Success Story: Short Term Volunteerism As a Bridge to National Service

Through the California Volunteers Disability Inclusion Initiative, 14 service and disability organizations were given mini-grants to create inclusive recruitment pipelines. These service program-disability organization partnerships led individuals with disabilities to volunteer with AmeriCorps programs as a prelude to national service. LiteracyAmeriCorps and What’s Next Mentoring were two San Diego-based agencies supported through mini-grants. Four members of What’s Next Mentoring, a leadership program for youth and young adults with disabilities, volunteered with Literacy AmeriCorps during a special service event. As a result, 2 enrolled in Literacy AmeriCorps. To learn more about this successful partnership read our interview with Kimberly Moore, Literacy AmeriCorps Program Manager and Cyndi Jones, Executive Director of What’s Next Mentoring.

Tell us about Literacy AmeriCorps.

Kimberly: Literacy AmeriCorps serves the 24 literacy programs throughout San Diego County and the 118,000 adults and children, within the County, that have reading difficulties. Most of our AmeriCorps members are doing one-on-one and small group in-classroom tutoring.

How does What’s Next Mentoring mobilize young adults with disabilities?

Cyndi: We reach high school students with physical disabilities. They’re in the program for 2 years. During this 2-year cycle we met the first and third Saturdays of the month. The young adults that worked with Kim were the graduates of the first 2-year cycle. We were trying to keep them involved and this was a good way to give them something they had ownership of. The alumni group worked out great because of the demographics. They were ready for their next step--either going to college or working or both so this was a good opportunity for them.

We built of foundation of public service, so this project wasn’t a big jump. We always volunteer on national youth service day, in April. Because most of our members are in wheelchairs, we divide people up into 3 or 4 sites because it’s hard to find a site that will take 20. We’ve had members tutoring, helping out with the family justice center, etc. Service is good for our students because a lot of time they are expected to be the person who is receiving and getting the help. But when you turn it around and you see them giving the help, it changes attitudes.

How did young adults from What’s Next Mentoring connect with the Literacy AmeriCorps program?

Kimberly: The timing of the California Volunteers Disability Inclusion Project was really important because it happened during the time that we do our major fundraiser --- The Union Tribune Race for Literacy. We were able to invite a group of What’s Next Mentoring youth to the event and have them work with the AmeriCorps members. The first day of the race is the kid’s magic mile. Every child who participates in the race gets a free book. We run the booth that gives out the books.

So, the AmeriCorps members and the What’s Next members were in charge of distributing those books to the close to 2,000 children that descended upon mass. It was really interaction What’s Next children. We had a great time.

I think the key thing that made the collaboration work is the What’s Next demographic. It matches up perfectly with the ages of the AmeriCorps members. Both groups are in their early 20s, so they have a lot in common.

What did you learn as a result of your partnership with What’s Next Mentoring?

Kimberly: Access. We have 24 literacy programs in 125 locations in the county, and many of them don’t have access. Bus drop offs aren’t close by. My office is a good example; we’re right off Texas street. The bus stops on Texas but to get down to Camino del Rio South, it’s all down hill, so I could never have anyone come to my office and help unless they had their own transportation.

Access also plays a role in special events. We have a very early morning call when we volunteer at the Race for Literacy. We have to be on site around 6:00 am. What none of us realized is buses don’t run that early on the weekends. Plus the way the site was arranged, there wasn’t a lot of sidewalk access. The port-o-potties were not always set up for wheelchair access and the bathrooms were not unlocked that early in the morning.

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.
So these are things that have now been added on to our event checklist. If we go larger scale with this next year, we’ll consider finding someone who could donate a bus and we could pick everyone up at one location. We do this with our adult literacy students when we do a learner conference. We have 5 buses that we send to different areas of the county and bring everyone in. There’s no reason it can’t be done for the Race for Literacy. We just didn’t think of it.

This also affected how we thought about working with the people we serve. Many of our adult literacy students face the same challenges. They can’t read a bus schedule so they have to be taught. They need to be coached on how to schedule themselves and take the bus. We found a lot of commonalities between the literacy students we already serve and the What’s Next Mentoring youth we were trying to bring into service.

Your partnerships with disability organizations have allowed you to bring literacy awareness to different groups in the community. Can you talk about ideas that have been circulating?

Kimberly: I had a discussion with a staff member of the San Diego Regional Center (an agency that provides services and referrals to individuals with developmental disabilities) regarding a participant of hers who was looking for a new volunteer position. As we were discussing, I got to thinking…we get lots of calls from parents who are looking for literacy services for their child with a developmental disability, who may has been skipped over or hasn’t gotten the reading background that they need. Unfortunately, all of our programs are volunteer run and the possibility of working with learners with disabilities scares a lot of our volunteers, who think they’d be working with someone who they can’t teach or can’t help. So, what I would love to do in the future is have an on site literacy program at the Regional Center and have students with disabilities helping other the students with disabilities. So, that’s something I’d like to explore.

Relationship-building is important because a person is more likely to volunteer or get involved if she/he has a connection with a current member of the organization.

Kimberly: That’s the opportunity the California Volunteers grant gave us. It allowed us to spend one-on-one time, small group time, going to meetings, talking on the phone, and seeing each other consistently. We’ve had the time to build these relationships, which we don’t always get.

Now that you’ve brought on AmeriCorps members with disabilities, you’re developing other strategies to deal with access barriers. Can you say more?

One of our members was finding it difficult to make it to her service site because the disability transit service was unreliable and the service site wasn’t close to a bus line.

We’ve decided to deal with this problem by developing a new service site, in a public library close to where the member lives. We have a huge waiting list for individuals who need tutoring, so developing a new site was not a problem.

How has the inclusion project enhanced your program?

Kimberly: I really wanted to see if we could place some kids who we hadn’t thought of before into something new and exciting and I think we did that. It’s been really great and I’m really excited to see what will happen over the next year and how Christian and Nancy are going to grow and how they are going to influence the rest of my members. And we’ve all been able to develop more visibility for literacy in San Diego so new groups, disability related groups, are coming into the fold.

For more information contact Kimberly Moore at 619-574-1641 x104 or kmoore@literacysandiego.org.