

Inclusion: Volunteers with Disabilities Offer Unique Skills and Perspectives

It is often said that public safety is everyone's responsibility. With that in mind, it is important for law enforcement agencies to be inclusive and give everyone the opportunity to be involved in keeping their community safe. Creating an inclusive environment that welcomes individuals with disabilities as volunteers can be a great benefit to law enforcement agencies and volunteers.

Individuals with disabilities sometimes feel socially isolated and may not be comfortable or familiar with law enforcement and crime prevention. As volunteers, individuals with special needs gain a better sense of their rights and the role of law enforcement. They can become advocates in the disability community to help others become more comfortable interacting with and reporting crime to law enforcement. They can also develop skills and relationships that will help them to lead more independent lives and stay active in the community.

There is no single definition of disability. The term encompasses a wide range of physical, cognitive, and developmental challenges that impact individual's lives in different ways. Volunteers with disabilities can contribute a variety of unique skills and perspectives to VIPS programs. By working with volunteers with

special needs, not only can law enforcement agencies benefit from their services, but agency personnel will also have the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the needs and concerns of individuals with disabilities, helping them to better serve the community at large.

Volunteers and Disability Law

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) marked its 20th anniversary in July 2010. This act guarantees equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in state and local government services, public accommodations, employment, transportation, and telecommunications.



Title II of the ADA requires that all state and local government services, programs, or activities must be accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities.

Under this provision, law enforcement volunteer programs can be considered an activity of the local government. This does not require an agency to offer a position to a volunteer who is not qualified, but it does obligate the agency to make volunteer positions available to

individuals with disabilities who can complete the job functions with or without reasonable accommodations. As with all volunteers, it comes down to finding the right person for the right position.

Accessibility and Accommodations

The ADA states that public entities are not required to make accommodations that would result in undue financial or administrative burdens. However, the National Service Inclusion Project reports that nearly half of the accommodations that volunteers may need cost nothing, and those with costs associated have a great return on investment when considering the value of volunteers to the agency.

Given the ADA requirements for local governments, many law enforcement facilities will already meet accessibility guidelines for mobility, such as ramps, wide doorways, and automatic doors. However, there are other types of accommodations that may need to be considered depending on the needs of the volunteer. Some volunteers may need flexible schedule options or accommodations with communications and technology. Often simple things such as printing documents in large font, reading documents aloud, or providing a typed transcript of a presentation will be sufficient to help individuals with vision, hearing, or certain learning disabilities. With today's technology, many phones, computers, televisions, and websites are already accessible to users with a wide range of disabilities. Other pieces of equipment, such as assisted listening devices and Braille machines can be brought in to better serve your volunteers. If a volunteer requires special technology, he or she may be able to supply his

or her own equipment. If not, a local nonprofit or government agency that serves the disability community may be able to provide assistive technology or funding to purchase it.

Disabilities affect individuals in different ways, and the key to an inclusive environment is to maintain an open dialogue with the volunteers about what accommodations they will need and if the accommodations are effective.

North Miami Beach, Florida, Police Department

North Miami Beach, Florida is located midway between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. Given its central location, North Miami Beach is a popular business and shopping destination in southern Florida, with the population of 60,000 that swells to 120,000 during the work day. The motto of the city is "Where People Care," and this is something that is clearly taken to heart in the North Miami Beach Police Department (NMBPD). NMBPD has 115 sworn officers and 57 civilian staff. Volunteers work on a variety of assignments, including administrative support, Citizens' Patrol, Police Explorers, and Seniors vs. Crime. In 2009, NMBPD's 75 volunteers contributed 19,605 hours of volunteer service. NMBPD makes it a priority to be welcoming and accommodating to all volunteers, especially those with disabilities.

A Tradition of Inclusion

The volunteer program was started in 1979 by a veteran, who was blinded during his service in World War II. As an active North Miami Beach resident, he worked with NMBPD to start a citizen patrol with the aim of reducing crime and getting residents more involved in the community. Thirty-

one year later, the founding volunteer is still an active member of the citizen patrol, operating the police radio while riding along with a partner and training new recruits on radio operation and procedure.



The Chief awards a 30 year service pin to NMBPD's founding volunteer.

