



volunteer centres

Ionaid d'Oibrí Deonacha na hÉireann

IRELAND

involving people with disabilities and special support needs

a step by step guide

There are many groups of people within Irish society who for a variety of reasons find it difficult to feel included in everyday activities. Every person has gifts, skills and abilities that are beneficial to their local community. The aim of supported volunteering is to promote and create voluntary opportunities for people of all abilities, and to provide supports to volunteers and organisations ensuring that volunteer placements are rewarding and successful.



Many people face numerous barriers as they seek to achieve equality in our society. Among the most daunting, are discrimination, fear, ignorance, prejudice, accessibility, and equal rights within society.

By deciding to recruit volunteers with disabilities and special support needs for your organisation, you are playing a significant role in assisting people in need of support define their quality of life. For people in need of extra support, volunteering may play an integral part in assisting them find their place in society.

“When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another.”

Helen Keller

step one identify who may require support

All volunteers should have support. However, there are groups in our society who require more support than others. Supported volunteering can be defined as assisting volunteers who have extra support needs find and sustain worthwhile and meaningful volunteering opportunities. Supported volunteering has also been known as facilitated volunteering, special needs volunteering, equal opportunity volunteering, or equal access volunteering.

There is an overwhelming community spirit and desire to contribute amongst a variety of groups who may require additional support.

- People with long term illness.
- People with physical disabilities.
- People with mental health difficulties.
- People with intellectual difficulties.
- People with learning difficulties.

These are but an example of the groups in our community who may feel socially excluded but who have an active role to play in their local community.

“People are pretty much alike. It’s only our differences are more susceptible to definition than our similarities.”

Linda Ellerbee

step two overcome the barriers

Many organisations have an equal opportunities policy and an ethos of openness and inclusion. However, they may not be aware of barriers existing in society that may deter people with support needs from volunteering. Effective measures to overcome these barriers are:

- **Be creative in volunteer recruitment** and create an easier route for a person with support needs to become involved. This could take the form of a presentation to a particular group showing what your organisation does and how accepting you are to having people volunteering with your organisation. An invitation to volunteer with additional information may help overcome a fear of rejection.
- **Look at the abilities of the individual rather than the difficulty or disability.** The common tendency is to overlook the skills and strengths of the person and assume the worst. This is often an unconscious decision - however this lack of acceptance may show itself as a discomfort or patronising attitude that may deter volunteers with special needs.
- **Show the benefits of volunteering.** There are many factors that play a large part in blocking people with disabilities and special support needs from volunteering. Internal barriers such as a lack of self esteem; anxiety about trying something new or an assumption they will not be welcome are an example of these. Volunteering helps everyone feel needed and productive. If it is an enjoyable experience it is rewarding and provides the opportunity for self satisfaction, as well as offering the chance for social interaction and breaking down the barriers of isolation.

step three go through the checklist

Below is a checklist for organisations to read through which may help them in encouraging people with special support needs to volunteer with them.

- Does your organisation promote equality and social inclusion?
- Is awareness training encouraged and available for staff and volunteers?
- Is your organisation accessible to all volunteers?
- Is your organisation sensitive to volunteers support needs during volunteer recruitment?
- Do you provide an accurate role description of the requirements of the opportunity and what is expected of the volunteer?
- Where does your organisation find volunteers? Are you proactive and diverse when sourcing volunteers?
- Are you open to new ideas about volunteer recruitment?
- Do you provide support on an ongoing basis?
- Are you willing to meet the volunteer's needs and match them to realistic tasks?
- Do you and your staff place the person first and the disability second?
- Does your organisation have the policies in place to ensure that the volunteer is clear about what role they are to carry out within the organisation?
- Does your organisation recognise the contribution of volunteers?
- Does your organisation promote interaction between volunteers and staff?
- Does your organisation have equal opportunities policies which encourage people with disabilities to volunteer and that are effective and operational?

Organisations should consider volunteering can be about promoting a change within society. They can offer opportunities to people who might not get similar chances in paid employment. They can bring people together from diverse backgrounds in a unique way. Organisations have the chance to promote a vision of volunteering that is more than delivering a service, and embrace inclusion and empowerment.

step four look at the benefits to your organisation.

Supported volunteer programmes offer more to organisations than a sense of satisfaction from meeting the accepted standards of fairness and equality. By actively involving all of society, organisations are exposing themselves to a wider range of ideas and experience, thus they are more likely to make better decisions and be more creative. By openly encouraging participation of all, organisations are able to utilise the broad range of resources available from all walks of society. This will ensure they can develop a team of volunteers with diversity of skills and experiences, and as a result, receive valuable input from many different perspectives.

A balanced mix of volunteers can increase the organisation's understanding of its client's needs. Volunteers with support needs can meet the needs of an organisation that cannot be met as effectively through other means. Through their own experiences, volunteers with support needs may be especially sensitive to the needs of neglected or alienated members of society. Former clients of organisations make excellent volunteers. In general, research shows most volunteers with support needs are highly motivated and hard working if they are properly nurtured. Therefore, when given the support they require, they may be among the most productive and most committed to the work of the organisation.

Your local volunteer centre will be more than happy to assist groups on an individual basis on all aspects of volunteer management and can be contacted as follows:

Volunteer Centres Ireland is the national organisation with responsibility for developing volunteering in Ireland, both locally and nationally, and is supported by the Irish Government through the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.