Jillian Wiker, Program Manager of the Monterey County United for Literacy AmeriCorps program and Jennifer Ramirez, Deputy Director of the Central Coast Center for Independent Living formed a partnership in April 2009. They began by assessing the basic accessibility of Monterey County United for Literacy. In 9 short months, their partnership led Monterey United to create a simple but effective program redesign that built more flexibility into both their national service and volunteer positions, and blew open the doors of service to a wider variety of individuals. Central Coast Center for Independent Living also integrated AmeriCorps education throughout their organization, and now disseminates information about AmeriCorps to people with disabilities on a weekly basis. To learn more about a partnership that moved from basic access to program redesign, read our interview with Jillian and Jennifer.

**Jillian, tell us about your AmeriCorps program and how you give service to the community?**

**Jillian:** We’re charged with engaging 30 full-time AmeriCorps members that serve 1700 hours per program year. Their goal is to raise the reading levels of at least 575 kindergarten through fourth grade students by 25, 50, 100 percent depending on the amount of time they spend with each particular tutor.

The members work Monday through Friday, 8:00 to 5:00 doing one-on-one tutoring and then large group sessions after school. In April 2009, The Tarjan Center and California Volunteers connected us with the Central Coast Center for Independent Living to do disability inclusion work.

**What made you want to partner with the Central Coast Center for Independent Living?**

**Jillian:** We thought our program was ready to bring in people with a variety of disabilities at different levels. We have a program that’s flexible and we have a partner school district that’s been on board with us for 10 years. They’re comfortable with us and we felt we could nudge them to move forward with us on this. So this was a good time to think about introducing a new component.

**Jennifer, how does the Central Coast Center for Independent Living provide service to the community?**

**Jennifer:** We’re one of 29 Independent Living Centers in the State of California, and we provide a core set of independent living services. We provide peer support, independent living skills training, individual advocacy, personal assistant services, housing services, benefits counseling services and assistive technology. We have Independent Living specialists who are assigned to work one on one with different consumers. We provide services based on each individual’s service needs and circumstances.

We also have a traumatic brain injury program. We do outreach and education in the community, so we provide disability awareness presentations and trainings for different organizations, governmental entities, basically anyone who will let us in the door. We conduct outreach at different community events, health fairs, anywhere where we can get out and reach people with disabilities who may be able to benefit from our services.

One of the things that makes independent living centers unique is that we proactively and reactively work on legislation and advocacy related to issues that affect people with disabilities.

**How does your partnership with Monterey United for Literacy fit in with the work of the Central Coast Center for Independent Living?**

**Jennifer:** Anytime we have a community partner that is interested in learning about access and the inclusion of people with disabilities, it’s an opportunity for us to provide technical assistance, so people with disabilities in our communities will have more options to live independently.

**What was the first thing you decided to tackle together?**

**Jillian:** The exchange of literature. I sent information to CCCIL so they could get familiar with our program and look through the materials for ways to make them more inclusive. CCCIL sent us a package of information regarding how to obtain a free TTY and connect with the California relay service. Then we began planning the disability awareness training.

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.
Tell us about the Disability Awareness Training.

**Jennifer:** AmeriCorps members wanted the training to be interactive. We did experiential activities that would let the person experience, to some degree, what it would be like to have a certain type of disability and the challenges that a person might face in simply navigating within the community or trying to perform work.

Did you hear any stories about members who had actually encountered an individual with a disability during their year of service?

**Jillian:** The CCCIL staff asked members what kinds of experiences they had had engaging with persons with disabilities in service as well as in personal life. It was really wonderful because one of our members’ fathers had been using a wheelchair since the member was a little boy. His father had become very well known and is a voice on big national TV commercials. So the member was really able to give some insight.

That made an opening for everybody else up to share experiences, both personally and through AmeriCorps. Many, many, many of the members have and believe they have worked with students with learning disabilities. The staff from CCCIL were very helpful in confirming or supporting the idea that, yes, perhaps what the member observed could be something that could be thought of as a disability. Or no, that really wouldn’t be considered a disability.

A couple of the members worked with a student who was in a wheelchair and had trouble holding objects. So they spoke to the complexities that came with that and the strategies that they had used for success.

Central Coast Center for Independent Living developed a comprehensive plan to conduct outreach to people with disabilities who might be interested in joining AmeriCorps.

