

Integrating Youth with Disabilities into Rotary Youth Exchange

In the guidelines for the Youth Exchange program, you will find the following paragraphs:

The Board encourages the involvement of people with disabilities in the Youth Exchange programs and other youth projects where and when this is possible and agreed upon between the sponsoring and receiving clubs or districts.

The Board recommends that district governors appoint one member of their district Youth Exchange committee to be responsible for encouraging and aiding in the participation of people with disabilities in both long-term and short-term exchanges.

Many exchanges involving students with disabilities have been successfully executed by Rotary clubs and districts. Often, these exchanges bring unique rewards to participants. Clubs and districts participating in such exchanges need only follow a few specific guidelines to conduct a successful and rewarding exchange.

When your club or district is interested in involving a student with disabilities in your Youth Exchange program, you need to develop focused recruitment strategies. You can do this by:

- Sending promotional materials to organizations that offer services for individuals with disabilities (schools for the blind, disability groups, independent living centers, recreation programs, school districts).
- Publicizing the program in media targeted at individuals with disabilities (disability-related magazines, newsletters, Internet discussion groups, or e-mail listservers).
- Inviting a disabled individual to participate on your recruiting committee. This person will have insight and contacts that you may not have considered.
- Developing application forms and promotional materials in large print or in audio for visually impaired candidates.
- Including pictures of people with disabilities in your promotional material or running stories in your local newspaper that encourage people with disabilities to apply to your program.

Screening

The selection process is often competitive and complex when choosing a candidate to study abroad, and a person with disabilities may have less experience with interviews or public speaking than other students applying. As a result they may not do as well during the interview process or meet all the criteria. Please keep this in mind during the interview process and, if possible, include a person who has a disability or has experience in working with individuals with disabilities as part of your interview team. If you are not aware of anyone with these qualifications, seek assistance from a local organization that works with disabled individuals.

Once you have found a qualified candidate, you should determine exactly what the student's needs are.

Physical needs:

- Will the student need a wheelchair-accessible home (with a ramp, adapted toilet, etc.)?
- Can the student ride public transportation? Is a wheelchair-accessible transportation service available in the host community?
- Will the student need assistance in daily tasks, such as dressing?
- Will a visually impaired student need a volunteer to help with orientation to new surroundings?
- Does the student have any dietary restrictions?
- Does the student take any medications? Must the student be in the care of a physician during the exchange period? If so, how will you locate a doctor to assist with medical care?

Communication needs:

- Does the student communicate in sign language, orally, or in some combination of these two methods?
- Must the host family be able to communicate via sign language? What type of sign language?

Often you will find that what the student needs is readily available in your community and/or the host community.

Finding host district/host families

Once you have determined your student's needs, you will need to find the appropriate district to host a student with disabilities. Here are some tips for finding this district:

- Target districts that want to sponsor a disabled student themselves; frequently a reciprocal exchange can be arranged.
- Be sure to be specific about a student's needs when proposing the exchange to another district. Often, assumptions regarding a student's needs are well beyond the reality of the student's requirements.

If you are to host a disabled student, you will need to recruit appropriate host families. The following are some suggestions for recruiting host families:

- Organizations that provide services to individuals with disabilities are good places to recruit host families.
- The families of students participating in the program will often be willing to host students from other countries.

Need further assistance?

- Speak with students with disabilities in your community to learn what complications they would foresee experiencing if they were to travel abroad.
- Inquire about your local, state and federal laws regarding people with disabilities.
- Research organizations at your local library or contact Rotary International for further information on other organizations that may be willing to assist you.
- Contact RI to inquire which districts have organized exchanges for students with disabilities.