilities are similar to the considerations needed to engage young people and older adults. Since Volunteer Centers have experience engaging both populations, many of the oversight systems such as providing additional staffing were already in place to accommodate volunteers with disabilities. *Still, four Volunteer Centers reported that they observed changes in the way their organization provided oversight for days of service projects.* Examples of changed oversight practice include:

- Pairing experienced AmeriCorps members with new volunteers with disabilities; and,
- Identifying a team captain either from the Volunteer Center or a partnering agency to provide oversight and to be on hand to answer questions.

he learning opportunities afforded through this grant have provided valuable insights to the Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network. Our mission – to mobilize volunteers to solve serious social problems – calls us to engage everyone in significant volunteer activities, regardless of ability, and challenges us to overcome barriers to full participation. A key lesson learned from this grant is that inclusion of persons with disabilities in volunteer service and the organizational change needed to accommodate inclusion are readily achievable goals.



This grant has opened up new opportunities for persons with disabilities to serve and learn about their communities. After a neighborhood clean-up project, one volunteer noted, "Over the years I have seen my neighborhood deteriorate. This is the first time I have had the opportunity to do something to make a positive change in my neighborhood." In many cases, for the first time volunteers with disabilities were given the opportunity to see themselves not as recipients of service, but as people who have the capability to give back through service.

The immediate benefits of this grant have been felt by the 2,900 volunteers with disabilities, 22 Volunteer Centers, and 59 local partners. As the funding period draws to a close, we believe the benefits are just beginning to become observable. Increasingly, Volunteer Centers are responding to requests from both local nonprofits and volunteers with disabilities to provide more service opportunities – both episodic and ongoing. Additionally, Centers are fielding new requests from national, state, and local organizations to provide training on engaging persons with disabilities as volunteers.

This initiative offered the Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network a unique opportunity to focus on engaging a previously untapped community of able volunteers. Like all volunteers, persons with disabilities have unique talents to contribute. The Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network are committed to substantially increasing the number of volunteers with disabilities in ongoing service roles in their communities. We look forward to continuing to build upon the lessons of this important grant and expanding opportunities for all to serve. As one new volunteer commented after helping to rake the yard of a senior citizen, "I think her yard looks much better. She looked like she needed my help."

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The Points of Light Foundation would like to thank the following Volunteer Centers for their contributions to this report. Information for this report was gathered through a series of technical assistance conference calls and structured telephone interviews with sub-grantees as well as from written reports submitted by sub-grantees to the Points of Light Foundation.

Volunteer Center Sub-Grantees

Level I

Volunteer Center of Morgan County, Inc. Decatur, AL Volunteer Center of Maricopa County Phoenix, AZ Volunteer Center of the Redwoods Eureka, CA Volunteer Services of Manatee County, Inc. Bradenton, FL Marquette County Volunteer Center Marquette, MI The Volunteer Center of Greensboro Greensboro, NC Volunteer Center of Bergen County Hackensack, NJ United Way of North Essex County Montclair, NJ Volunteer Service Clearinghouse Aberdeen, SD **VOLUNTEER Hampton Roads** Norfolk, VA Volunteer Center of Benton & Franklin Counties Kennewick, WA

Grafton, WI

Volunteer Center of Ozaukee County

Level II

Volunteer Center of San Diego County San Diego, CA Volunteer Center of Contra Costa Walnut Creek, CA Volunteer Muskegon! Muskegon, MI Volunteer Montana! Missoula, MT United Way of the Midlands Volunteer Resource Center Omaha, NE **FIRSTLINK** Columbus, OH The Volunteer Center, Inc. Charleston, SC Volunteer Center of Brown County, Inc. Green Bay, WI

Level III

Metro Volunteers! Denver, CO Volunteer Resource Center Minneapolis, MN



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