

Erica Steen - Pre-Teens and Pre-Teen Employment
For Youth With and Without Disability
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Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Hello and welcome. This is Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, president of a nonprofit organization working to enable people with disabilities to have a better future. I'm very delighted today to bring you this webinar, which is a free public service with wonderful speaker on pre-teen and pre-employment for youth with and without disability. This is about teen pre-employment services for teens with and without disabilities.

I just turned the slide to show pictures of terrific teens hanging out on a break while helping adults clean up her yard. We have a teenage girl packing food at the food bank and throughout this program we have teens with and without disabilities supporting each other in the community. This is a unique program that is at the Jewish Community Center in Washington, D.C. that serves people of all faiths. Our speaker is Erica Steen. She is the Director of Community Engagement at the Center for Community Service. She grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where she began at age 10 volunteering at day camp. She continued work at camps through her college years. She attended University of Kansas.

Following graduation, she began work with juvenile offenders working for the state of Department of Youth Services. For the last 18 years, Erica has worked in the Jewish community, including the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, and J.C.C.'s in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Washington, D.C. Her work has included developing teens of leadership programs, creating youth and family programming and coordinating volunteering work in the community. She has been at the J.C.C. since 2006 as the director of the department that helps this vulnerable population and

helps to improve the lives of the volunteers and those who they help. In 2012, she had an opportunity to add to her portfolio and began supervising the J.K.C. lunch program and the LGBTQ staff.

When she is not working, which is a huge thing because she works a lot on this terrific program, she still volunteers outside of leading her own volunteer program. She volunteers with leukemia, lymphoma and helps to coordinate registers to help find a cure for blood cancers. This program at the J.C.C. serves a huge number of people with a very large variety of needs and different sectors so I turn it over to Erica Steen to talk about this break-through program that enables teens with and without disabilities to work together in an inclusive environment.

Erica Steen: I want to start off by giving everyone a background about whom we are and where we started here on the J.C.C. The Jewish Community Center is first and foremost a community center. Not everyone on the call is from a Jewish agency and that is fine. Everything we do here can be done elsewhere. Our Jewish values are to make the world a better place. Let's be honest that is a human value. We added new wording to our website and all of our programs, which I think is very important. The J.C.C. embraces all of its inclusion activities. We welcome and encourage the participation of all people, regardless of their background, sexual orientation or abilities, including interracial couples and families. I think that is important moving forward that is where we stand and what we believe.

As Jennifer mentioned earlier in my bio, part of what I do as the Director of the Morris Cafritz Center for Community Service, quickly the photo you see here is of teens spending time at catch helping seniors and helping them tend to their gardens. Through our community center department, the Morris Cafritz Center, we organize all sorts of volunteer projects. The community center has been around for close to 30 years now and we partner with all sorts of nonprofits and social service agencies throughout the Washington, D.C. area and it is important to us that all of our volunteers come from all

backgrounds and have all abilities and a great section of our community here in the D.C. area.

Just a little bit about what our community service does so you have a little bit of background on how we got started in all of this. The Morris Cafritz Center was actually started five years ago. I'm sorry, excuse me, 29 years ago when five community members came to the J.C.C. saying we are looking for something to do on Christmas day so a volunteer project was put together for those individuals. Over the last 29 years, it has grown to close to 1,000. On top of that, we have three other days of service. We do volunteering on Martin Luther King Day. We have a program called Good Deeds Day that is community-wide and Everything But the Turkey, which is for everyone to come out for those experiencing homelessness on Thanksgiving.

Our Hunger Action Program at the J.C.C., volunteers can come and prepare food for the homeless community. We have a program where we go out into D.C. Central Kitchen, which is a soup kitchen and prepare food for those experiencing homelessness. Books to Prisons provides reading materials for those incarcerated and Martha's Table Joyful Market helps to make sure families living in low-income neighborhoods and food deserts that doesn't receive fresh produce. To get to the reason that we're here today comes underneath our annual projects, which is our summer of service camp. This is something we are very proud of. For over 15 years now, we've been providing opportunities for teens to come and volunteer throughout the summer to gain service hours for school and we'll talk about that in a minute.

