
Involvement of people with disabilities

Myth versus reality

MICHAEL SIMPSON

This session is about volunteering being for all and this paper has been composed from the perspective of people with a disability. This sector of the community is often perceived as being on the receiving end of the volunteer effort whereas in reality, they are on both ends of the effort. Hence the title of this paper is *Involvement of People With Disabilities – Myth Versus Reality*.

My interest in this issue stems from my role as a manager at Royal Blind Society, a disability-focused organisation of around sixty thousand volunteer hours each year. I am a past National President of Blind Citizens Australia, a disability consumer organisation which exists only because of the voluntary effort of its 3,000 members and supporters. I am a Deputy Chair of the National Disability Advisory Council, a policy advisory body which delivers disability consumer focused advice to the Commonwealth Government. I work in a voluntary capacity for various organisations myself and have personal experience of disability having lost sight through accidents, the first accident at the age of nine when I had an arrow damage my right eye whilst playing and the second at the age of eighteen, in a shooting incident at a country-dance.

It is from that background and particularly in my capacity as Deputy Chair of the National Disability Advisory Council (NDAC) that I'm speaking here today. NDAC is made up of fifteen people appointed by the Commonwealth Government. Those on Council are people who have personal experience of disability, are carers or family members of a person with a disability, or are involved with disability service provision.

In this paper I will address the following points:

- 1 As a group of individuals sitting in our meetings we see the enormous volunteer effort of people with a disability, who are members of our Council, contribute to the community.
- 2 In order to provide advice to Government we have consulted broadly in the community and that consultation has shown clear evidence that people with a disability are engaged in a wide range of voluntary pursuits.
- 3 In talking with funded employment service providers we have come to realise that many people with a disability use volunteerism to develop employable skills or to engage more closely with the labour market.
- 4 Our Council strongly believes that we need to focus on and promote the abilities of people with a disability in order to build an inclusive society.
- 5 As part of focusing on abilities we think that it's important to demonstrate that people with a disability contribute an enormous amount to the social and economic well being of our society. We believe that it's important to show that contribution to balance against the myth that people with a disability are simply recipients of the community's voluntary effort.

Let me give you some examples which demonstrate these points.

The best example to illustrate the first point regarding NDAC Members is that of David Pearce. David is a person who has a considerable disability resulting from cerebral palsy, however he sits on fifteen community committees, some as chair or president. He is an Alderman on his local municipal council and

provides voluntary peer support to many other people with a disability. Meeting David for the first time, however I can imagine that most people would think that he would be on the receiving rather than giving end of any volunteer effort. David's efforts are such that he was recognised in this year's honours list for his contribution to the community.

Like David, others on NDAC, give hundreds of voluntary hours to community organisations and to working with other people with a disability and their families. This is a common story for thousands of people with a disability around Australia and we know that many disability organisations simply would not exist if it were not for the voluntary effort of people with a disability.

Look at the example set by Dennis Stabback, ACT Volunteer of the Year. Dennis is a person with a disability and has been doing voluntary work for over thirty years. You can read more about Dennis's view of volunteerism from his experiences as a volunteer and recipient in an article in *Disability Reporter*, August, 2001.

It could be argued that there is an element of self interest in volunteerism by people with a disability as it is not uncommon to see people who are blind involved with sight impairment organisations, or people who have a physical disability involved with organisations running wheelchair sports, or people with an intellectual disability running peer support and social groups for others with an intellectual disability. The involvement of people with a disability goes well beyond this, which takes me onto the second point. Our community consultations have shown evidence that people with a disability are involved in a wide range of voluntary pursuits. During my term on NDAC, which is due to come to an end in a few weeks, I have been involved with disability consumer forums in urban, rural and remote areas around Australia. It has not been uncommon to hear of the voluntary work of people with a disability across a broad range of activity. Some have worked as volunteer counsellors for organisations such as Lifeline and Anglicare. Some have been involved with scouting, children's sports and athletics, local hospitals, church activity and schools. At one of NDAC's forums in Cairns a couple of weeks ago a young woman with a disability told me that she did meals on wheels and another told me that she did volunteer work in a youth refuge.

A couple of my friends who are blind, for exam-

ple work as volunteer radio operators for the volunteer coastguard. Another has just come back from volunteer work in East Timor and one has spent years in India working with children.

Voluntary involvement of people with a disability in their own disability specific sector is not dissimilar to that of people from Indigenous or Non-English-Speaking-Background (NESB) people volunteering in their own sectors of the community. Studies have clearly shown that these groups volunteer in their 'own' community first before branching out to other communities.

It is clear that there's no limit to the scope of voluntary involvement of people with a disability as long as there are no barriers, real as in inaccessible workplaces, or artificial as in attitudes.

Let us go on to point three which was about using volunteering to develop employable skills and to engage with the labour market. Like volunteers without a disability people with a disability can and do utilise volunteerism to get back into the workforce. You've probably had other presentations over the past couple of days which demonstrate the enormous benefit that volunteering can bring to a person's skills development, emotional wellbeing and sense of contribution and achievement. Exactly the same positive benefits and outcomes are found by people with a disability as for those without disability.

The Federal Government, through the Department of Family and Community Services, funds specialist employment services to assist job seekers with a disability into employment. Many of these services find that getting a person back into employment is positively assisted by the person undertaking voluntary work. Government also recognises that there are sometimes barriers such as transport so to assist, a mobility allowance of around \$30 per week can be provided to a person with a disability who is doing eight hours or more per week of voluntary work.

I do not have hard evidence to show just how valuable volunteering is for getting people with a disability back to work but I'm sure it plays a significant role. Perhaps we can get some of the social policy researchers interested in these areas to do some work.

Points four and five were about focusing on and promoting the abilities of people with a disability to balance the perception that people with a disability take more than they give. I don't want to be critical here but like Dennis Stabback, to whom I referred

earlier, I have run into those in the community who clearly have the view that people with a disability rely totally on others. The reality is that we are all interdependent and that we all have something to offer each other.

People with disabilities have an enormous contribution to make and the National Disability Advisory Council believes that we will build a more inclusive community by dispelling the myth and highlighting the reality which is that people with a disability live, work, volunteer and play alongside everyone else. We also believe that through a positive recognition of the abilities of people with a disability that we'll end up with a community which values the social and economic contribution of all paid or unpaid, disabled or unchallenged.

The simple point I am making is that volunteering is for all. Find the person with the skills and ability you need to fulfil the task and the job will be done regardless of whether the volunteer has a disability or not.

The myth is that people with a disability are recipients rather than the providers of voluntary effort. The reality is that people with a disability volunteer alongside everyone else.

Michael Simpson is Deputy Chair of the National Disability Advisory Council and Director, Client and Community Services with the Royal Blind Society.