**Jennifer:** We integrated the Monterey United for Literacy AmeriCorps program information into our outreach packets. We were most successful when we integrated talking about the literacy program during our one-on-one consumer appointments. When we do the intake process with new consumers, we let them know about the AmeriCorps program. Later on, if an individual identifies that they’re now at a point where they are interested in either re-entering the workforce, gaining vocational skills or doing volunteer work, then we again bring up the opportunity with the Monterey Literacy United program.

**Jennifer:** CCCIL made successful referrals, in part, because you prepared your staff to talk about AmeriCorps and Monterey United for Literacy, right?

**Jennifer:** We called a meeting with all of our direct services staff and we gave them an overview of our partnership with Monterey United Literacy. We talked about the specific opportunities that were available for consumers and about the fact that we would offer support to any consumer who was interested, including helping Monterey United for Literacy provide reasonable accommodations.

After the staff were doing this for a month or so, we called another meeting. We asked, “How many people are you referring over? Have any questions come up? Do you need any clarification? Do you have any ideas for making the information clearer or getting more people interested?”

**Did you get any feedback from that follow up meeting?**

**Jennifer:** Some of the most relevant feedback we received, which I shared with Jillian, was about the time commitment. There were consumers who were really interested in the AmeriCorps positions but didn’t feel like—for various reasons and some related to their disability—they could fill a full-time position. So that’s where Jillian and I brainstormed about splitting up some of the positions so that those individuals would have an opportunity to apply for something that would fit their needs.
Jillian, how did your outreach plan seek to integrate the volunteers that CCCIL was potentially going to refer?

Jillian: Generally, we engage volunteers for our bigger one-time events. For instance, each school site puts on one or two family reading nights, so we need volunteers for those 10 or 12 nights. We also serve on Martin Luther King Day, National Make a Difference Day, and Cesar Chavez Day. For these events, we usually partner with another organization in the community, who provides the volunteers.

We began to consider that CCCIL clients might want to volunteer during the day or on a more consistent basis, in order help them harness a new skill, meet new people or experience a new career field. So, we began working with our school sites to bring in volunteers, whether they had disabilities or not, as weekly tutors.

We can be very flexible with the volunteer schedules. We can do a condensed training. The volunteers will come in and support the AmeriCorps members by reading with students and helping them with their homework. In that way, the volunteers can feel supported by the Corps members that are right there in the classroom with them.

Your discussions with Central Coast Center for Independent Living led you to redesign parts of your AmeriCorps program, to make easier for a variety of people to serve with you.

Jillian: We considered there might be referrals from CCCIL where the individual might not be qualified for the position as a tutor because he or she did not have a high school diploma or wasn’t able to successfully complete the skills assessment test.

We decided to create one or two positions that are strictly for building our volunteer capacity. This will give us more flexibility with our applicants and open up service to someone who perhaps isn’t qualified to provide academic tutoring but who is very good at networking with people.

You didn’t stop there, you added flexibility in other places.

Jillian: Our program currently functions with 30 full-time spots. Full time is way too much for some CCCIL clients, who might prefer part-time position, reduced part time or quarter time, which would work for them if they’re reentering the workforce or are in school.

So we converted some of our full-time spots into 900 or 450 hour positions. Those positions don’t necessarily have to be filled by persons with disabilities, but it leaves that option open and gives us the flexibility to accommodate different time commitments.

Also, this year, we had both members with disabilities placed together at the same school but we didn’t have a disability inclusion component in the orientation we provided to the Principal and staff. So we decided to identify a specific placement site that has agreed to engage in the disability awareness training. That’s where they’ll really be able to support and rally around the member or members with disabilities.

What can you share with other national service programs about taking those first steps toward inclusion?

Jillian: Before this, I was probably too quick to think of all the things that would make it difficult to move forward with this type of planning. I feel like I’ve heard that from a lot of the programs. “It’s not a good time. We don’t have any money.” So I am sure that I came to the table with that sort of sentiment. But I’ve realized that it doesn’t need to be a life altering or program ending endeavor. It should become an integrated part of the fabric of the program. It did require some backwards planning for us--going through our program design and creating additional flexibility which leaves room for bringing in members with disabilities without having to jump through additional hoops down the road.

We as programs get impatient and are quick to give up on things, like this, that seem to be more trouble than they’re worth. I’d like to instill that idea that programs can do one good re-program design, then they’re pretty much set after that.

Jennifer: Even in front of that, just take the step to introduce yourself to the disability organization that’s in your community. It doesn’t take a lot of resources to make that first step. Like Jillian said, it doesn’t have to be a huge undertaking. It can come along quite naturally if you’re at least consciously taking small steps.

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