We do have referral projects and customer volunteer opportunities that we run throughout the year.

So why summer of service? Because that is why we're here. It is our opportunity for teens to come together and earn their service hours. The D.C. metro area, the schools are requesting and requiring the students to get 75-100 hours of what they are calling student service learning hours to graduate high school. It is something that is important that the teens need to do. They are expected to get these hours on their own and to go out and organize their own projects and find places to volunteer so we really put ourselves out there and become a hub place where

the teens can get their service learning hours, whether it is in the summer or throughout the school year. We would like to be that place where they can come and get their hours.

A little bit of our summer of service program, it is just over 15 years old. Over the past 15 years, we've had over 600 teens. Throughout the summer and I will talk about the day-to-day activities in a bit but the teens really participate in all sorts of volunteer activities. They help to pack up food for the capital area food bank. They will prepare food at a local shelter. They will go to parks and local gardens and help to clean out the rivers and clean up the neighborhood, which is something that is a wonderful service to provide. It is important to us also that the teens learn something from the process.

The whole point of student service learning is they are getting something in return and that is where the pre-employment comes. A lot of teens have no idea what they want to be doing with their lives and this is an opportunity for them to really try out different types of things. Do they enjoy gardening? Do they enjoy cooking? What kind of things do they want to do as a hobby or in the future? This is a great opportunity for them to be able to learn new skills.

This will be our third summer really putting it out there that we're open and welcome to teens with disabilities. We've had teens in the past with a disability but never more than one or two and we found it is a neat opportunity for these teens to come out and intermix with each other and to learn something from each other so this will be our third summer doing so.

As I mentioned before, all teens are expected to get their S.S.L. hours to graduate high school and the importance of us of creating these services camps with disabilities is to give them an opportunity. For a typical teen who is maybe very social, it might be easy for them to pick up the phone and cold call a senior center or a soup kitchen and be able to go out and do their service hours on their own. For a shy teen or a teen with a disability, a lot of pressure is put back on their parents so we hope, you know, the importance of creating our camp is to give all teens this opportunity an easy way so they can go out and gain their service hours and the parents don't have to do a

lot of leg work. As I mentioned before, it is all about giving these teens an opportunity to have some real world experience.

What does inclusion look like at the summer of service? I will point out the two photos on this page. The first is two teens packing up groceries for clients in need there at the Capital Area Food Bank. They are working together to put the packages together and the photo on the right is a young girl who is gardening. We do a lot of work with senior adults in the area who can't take care of their own lawn so this is a great opportunity for seniors to get help and the teens the opportunity to give back.

Inclusion, we hope it looks like a regular every day camp for teenagers. We host 12-14 teens. This past year, we had a 60-40 split. 60% were normal teens and 40% had disabilities and being cautious to the staff ratio is importance to us. One staff per two teens with disabilities works fairly well but you will see in future slides and conversation that we really take the time to get to know the families and the teens that are coming to camp. The staff is very well trained. Many of them have degrees and are teachers throughout the year so they are skilled in working with teens with disabilities and youth with disabilities and may use their creativity to adapt the projects to make sure all teens can participate. They work with the other camp staff to integrate with the teens so everyone feels a part of what they are doing.

A typical day, I have to admit there is no typical day at camp. Every day is different and that is something that we convey to the parents to let them know that there's a schedule to each day but each day is going to look a little bit different depending on where we're going to do service that day. Typically, the teens would arrive at 8:30 when camp begins.

Just so you know, we have two meeting points for camp. One is at the DCJCC and the other is in Montgomery County, which we found a lot of our teens live in the area. By 9:00, they have hopped on a bus and they are heading to the service project itself. Once they get to the service site, the staff will take the time to discuss where the teens are as part of the service learning process. The teens have an idea of what is their purpose for the day and where are they and who are they going to

be helping? It is something that the staff is conscious of. The teens will work for the majority of the day and when they take a break for lunch, the staff will take the time to talk about, you know, what have we done so far? How did it make you feel? What are you enjoying? What did you not enjoy? They will engage in conversation on that return bus trip at the end of the day, which is something really important when it comes to ending the day so the teens go home knowing not only have they done something good, hopefully, they have learned and realized who they are and something they have learned as well.