In its 31 year history, the program has grown and expanded in many ways. The Citizens' Patrol remains NMBPD's largest volunteer project. It has grown from grassroots patrol in which volunteers drove their own vehicles to a robust program with 45 trained volunteers and five dedicated volunteer patrol cars, including two new Dodge Chargers purchased through the Law Enforcement Trust Fund. Many patrol volunteers are also certified as Parking Enforcement Specialists. This position requires a 16-hour training on Florida parking laws, driving techniques, and hostility diffusion. NMBPD Parking Enforcement Specialists are authorized to issue numerous types of citations with an emphasis on fire lane violations, expired vehicle tags, dead storage of derelict vehicles, parking on the sidewalk, parking too close to a fire hydrant and handicapped parking violations.

Handicapped Parking Enforcement

NMBPD's Handicapped Parking Enforcement initiative is well supported in the city. In fact, the mayor of North Miami Beach is a volunteer Parking Enforcement Specialist. The mayor, who uses a wheelchair, is one of several volunteers with disabilities who contributes his time to the project. NMBPD partners with the North Miami Beach Leisure Services Department to provide wheelchair accessible vehicles to allow volunteers with mobility issues the opportunity to go out on patrol. NMBPD also received grant funding to purchase two handheld automatic citation writers to accommodate volunteers whose disabilities make it difficult to write. One Parking Enforcement Specialist volunteer, who uses a wheelchair, said that being an individual with disabilities can be socially isolating. He feels that the volunteer program gives him the chance to become engaged in the community, while helping to provide services to other residents with disabilities.

A weeklong "Permit or Ticket" campaign was held in July of 2010 in recognition of the 20th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Both through the campaign and the ongoing efforts of the Handicapped Parking Enforcement Program, NMBPD is clear that its aim is not to collect revenue but to educate the public and raise awareness about the rights of disabled residents. Since its inception in 1991, the Handicapped Parking Enforcement initiative has been extremely successful in reducing violations.

Advisory Committee for Individuals with Disabilities

Not only is the program successful in making parking spaces more available to those that need them, but it also sees that the revenues



from the citations go toward services for North Miami Beach's disabled residents. Handicapped Parking citations generate thousands of dollars in fines each year and a portion

of the fines is dedicated toward improving city services for the disabled. The North Miami Beach Advisory Committee for Disabled Individuals, which includes the mayor and several NMBPD volunteers and staff members, decides how the funds will be spent. The major program funded by revenue from handicapped parking citations is the Disability Sports Program, through which a state of the art gym with handicapped accessible fitness equipment, a wheelchair tennis program, and a tandem biking program for visually impaired individuals were developed. The program has started a nonprofit arm that operates out of the police department, so they can solicit additional sponsorships and grants to support and expand the program. The Director of Police Services noted that some volunteers have come in from other jurisdictions to volunteer for NMBPD because they appreciate being able to see the direct results of their volunteer time going toward services for the disabled community.

Chesterfield County, Virginia, Police Department

Chesterfield County, a suburb of Richmond, is the fourth largest municipality in Virginia, with a population of 314,000. The Chesterfield County Police Department (CCPD) is a professionally accredited organization with 470 sworn officers and 138 civilian personnel. The VIPS program's 190 volunteers contributed

32,353 volunteer hours in 2009. VIPS tasks are divided into three levels. Level one includes the highest commitment positions requiring the most thorough training and background checks. These positions include the Auxiliary Police Unit and Motorist Assistance Team. Level two volunteers perform ongoing projects of a less intensive nature including office volunteers and the Neighborhood Watch Administrative Board. Level three volunteers help as needed with special events.

Volunteer Placement and Accommodations

CCPD has a very diverse volunteer base. Volunteers range in age from 16 to 91 years old. The volunteer program also includes a number of individuals with disabilities who participate at different volunteer levels. During the initial volunteer interview, the volunteer coordinator learns about any special needs the individual has and places him or her in a position that accommodates the volunteer's needs and skill level. A volunteer who is hearing impaired recently started with the volunteer program. She requested to not be assigned to phone work, but she is very efficient at filing documents and other administrative tasks. Several volunteers with mobility issues assist with office work that allows them to stay in one place during their volunteer time. It can be a challenge for them to get to and around the site, but they are happy to be a part of the program and proud of the work they contribute to the community.



This CCPD Property Room Volunteer has limited mobility but extensive professional experience in purchasing and inventory management.

Practical Testing Scenario Volunteers

CCPD volunteers also contribute their time to help with the Department of Criminal Justice Services Mandated Practical Testing Week for the department's basic police academies. CCPD previously utilized officers to act out scenarios with recruits, but in 2004, they began using volunteers as actors to help reduce staff overtime and keep more officers on the beat. Utilizing community volunteers also offers recruits more realistic interactions, allowing them to be better trained to deal with a variety of citizens. The Volunteer Coordinator makes a point to include volunteers of all ages and different backgrounds to make the scenarios, such as shoplifting, vehicle stop and search, domestic assault, and lost Alzheimer's patients, as true to life as possible.

