



ILLINOIS INROADS TO INCLUSION

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Disability Awareness: Beyond the Day

Sometimes national service and disability organizations use "disability awareness days" to teach service members and volunteers about the disability experience. These days may use simulations to convey what it's like to live with a disability. Participants are blindfolded, for example, or put into a wheelchair and told not to use their legs. However, many disability advocates feel that simulations are the wrong way to go.

What's wrong with simulations?

- **Simulations are unrealistic.** A person who's been blind for 25 years has the coping skills to handle their environment. But a sighted person who is blindfolded doesn't have those skills. This gives participants a false idea of what it's like to live with a disability. In fact, some find the simulated experience terrifying. Which leads to...
- **Simulations promote pity/superperson stereotypes.** Stuck in a situation they haven't learned how to handle, participants may react with amazement that people with disabilities can accomplish everyday tasks: *To think you can drive without using your arms!* On the other hand, simulations can evoke pity. Participants may find the experience so unpleasant that it makes them think that life with a disability is miserable. A Joliet, IL high school student reported, "At the end of the day, I took off the blindfold. I was so grateful because so many people do not have the option of taking off the blindfold."

When a person with a disability is seen as helpless, barriers go up in the minds of the people around them. People with disabilities want to be included in their communities and be treated like anyone else-- with dignity and respect. In reality, people with disabilities do everything others do, just differently.

Bottom line: National service organizations should sensitize participants to the disability experience, but there are better ways to do it.

Better ideas

The key to increasing understanding is to have people see what it's like to have a disability first-hand-- from people in the disability community, not a blindfold.

- **Read books and magazines written by people with disabilities.** These publications give a uniquely "for us/by us" perspective. Magazines include *Ragged Edge*, *Mouth* magazine, and *Braille Monitor*. For books, check out the recommended reading list at the end of this brief.
- **Invite people with disabilities to talk to service groups.** Ask persons who have had a disability from birth or a longtime disability to speak about their experiences. Encourage service members to ask questions.
- **Include people with disabilities as service members, volunteer leaders, and employees.** More likely than not, you already do! Organizations benefit from everyone's contributions. Having people with disabilities in your organization helps everyone keep the disability perspective in mind.
- **Learn about disability culture.** Yes, there is such a thing! The history of the disability rights movement, how people with disabilities have been viewed and treated over time, civil rights laws, heroes such as Ed Roberts, Gini Laurie (grandmother of the independent living movement), and Justin Dart (father of the Americans with Disabilities Act). The disability community has a rich and illuminating history. Some websites to start with:
- Disability Social History Project: www.disabilityhistory.org Society for Disability Studies: www.uic.edu/orgs/sds
Disability History Museum: www.disabilitymuseum.org
- **Attend meetings of disability consumer groups**, where people with disabilities take leadership roles. Nothing illustrates the "independent living" philosophy like a group of people who live it.

These experiences send service members the message that despite a disability, a person can cope, learn, and contribute to society. Attitude change doesn't happen overnight, but these doses of real-life experience can open doors for service members.