And adding an inclusion component to our camp was something that we wanted to do and the slide says adding inclusion component to camp but I think it can also be added, you can insert something other than camp, any other type of program will be helpful with this. One of the keys is staffing and making sure that we have staffs that are skilled and knowledgeable. Over the last two summers, we've hired and will again this summer we've hired special education teachers and para educators. We want to make sure they build a working relationship with our camp staff who don't have experience working with teens with disabilities so they can have a good form of communication between each other to make those adaptations to the different projects and to make sure there is a good number of staff and a good ratio in case a teen needs to step out and a staff member needs to go with them. We want to make sure we have all of our teens covered and give them the support that they need.

One of the most important things really is all of the preparation and making sure we have their applications. We have pre-meetings with teens and staff train for all of the staff involved that will be interacting with the teens themselves.

There are four things that we broke down so you can see the different preparations that we have. The first is our camp registration. You will see the registration link right there if you have an interest in what our camp registration looks like but that in itself is the general overall camp registration that is for all of the campers coming.

Second, are the details about the teen and his or her family, we have a checklist that the departments fill out and an

opportunity for the parent, teen, and staff to meet. A little bit back to the part one in regard to the registration form, you know, we have teens of all different disabilities and younger students coming to our other camps at the J.C.C. and we need to figure out who is who and who do we need to follow up with and that is where the check box comes in. We hope the parents will give us an opportunity to know that their teen has special needs and we will reach out to them to find out what kind of accommodations they might need.

The second part, as I mentioned before, is what I consider registration part two. Getting more information and just so you know this is a shortened version of the form. If anyone afterwards would like a longer version, we can make sure you get the full version. We're actually in the process of revising it for this summer but what you will see is we're very specific. Not only do we want to know who the parents are residing with the teen, are there any parents not residing in the home because a lot of times that can affect a teen's behavior or affect their mood from one day to another. It is important to know if they have a parent or sibling who doesn't live with them full time.

The second part of that is really drilling down to some of the important questions that you would want to know. A few of these and I won't read through all of them but wanting to know what are the teens' best attributes and what can we do to bring out these attributes in them? Has the teen's disability been professionally evaluated? It is important for us to know what activities the teens like to do with other people. A lot of teens with disabilities are introverted and there may be certain things we can do to help them become more integrated into the camp itself. Then also asking questions about when they become upset and what we can do to help calm them down so on a day-to-day basis when we're participating in the activities, the staff knows the best strategies to help them feel a path of the group itself.

Part three is really finding out more about the teen's abilities and disabilities. This is an abridged form but all of these things are listed with check boxes giving the parents an opportunity to tell us more about the teen themselves and what their developmental or neurological disability is, what their

sensory or motor skills are like, communication, speech, and language, and learning disabilities because all of these things going to affect the teen and their interaction with others.

We ask about mood disorders and behaviors and are also asking the parents to help us learn a little bit more about some of the teens' traits and what their social style is to be able to help integrate them a little bit more into camp itself.

Part four is the opportunity for the parents, teen, and staff to work together. It is important to find out what the parents' needs are. We had a teen last summer whose parents wanted to meet and they insisted on meeting here at the J.C.C. when we asked if they could come to their home. It was an opportunity, not only for the parents to see where their teen would be going each morning but for the teen to see where they would be interacting. The majority of our day through this program is spent out, I guess you could say in the field but it is a meeting place at the beginning and the end of the day for the majority of the teens.

Budget, everyone wants to know about the budget very, very, very important. We do have a fee for camp. We need to make sure that our costs are covered. There are higher expenses when it comes to hiring staff with a background in working with teens with disabilities and the fact that we're driving around the D.C. metro area throughout the day so the costs of special needs staff and transportation make a difference. Just a couple of things to point out on this budget sheet, first of all, point out our plan for this summer is four weeks of camp as I mentioned before, about 12 teens per week. We keep it small because when you go into the service sites, a lot of times they can't accept more than 12 or 14 volunteers at one time. It also gives the teens a chance to interact with each other and they learn a little bit more when there is a smaller group like that. I did mention we do have a camp fee and it is in line with the other camp fees here.

