

Contrasting Approaches to Recruiting Relationships

People with disabilities often know few people from outside the world of disability i.e. people who are not labelled, or paid service workers or family members. Citizen advocacy developed to enable such relationships. Services are thinking more about what they can do to facilitate inclusion into the life of the community. Having a person (a co-ordinator) to act as an intermediary, to make introductions, is common to these initiatives. This briefing describes a way of recruiting relationships which has been found in practice to be effective and to produce good outcomes for the effort and resources put in.

One way to set about making matches (not the most effective) would be to advertise for volunteers who would then need to be vetted by taking up references. When you have enough, you could arrange for a course of training, perhaps one evening a week for 5-10 weeks. You could have a referral system for people in need of relationships. Then you could find a way of matching people from the waiting list with volunteers who have survived the preparatory training. This is how many volunteer arrangements are made, but it has problems. One being that it usually focuses more on the needs of volunteers than the needs of partners with disabilities. Also, there can be considerable delays before people get matched.

Another much more effective way is to agree a policy on the kind of relationship needs to be given priority. The co-ordinator then works within this policy to identify a person in need of a relationship. Then the co-ordinator searches for a person who might meet that person's requirements. This could be done by personal recommendation using a network of contacts. An approach is then made with an invitation to meet the person with a disability. This way, the focus is on the partner and delays in matching are minimised.

Interestingly, the kind of volunteer one gets through these two methods can be somewhat different. With the first kind of scheme, volunteers are often people with unmet needs of their own, perhaps lonely or wanting to have someone dependent on them. Volunteers from the second kind of scheme are often busy people who possibly never even thought

of being a volunteer. They usually have lots of connections.

There is nothing wrong with the traditional approach to recruitment. Indeed some powerful relationships have grown from such beginnings. It is just that in practice the second approach turns out to have a number of benefits.

Summary of benefits of person-specific relationship recruitment

- The focus is on the needs of the person with a disability rather than the needs of the volunteer.
- There is less need for vetting procedures such as taking up written references as the co-ordinator has the recommendation of someone whose judgement she trusts. This saves time in eliminating unsuitable applicants.
- There is no need for preliminary, time consuming, training in groups. Orientation is specific and done on an individual basis which helps the co-ordinator get to know the person being invited.
- There is less delay in matching.
- It is more likely that a competent advocate, appropriate to the needs of the partner, will be found.
- The power of definition rests with the co-ordinator and not with those making referrals.

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