

Supporting volunteers with disabilities

Whatever your branch or group fundraising event – from a ball to a small coffee morning – it is important that it is safe and that you are aware of any legal issues. You will then be able to relax on the day and enjoy yourself.

Introduction

People with disabilities can make a great contribution to the work we do. However, we need to be aware that they do not share the same opportunities and choices as people without disabilities in many areas of their lives. Poverty, social exclusion and disadvantage experienced by many people with disabilities often stem from a lack of understanding of disability issues. People with disabilities are 9% less likely to volunteer than the rest of the population due to the barriers that prevent them from volunteering.

At any stage of your volunteering journey, you may support, buddy, mentor or coach volunteers with disabilities. This piece of guidance has been created to help you in proactively supporting them, whether they are already volunteering with us or expressing an interest in becoming a volunteer.

Useful definitions

Disability - 'A person has a disability if she/he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day duties'.

People with disabilities - covers a wide range of different people with different impairments which may or may not affect how they carry out their volunteering role.

Reasonable adjustment - is a fair, sensible and simple change we can make to support volunteers with disabilities. The majority of adjustments are relatively inexpensive if not free.

Putting the guidance into practice

A new volunteer is joining our branch/group. They have a disability. What could we do to ensure the volunteer gets the support they need to carry out their role?

It is important to spend some time talking with them and ask them if they feel they need any additional support to effectively carry out their role. Some people with disabilities may not want or need additional support; however, if they do need small adjustments to be made and these are reasonable, put them in place.

If you need some guidance on what a reasonable adjustment is and how to implement it, contact your Area Support Coordinator (ASC).

How can my ASC help us support volunteers with disabilities?

Your ASC can:

- assess if adjustments required are reasonable,
- request information and resources from disability specific organisations,
- discuss your concerns and provide some advice and guidance,
- request funding and arrange for equipment/resource/service to be purchased (or produced in-house).

Remember

Some people with disabilities don't say 'I have a disability' or 'I'm disabled'. They may explain it differently e.g. 'I get easily stressed so I need a routine'.

Not all disabilities are visible and many people with disabilities have conditions that are not immediately apparent e.g. dyslexia, heart disease, depression etc... People who have an invisible disability will be more likely to tell us about it if we create an open and accommodating volunteering experience where they know they can come to us to discuss problems in confidence.

Common problems and what the MND Association does to overcome these

People lack the knowledge about the support that volunteers with disabilities need. e.g. "We don't have the time or money to give them the support they need".	We ask the person with disabilities for their help in understanding what, if any, additional support they need to be effective in their role. We implement reasonable adjustment e.g. for people with concentration problems, we divide large pieces of work into smaller tasks and goals.
People think that reasonable adjustments must be physical or costly.	The majority of adjustments are relatively simple and inexpensive. A change in working hours, more rest breaks, splitting the role up can be just as effective. e.g. we allow volunteers with disabilities to work their hours flexibly, so they do not have to travel at times that are unsuitable for them.
Financial and transport difficulties.	We are up front about what out-of-pocket expenses we can cover and ensure volunteers are promptly reimbursed. We can offer to help volunteers find details of accessible transport options (such as Dial a Ride, Taxilink). We could consider organising a "buddy" to help people with disabilities to learn new routes.
Some buildings are inaccessible to people with physical disabilities.	We run training and events in venues which are accessible to people with disabilities.
Volunteers don't feel welcome / no one helps them when they arrive or start volunteering.	People with disabilities may have a history of negative experiences that may put them off applying. We can appoint "buddies" to welcome volunteers on site, show them around, and tell them about the tasks required.
People with disabilities often must attend regular appointments or take medication at certain times of the day.	We offer flexible volunteering slots to help a volunteer with disabilities feel in control and remove anxieties about attending regular appointments.
Lack of alternative forms (e.g. large print, Braille, audio tape, disk) and complicated forms exclude people from the recruitment process.	We can provide information in a variety of ways and offer assistance in completing forms.

Case studies

Hilary Walklett, North Lancs and South Cumbria Branch Vice Chair

"Over the years, I have undertaken a number of roles including Secretary, Chair and Vice Chair [...] I give talks on MND to local societies and groups and to Health and Social Care Professionals. I recruited volunteers to form two satellite fundraising groups and I fundraise - everything from rattling tins to organising street collections, market stalls etc."

"I enjoy putting back into the Association some of what I get out of it and meeting people who understand my position and my needs [...] My colleagues in the branch are really good at making sure that venues have good access, so we don't have committee meetings in houses that I can't get into, or only have an upstairs toilet. At events, care is taken that I get tasks that can be done without much standing or walking."

Alison Kelly, National Office Volunteer

"My motivation to volunteer with the MND Association stems from my desire to work for a charity that helps people with physical disabilities adjust and cope with a life changing condition [...] I have compiled packs for volunteers and helped complete various administrative tasks for the Fundraising Team."

"On my first day working at MND Association, I was extremely nervous: I had been housebound for a year because of a significant deterioration in my physical condition. I explained this to the lady who was to supervise me that day and she was extremely accommodating, supportive and friendly. She checked up on me during the course of the day at frequent intervals and introduced me to many other colleagues who were gregarious and friendly."

"All staff members were happy to help me in any way they could physically, such as: lifting heavier objects, helping me decide which chair was most comfortable and making me frequent cups of most welcome coffee! All the tasks I have been asked to undertake have been tailored to my individual capabilities."