Over the last two summers, we had 50% of our teens culling from the Maryland, Montgomery area and 50% coming from the D.C. proper area. It is something we want to keep in mind because there is about a 30-minute drive between the two areas and that is without traffic. The people in the D.C. area know what I'm

talking about with the traffic issue. As I mentioned before, our para educator and the special education teachers is something we feel is a benefit to the families, to the teen, and to the program itself. It is important to make sure the staff is educated in a sense they can make the adaptations that the teens need and help them fit in with the larger group itself so that is something an expense that is worthwhile.

A little bit more about our budget sources and this should just say resources in general because there's a few more here. There is a few partners that are not necessarily financial but they give us enough of a partnership that have monetary value. As far as our budget source, our camp fees themselves, we have three major partners in the community, Montgomery Volunteer Center, RespectAbility, and Dreams for Kids D.C. and of these three organizations certainly RespectAbility has become an amazing resource for us. We utilize the organization for a lot of questions when it come to day-to-day activities and working with the families. We also found with the Dreams for Kids and Montgomery County Center is a great way to help spread the word through the community.

Our volunteer service agencies are an obvious partner we can't do this program without. They also provide the pre-employment opportunity for the teens, giving them an opportunity to learn something new and to learn something they might be able to utilize later in life.

On the financial end, we do receive financial support from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and other donors who are connected with the world of disability but who are also supportive and want to make sure there is an opportunity for the teens in our area.

Marketing is something that we couldn't do without. We have numerous opportunities in the community, most of them online. We include this as a J.C.C. program. It runs within the camp program itself. We list it on several different places on the website, throughout the building, and our newsletter. Thanks again to Respectability and Dreams for Kids D.C. and their newsletters and networks. We started working with X Minds to help spread the word. A lot of teens will come and hear about the programs through their school themselves.

Here is an example. This is our new promotional postcard. It has not been passed out yet. It just received approval this past week so I'm in the process of ordering postcards that will be used, passed out through programs in the area. We will use it here in the DCJCC with our teen program and it will be distributed to share with their resources and their partners.

Hopefully, you are intrigued by what we do and you see the importance of including teens of all abilities in our summer program and I think what is most important is that these teens not only walk away having a great experience but they have learned something new through that social service aspect of things.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: That was terrific. We appreciate you leading us through that and the excellent work you and your team are doing in conjunction with the wonderful school teachers who are spending their summers with you, serving the same kids that they serve during the school year through the special education programs and the autism programs. Now we're ready to turn it over to questions from the audience. Operator, if you can let people know how to ask on the telephone a question or through the internet.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, if you have dialed in or would like to ask a question, press seven pound on your phone now. Listen for your name to be announced and ask a question when prompted. You can send questions using the chat window located on the left of the presentation screen.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: While we're waiting for people to type in their questions or get in queue, what was the most challenging thing about bringing in kids with disabilities? As you said, you have been doing a Summer of Service for many years but it was predominantly with kids without disabilities or one or two kids with disabilities and now you have changed the program to a significant number of kids with disabilities. So what was the hardest part and how did you address the challenge?

Erica Steen: The hardest part is integrating the teens and, not only having them feel a part of the program itself but having the neuro-typical teens accepting of the teens with disabilities. It has been a lot easier than we expected because

of the educators we bring on for the summer because it is something that we do on a regular basis. Yes, it was a challenge but because of the staff we have and the training we do with them, it's easier than we thought it would be.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Operator, do we have anyone in the queue for phones for questions?

Operator: No, ma'am.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: I don't see any questions typed into the chat. Am I missing something, operator? Usually by then we have them.

Operator: Nobody has typed a question and nobody is in the queue.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Let me encourage people to ask questions and can you talk about the different disabilities that the kids have had and what you have been able to do in terms of accommodations for meeting their needs?

