

# Student Tips – Successful Volunteering for Students with Disabilities

Volunteering in the community is a great way to gain experience and develop job readiness skills. It is also a requirement for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma that students complete 40 hours of community involvement (volunteering). Students with a disability often find it more difficult to find volunteer opportunities, and they may have more difficulty getting to and from volunteer sites. Students with a physical disability may be challenged to complete their 40 hours of community involvement for graduation from high school.

An important first step in community involvement is talking to the staff in the Guidance Department. The guidance department may have a list of organizations that are looking for volunteers, or who have been supportive of volunteers with disabilities in the past. They can also tell you about the forms that need to be completed to confirm your volunteer activity and completion of your community involvement hours.

You should also find out about the school board policies on community involvement. The school board policy will let you know what kinds of activities are acceptable and which ones are ineligible. For example, you can't accept money for volunteering and you can't count chores you do at home as volunteer hours.

The easiest way to become involved in the community is to follow your interests. If you are already involved in a sport or leisure activity, find out if you can become a volunteer. You may be able to coach younger children, or help out with organizing club activities, or fundraising.

You can also follow your passion and become involved in a cause that is important to you. If you have mobility issues and have concerns about community accessibility you could become involved in advocacy activities. If you have a friend or relative with an illness, or you get support from a disability specific organization, you could become involved with raising public awareness or funds for a special cause.

Plan ahead when approaching a community group or organization about a volunteer opportunity. Find out about:

- the organization's mission, goals and activities
- types of volunteer activities
- location or sites
- policies on inclusion and diversity

If possible, connect with someone who volunteers or works with the organization to find out about the work they do and the work environment.

Be prepared to talk about yourself. Be ready to answer questions about your:

- interest in the organization
- reason for volunteering
- skills and knowledge you can bring to the position
- needs for accommodations and supports

Volunteer Canada has identified a few of the reasons that many organizations are hesitant to accept volunteers with disabilities in [Volunteer Connections: Creating and Accessible and Inclusive Environment, 2001](#). These include:

- people with disabilities are not well educated
- volunteers with disabilities may be less reliable because of health concerns
- volunteers with disabilities are at greater risk of having an accident while volunteering
- making the workplace accessible is very costly

You may need to respond to these barriers by covering these issues in your interview. For example, share information on your credit courses and the skills you have been developing at school. Be upfront if you tire easily, have limitations in your movements, or will need to limit your commitment to one or two hours at a time. Share how you maintain your personal safety and which activities are more risky for you. Be clear about what type of accommodations you will need and how small improvements to the work environment can improve your productivity.

It is unfortunate that it is harder for people with disabilities to be volunteers. However, if you are prepared and can convince the organization to accept you as a volunteer, we all win. The organization demonstrates inclusivity and can learn from their experience to accept more volunteers with disabilities. More importantly, you get the experience for your community involvement hours and start building your resume for future education and employment opportunities.