Your goal was to expand the horizons of the individuals who receive your services by exposing them to a variety of volunteer opportunities. How did you go about doing that?

When we started, we tried to think about the limitations of some of our participants and some of the needs that weren’t getting met through the current program. We did a lot of interviewing with participants and asked them what they wanted to do. We approached nonprofits in the community that might be able to provide interesting experiences to us. We tried thinking of things that were not previously part of our consumers’ world. I sent up meetings with nonprofits and a lot of it was trial and error. I just thought about what I would like or be interested in and went from there. We were trying to create an environment that was as close as possible to the environment of adults without disabilities. As volunteers ourselves, we wouldn’t want to be channeled into one project; we prefer to have the choice of what we would like to do, that’s the kind of experience we wanted to create.

Did participants stay at one volunteer site the whole time or rotate to different sites?

We had different approaches for different people, depending on what they were looking for. We placed our groups at sites appropriate for them. People with greater independence were placed in individual service assignments. At first, we had a group of about 30 people who wanted to volunteer. Most local volunteer programs can’t take that many volunteers at one time, so we went out in groups of four; each group had a staff supervisor. There are always more people that want to go than we have to room to transport. We’re still flushing out the process. From day to day it depends on different variables like who comes to the program that day and what their abilities are, and what kinds of jobs are available at each site that day.

No one model works for the whole group. Also, it’s a continually evolving project. Once we started getting people involved in regular activities, the enthusiasm built and spread to other individuals who wanted to be involved.

This inclusive service project was supported by California Volunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Local Inclusion Network Collaboratives for Service (LINCS) at UCLA Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project is part of a national initiative in California, Hawaii and Florida, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. LINCS uses community collaborations to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as volunteers in community service. For more information on the California LINCS project or to share your own success story, call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal.mednet.ucla.edu.
You did more than offer volunteer experiences; you organized monthly education modules that covered topics like fire safety and health. These trainings were given by the local nonprofits that you had connected with. Can you say more about that?

The partnership is a relationship that needs on-going nurturing. Whenever we go to a volunteer site for work, I usually meet with each partner. I ask them how we are doing and I educate them on our programs and population. It’s kind of like a public relations job. I stop in, say hello, and stay abreast of what’s going in their organization. Our partnership with Community School of Music and Art has been a good one. Since the participants from Abilities United have been taking art classes and doing volunteer work with them, the agency has begun to realize that value of providing art services to people with disabilities. They have made it a part of their strategic plan to provide art services to those with special needs. I don’t think this would have come about without this exposure. They initially didn’t have a staff member with expertise in teaching people with special needs, but their experience with us gave them the confidence that they could do it.

You’ve said it is important to develop buy-in within your own organization— from staff members and families of participants.

If your staff doesn’t believe in the mission of your project, then it becomes an exercise in having to do things versus getting to do things. Our staff persons were used to taking adults out to the mall and movies and just passing time.

It was a struggle to teach them that getting people into meaningful community experiences, like volunteerism, is what we are all about. We are about work experience. Coordinating volunteer assignments takes a lot of work. We have a great staff and they

Education was built into this project to enrich the experience for adults. It gives participants a better appreciation of why their volunteer activities are important, and also a better understanding of how to care for themselves and their communities. At the beginning, to find presenters, we cold called local agencies and asked them if they would come present for us.

We have covered topics such as recycling, fire safety, the environment, emergency preparedness, and nutrition through our nonprofit partners. Some of the groups that came in to present were also our volunteer sites, like the Red Cross.

You developed fifteen new collaborative relationships during this project. What an accomplishment. What advice would you give to other disability service providers who are looking to develop relationships with local nonprofits?

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have a hard job, so it is understandable that it was overwhelming at first. We had to communicate that we weren't doing this to make their jobs harder; we were doing this to make our participants lives better. And if we make our participants happy, then their jobs are easier.

What were the highlights of the program, this year?

A sense of community has come out of this project. You'll see one participant pushing another in a wheelchair to complete a volunteer task. They have developed a lot of teamwork and they have more interaction with the outside world. They express joy to an extent that you don't see in an average work place. It's great to be around that. One day, at a volunteer site, I asked one of the participants if he was tired and he said, “No I'm happy.” That sums it up.

We also did a show about our work on public access television. Three stations are now airing the program. They have asked us to do more shows, three a year, because the first one was so popular.

How do you see this program growing and evolving over time?

The goal is to have other nonprofits or communities take this as a model so a lot more adults with developmental disabilities can benefit. On a larger scale, this is all about changing society’s view of people with disabilities. This is what is happening with the visibility from the television programs and having people out there in the community. We’re moving the community forward.

What are some challenges you have faced?

I would say don’t take anything personally. A lot of people aren’t ready to accept this sort of thing. I use the approach of, “why don’t we try it and see how it works.” I try to build a relationship. If they trust me, then they’ll trust our volunteers. Our bigger challenge has been the nuances of the day to day experiences—like do we have the right volunteers for a particular job? Once we had somebody with a compulsion with food sent to a kitchen to prepare food for the homeless. We had to figure out something else for him to do. Afterward I talked to the counselor about matching participants to the right experiences. Nothing’s lost. Everything is a learning experience.

One of the individuals that volunteered said, “I like to be a blessing.” I love that message. How do you think this initiative is a blessing to the community? How is it a blessing for the people who volunteered?

One of our goals is to educate the community about people with disabilities, to give them a chance to work with these people and see how wonderful they are. When I go out to the sites, it's amazing to see how much they appreciate...
us. If our groups were not there, the work would not get done. We’re not just wasting time, we are providing services. Now, these organizations rely on us.

Our participants are really good at detailed worked. We try to channel their energies into productive activities. Their families have commented on what a remarkable difference the project has made. Also, our participants take pride in being able to give back and help someone else. Prior to this project, they were always on the receiving end. Now they are giving back and saying, “Who are we going to help today”?

After every volunteer experience we ask, “What did we accomplish? How did it go? How do you feel? Doesn’t it feel better to work?” Our challenge has been working with the staff and helping them to understand how to help the volunteers process the experience.

It’s important that they know the answers to these questions “What are we doing here? Who are we helping? Who benefits from our work? How is the world a better place because we are here?” It helps them realize that they have an important role. It doesn’t matter what type of disability you have, having the feeling of “I help” is important and, there is increasing understanding of what our agency is about.

The agencies we work with are also beginning to know more about each other. Some organizations knew of us, but not about each other. Now all these threads are becoming intertwined and all of these people are interacting because of our program. I feel like it has opened up the whole community.

Anything else you would like to share with those who are reading?

The reality is that, you helped us get started, we are so appreciative, a small thought, or small deed can grow great things. No action is really too small. Maybe some organizations can’t take on a huge project, like we did, but they can grow it little by little, even if one or two more people are volunteering, it’s a step forward.

For more information about Abilities United and their Community Connections program, contact Andrea Thronson at andrea@AbilitiesUnited.org or 650-862-4810.

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