Erica Steen: Absolutely, we've had a variety of disabilities. I would say, at this point, a good portion of the teens attending do fall on the Autism spectrum or the Asperger's spectrum. We've had teens with physical disabilities, not being able to use their extremities like a typical teen can. By meeting with the parents and the teens, we've been able to tailor what we do to the teens that are attending. It is important for us that the teens walk away having a great experience. In my mind, not only is it an opportunity for them learning and something new to do, but they look at it as a chore, they have to do it to graduate. By us making them feel comfortable, they realize that volunteering is not as bad as they thought it would be.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Do you think teens found it was too frustrating for them physically or emotionally after the first day? Maybe you can talk through that because some of those who can participate in the program have significant anxiety or behavior issues.

Erica Steen: Absolutely, so when we actually initiated the program, we felt consistency and doing several of the service projects for the same projects over and over again might be

easier for the teens but what we found is by changing the project, each day, we can talk with the teen and explain that each day is a new experience. By keeping the staff consistent and the overall schedule of the day consistent, we can change the projects so if a teen is struggling one day they can, hopefully, the next day is a new opportunity for them. I think sometimes it does take that first day or two to help integrate the teens into the program. But it can be a struggle, it very much can be a struggle.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: We're hearing there is an echo effect sometimes. I don't know if people are still feeling there is an echo. I hope not. There was a question about if this was just in the Washington area or not.

Erica Steen: Yes, as far as we are aware, it is a program only happening in the Washington, D.C. area. But I certainly welcome others to copy the program or to use or I'm happy to speak with people if they want help duplicating. I think it would be wonderful if it was nationwide. I would love to have an opportunity to work on a project like that.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Can you talk us through some of the pre-employment skills you think people might be getting through this program?

Erica Steen: Absolutely, so when you look at it from the outside, it is a service camp. The teens come and they do a different service project each day but there are a lot of learning opportunities that fall within what we do certainly, the social aspect. Once teens get into post high school age they are in a job they have to be social with other people unless they have a job where they work from home on their own. Working with others is important so the social aspect is important for everything we do. Each of the projects has work opportunities within them. You're working with an outside organization so you have to take direction from someone else.

Some of the projects that the teens do are preparing food for folks experiencing homelessness so they are learning cooking skills. They are learning serving skills when they serve meals. Some of the projects take place in parks or gardening. Last year, one of the teens went home and was so excited to tell his

mother he learned how to use a lawn mower so that provides skills that they may not learn at home. Each day brings new activities whether it be crafts, visiting with seniors, learning different aspects that they may not encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Do these kids that have disabilities and the kids that don't have disabilities, do they associate with one other, do they build that integrated friendship or do they wind up in silos where the kids with disabilities are separate from the kids without disabilities?

Erica Steen: The camp counselors get together several times before the summer begins and we make that point of trying to have the interactions between the teens. Yes, I think there are silos but I think that is a challenge on our part to overcome but I think from the staff perspective, they know part of their job is to help the teens integrate with each other.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: By the time summer rolls around, what percentage of the kids have met at least one of the staff members in person before the summer starts?

Erica Steen: As for the teens with disabilities, they should have all met someone, one of our special educators that is something that is important to us so they are not showing up the first day not meeting anyone. As far as our neuro-typical kids, if a parent requests it, we want to make that opportunity available. It has not been requested in the past. It is important, a lot of our teens that attend the program happen to have some of our educators as teachers throughout the year so it works to our advantage. We've had other kids join us so we make sure they have the opportunity to meet in advance.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Is there any other questions by people on the line or people who want to type in questions for Erica for the summer program who wants to get service learning opportunities? Erica, is there anything we didn't ask you that you feel it is important for people who are interested in replicating this program in other places on how they can best go about doing that?

Erica Steen: Certainly, utilize my contact information. Reach out to me. We do have a specific volunteer page on our website too if you go to Washington, DCJCC.org and you will see our volunteer page. Our service camp online website that you see will give you more information about what happens at camp but I welcome and am open to answering questions and speaking to people one-on-one.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Very appreciated. Let me thank all who listened to the webinar. Let me thank Erica Steen for your work and for being willing to share it with others. Thank you to all of those who joined.

Erica Steen: Thank you.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi: Thank you all again. Operator, this concludes our call.