Volunteers with disabilities play an important part in these scenarios by helping recruits experience interactions they may not expect. A volunteer who is visually impaired is a regular participant in these training events. She is able to help recruits think about different ways to respond when a victim or bystander is unable to give a physical description because he or she could not see a perpetrator. Recruits also experience how to help when an individual cannot see to complete and sign the necessary paperwork. Many of the training scenario volunteers are elderly, giving the recruits the experience of handcuffing someone who may be frail or have mobility issues. Several hearing impaired volunteers help recruits learn to better enunciate and communicate to be understood when hearing presents a barrier. One of these volunteers is proficient in sign language, and she is able to prepare recruits for interactions in which nonverbal communication may be necessary. One CCPD volunteer said of her

experience, "I feel it is my duty as a citizen of this county to assist those who will be protecting my community and who I might possibly need in an emergency or non-emergency situation. I want to help them be the best trained officers they can be."



A visually impaired CCPD volunteer acts out a realistic scene with training academy recruits

In addition to helping with police academy practical training, CCPD's scenario actors have also participated in SWAT Hostage Negotiations, Surveillance Team training with the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, and training at the U.S. Defense Supply Center in Richmond. In all of these scenarios, the use of diverse volunteers, particularly those with disabilities, offers the opportunity for law enforcement to become more aware of how to effectively respond to the needs of all of their residents.

Concord, California, Police Department

Concord, California is a city of 127,000 people located 29 miles east of San Francisco. The Concord Police Department (CPD) has 150 sworn officers and 150 civilian staff. The CPD VIPS program has 80 active volunteers. VIPS volunteers work on

more than 15 projects, including neighborhood patrol, business license enforcement, records management, police department tours, and the Community Emergency Response Team.

Special Needs Volunteers in Emergency Planning
Recognizing the need to ensure that individuals with disabilities are served effectively during emergency situations, the Concord Police Department started a Functional Needs Group of government agencies and community organizations that serve the special needs community. The committee meets monthly to adapt the city's All Hazards Emergency Operations Plan to address sheltering, transportation, and other issues for residents with disabilities and other special needs. The committee is currently planning a voluntary self-identification project in which individuals with special needs can place stickers on the front windows of their homes. In the event of an emergency evacuation or other crisis, the stickers will allow emergency personnel to easily identify the residences of individuals in need of special assistance.

In keeping with the popular disability advocacy slogan "nothing about us...without us" that encourages active involvement of persons with disabilities in the development of plans and policies that affect their lives, CPD makes an effort to include individuals with disabilities on the special needs planning committee. These volunteers provide first hand accounts of their needs and concerns to ensure that effective emergency plans can be made. One committee volunteer is a Concord resident who uses a wheelchair. She comes to the meetings with an aide and is able to share her perspective on

assisting residents with mobility issues. The committee ensures that all meetings are held in CPD's wheelchair accessible facility.

Another volunteer with hearing and vision impairments works on the special needs committee in addition to other VIPS duties. He is aided by a service dog to assist with his mobility and uses a screen reader program called Job Access with Speech (JAWS) to access written text. This software converts text from websites and documents into an audio format that the volunteer can listen to. With his JAWS software, the volunteer is able to research on his home computer and bring information back to committee meetings. He helps keep the committee up to date on news regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act and other local and national disability issues, as well as provides information specific to the needs of visually and hearing impaired individuals. Some of his contributions include pointing out issues with service animal accessibility in shelter plans and notifying the committee that JAWS software cannot convert pdf files into audio, making visually impaired people unable



CPD volunteers help with community outreach about volunteering and emergency preparedness.

to access some information that is emailed or posted on the city website. The volunteer is in training to assist with community outreach events. He will help promote the VIPS program and emergency preparedness to other residents with disabilities and to the community at large.

Community Partnerships

CPD also has a long history of engaging a volunteer group from a local school for adults with disabilities. For seven years, small groups of five to seven volunteers with developmental disabilities have come once a week to restock supplies in the trunks of CPD's patrol vehicles. The teacher who accompanies the students supervises the group while they are volunteering. The volunteers with disabilities are not given background checks, but the teacher does go through the VIPS standard background check and orientation. The group has become part of the CPD culture and receives a great deal of support and appreciation from CPD staff. By volunteering, the individuals with disabilities develop positive relationships with law enforcement and gain valuable work experience that will help them lead more independent lives.

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