How do people typically volunteer through HandOn Sacramento?

Christina Edwards: We partner with approximately 370 nonprofits in the region. These nonprofits come to us with their volunteer needs, and then we recruit volunteers for their agencies. We serve as the middleman. Hands On Sacramento provides an online database of projects. People can search by interest, location and availability. So essentially you could choose where, when and what you wanted to do for your volunteer project.

Hands On Sacramento partnered with a self-advocacy network, a type of disability group that most people probably know little about. Can you say more about the People First Self Advocacy network?

Christina Edwards: Through People First, community members with disabilities can come together and advocate for themselves and be active in the community. Self-advocacy can mean working with local governments and agencies to bring awareness to the cause and make sure that people with disabilities are receiving the rights they deserve. In addition, one of People First’s mission statements is to be positively involved in the community by serving others. So it was mutually beneficial for them to partner with Hands On.

Through this project, you piloted a new approach called “Mobile Volunteering.” What were you hoping you would accomplish with strategy?

Christina Edwards: Mobile Volunteering was a brain child that Kathy Chow (former Hands On Sacramento Executive Director) and I worked on together. We noticed that a lot of groups were coming to us with the desire to do volunteer projects on a short timeline or a large scale that a lot of non profits wouldn’t be able to accommodate. This made us think of Mobile Volunteering just because it’s so practical. We started talking to non profits to see if they had any volunteer work that didn’t have to happen at their agency, maybe it was folding the newsletters or thanking donors. We reached out to them to find things that could be either put in a box and brought to a community group or put in a box and be done virtually, say, over the phone or the internet. We really just wanted to make volunteering even more accessible.

How did you initially reach out to People First chapters and introduce this idea of mobile volunteering?

Christina Edwards: We met with the president of the Capitol People First chapter and discussed some ideas for the project.

How did the People First Chapter choose a project?

Christina Edwards: Initially, I brought a few of our projects and presented them to the group. They picked Project Birthday.

Project Birthday is a monthly birthday party that happens at a local Women and Children’s Shelter in Sacramento. It provides a birthday party for kids that might otherwise not have one, complete with presents and decorations and cake and usually there is a community sponsor providing some kind of activity. One time we had the Build-A-Bear people come out and the kids made bears. Project Birthday is a great initiative. People First latched on to it right away. The People First Chapters made birthday cards for the kids at the shelters.

This inclusive service project was supported by California Volunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project works to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as community volunteers. For more Service Inclusion Project Stories of Success visit http://tcsip.tarjancenter.ucla.edu/stories.cfm or call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu for more information.
How did you pilot Project Birthday with People First chapters?

Christina Edwards: First we tried it with the executive members, the president and vice president and such. We decided to do a test run before all the members joined in, which was wise because there were a few kinks to work out, specific tools, and different applications we explored so that People First members with disabilities could complete the cards. Regular chapter meetings are typically quite busy. So we created a separate meeting to conduct Project Birthday activities.

Did you need to make any accommodations or changes to the activity?

Christina Edwards: We had some adaptive tools. We had craft punches which basically cut shapes out of paper just by punching, which was a lot easier for some of the folks with less dexterity. This was planned in advance, so it wasn’t necessarily an adjustment, but it was different than what we would do with some other groups.

We also used ergonomic scissors. We have quite a few different kinds of scissors in our craft bin. We have ones for left and right-handed people, of course, and then ones that don’t require you to grip your fingers around them.

All the scissors and punches were bought online. A staff person from Very Special Arts* gave me pointers on which tools were good and others that were perhaps not as good as they seemed in their description. It was great to actually talk to somebody that had worked with people with disabilities doing similar arts and crafts projects.

What tips can you give volunteer centers who want to work with People First chapters?

Christina Edwards: At first it was just trial and error, for us. We received guidance from the chapter coordinator, who worked with several of the different chapters, knew all of their schedules, and knew all of their leadership. He provided a lot of direction to get me started.

Matthew Holkeboer: Meeting with the People First advisory boards was, to me, the most helpful. It really allowed us to get both the clients and the people who are in charge motivated and excited about volunteering. After piloting activities with the advisory boards we moved things into the general chapter.

One of the unexpected good outcomes of this project was that Mobile Volunteering led to other types of volunteering.

Christina Edwards: We wanted to make a transition from Mobile Volunteering to actual onsite volunteering. It happened for both chapters we worked with.

Matthew Holkeboer: People First chapters have volunteered for RAFT, one of our placement sites. The director of RAFT understands the push that we’ve been making, so he’s made projects readily available for people who have different abilities.

RAFT stands for Resource Area for Teachers. They put together teacher packets from donations from around the community, like a bundle of ten highlighters together and stuff like that. They’ve made a lot of creative accommodation for volunteers with disabilities. For instance, for people who might not have the cognitive ability to count to ten, they’ve created a board with ten little cups and the volunteers put one highlighter in each cup.

But for some of the groups, I think that it’s been hard for them to make that transition into independently searching for projects. There are still negative feelings about volunteering. People don’t want to go to a project and feel like they’re not going to be able to actually do the tasks or that they won’t have someone to help them.

What steps have you taken to help groups volunteer independently?

Christina Edwards: A lot of People First members did not have regular access to a computer or the internet, which is how most of our projects are posted. So we brought a generalized list of monthly projects to the groups. I went through the list and explained what each project entailed. I read each sponsoring organizations mission and heart statements, just trying to create a better connection to the group.

What have you or your agency learned as a result of this process?

Matthew Holkeboer: I had never really worked exclusively with People First groups or people with disabilities before. Now I really understand that culture and I see the potential in people with disabilities. Also, from an organizational standpoint I learned that when we encounter new agencies that want our volunteers, we need to work with them to become aware of the community and create projects that would be accessible to people with disabilities. Our agency partners need to be more conscious about inclusion.

To find out more about Hands on Sacramento visit http://www.handsonsacto.org/

*VSA arts is an international nonprofit organization founded 35 years ago by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith to create a society where people with disabilities learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. For more information visit: http://www.vsarts.org