

Introduction

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People with disabilities are joining the world of service in increasing numbers. Just like their able-bodied peers, they see a need in their communities and want to contribute to creating a better world for all. Whether it is teaching children to read, repairing trails, helping seniors remain independent in their homes, or increasing public safety, people with disabilities are contributing.

Service is not always easy. We know that if we want service to be successful and if we want to retain committed individuals in our programs, we need to facilitate experiences that are rewarding and meaningful. The easier it is to serve, the more likely one will continue to serve.

For people with disabilities, the world of service is often fraught with barriers. Barriers are often inadvertent and exist out of ignorance, fear, and concern. Barriers are removed through training, technical assistance, collaboration, and the development of inclusive practices, teamwork, and respect.

All programs receiving funds from the CNCS or other federal agencies must comply with federal laws that guarantee equal access and prohibit discrimination. But mere compliance does not necessarily ensure the full and meaningful participation of people with disabilities in national and community service. An inclusive service environment does.

An inclusive service environment is more than ensuring an accessible building, providing a sign language interpreter or creating large print documents. It is more than refraining from illegal interview questions or violating confidentiality. Rather, an inclusive service environment welcomes all people, regardless of their disability. It recognizes and uses their skills and strengthens their abilities. An inclusive service environment is respectful, supportive, and equalizing. An inclusive service environment reaches out to and includes individuals with disabilities at all levels — from first time participants to board members.

This Handbook is not a compliance manual. It will help you begin to understand the law and will serve as a resource and source of guidance and technical assistance.

This Handbook will help you understand the concept and ideal of inclusion. It will help you in your outreach efforts to the talented community of persons with disabilities in your community. It will help you develop the skills of all of your participants. It will help you become a better manager. Most of all, it will ensure the valuable contributions of many more individuals.

In the past 30 years, the world has changed dramatically for people with disabilities. More opportunities exist now than ever before. As a society, we have much more to do, however, and our work will only be complete when all individuals, regardless of their disability, are fully included. This Handbook will help you begin.