

## TITLE

Perceived benefits for community, organizations, volunteers, family and children with disabilities resulting from the use of teenage volunteers as carer's in recreation programs.

## ABSTRACT

## INTRODUCTION

Interchange Outer East is a community based, non profit organization that provides support to families, who have a child or a young adult with a disability. Established in 1982 as a single respite care service for 15 families, Interchange Outer East (IOE) has grown to reach over 700 families in 2006 as a direct result of responding to families needs.

At IOE there are five recreation programs which utilize volunteers who are matched 1:1 with children with disabilities. These are community based activities where the volunteers provide the safety, supervision and fun for those children, while the paid staff members provide personal care, medical attention and all additional support.

The study was initiated as a result of the following perceived benefits to IOE that have been associated with using teenage volunteers.

**Benefit number 1. Volunteers, who volunteered as teenagers, grow to become adults in the community who are dedicated to maintaining a socially just society.**

Teenagers who work with people with disabilities in a positive manner at such a crucial stage of their social development – find that this is influential in creating an adult who is willing to make a difference in their community.

A study in the US, Giles & Eyler, (1994), cited in Locke, Rowe, Oliver, (2004) reported that youth who carried out community service, said it helped them be aware of community needs and programs, develop and implement service projects and be committed to community service now and later in life. Many past volunteers at IOE have influential careers in disability and related fields, like public advocates, managers in disability related agencies and person centered planning coordinators.

**Benefit number 2. Increased respite hours:** In 2004 – 2005, IOE recreation volunteers accounted for the delivery of 22,477 hours of respite care. This amounts to 432.25 hours of every day of the year for families at IOE. If this is converted to dollar terms, this equates to \$7,348.25 per day and \$382,109 per year. In 2005 -2006 this figure of hours is set to reach 25, 978 due to the opening of yet another teenage volunteer assisted program.

**Benefit number 3. Increased number of programs offered by the agency.** Michael Gourlay, CEO of the Association for Children with a Disability (2001) maintains that without the appropriate levels of funding, increasing children and young people's social and community inclusion is very difficult. IOE suggest that, an affordable option for 1:1 supervision on programs is the use of teenage volunteers who, as well being the preferred option of carer, cut the cost of paying staff and allows more individuals to receive much needed respite. At IOE, the 2005 -2006 figures of respite hours come from 5 separate

programs which service 303 individuals receiving a service from IOE they would not receive without teenage volunteers.

**Benefit number 4. Increased retention rate of personnel within the organization.**

At IOE, there are 5 staff who have been full time with IOE for 5 years or more and 25% of existing staff who began their time at IOE as teenage volunteers.

The staff who volunteered with IOE in their teens, know the participants better and have stronger relationships with the families. This is then associated with a better quality of care, an ease of program facilitation and an easier shift for families from recreation programs to other IOE programs. Volunteers', who become staff, also know the organization better. They have potential to move to casual carer positions within the organization, are quality mentors for other volunteers, do more recruiting of friends and family, and are the first choice for permanent staff and coordinator roles.

**Benefit number 5. Increased social benefits for participants - both volunteers and children with disabilities.** The importance of social networks and friendships has been well documented. Archeson (1998) argues the following

*“People with good social networks live longer, are at reduced risk of coronary heart disease, are less likely to report being depressed or to suffer a recurrence of cancer and are less susceptible to infectious illness than those with poor networks.”*

(Archeson, 1998)

IOE believe that the better person to offer a model of friendship most consistent with traditional models of friendship is a person closest to the individual's age. So, providing a volunteer who is closer in age than their 18 + counterparts is more beneficial for a child's social development.

The social benefits for teenage volunteers that have been reported so far at IOE which include, higher rate of school attendances than before volunteering, better relationships with family and higher levels of acceptance in responsibility.

## OBJECTIVE

The aim of the study is to demonstrate that the use of teenage volunteers is an innovative model of respite that enhances a range of outcomes, which should be supported by the Victorian Government.

It is hypothesized that this model is more effective than using over 18 year olds alone, in terms of personal development for volunteers, service provision and the multitude of benefits for the organization, families, future volunteers and the community.

IOE suggest that the reason for the current level of success as a volunteer organization is the model used to recruit and maintain this age group.

## METHOD

The demographics of the area will be examined in two sections. The initial phase will examine volunteer patterns across similar organizations with recreation programs,

specifically focusing on whether they use teenage volunteers, the number of volunteers they have, the number of programs offered, the number of respite hours they offer and whether other funding affects their choice of programs.

The second phase of the study will be an analysis of the IOE volunteer program and how it has affected the demographics within paid staff roles.

An exploratory qualitative study in 2 parts will also be conducted. The first analysis will be on volunteers' perceptions of benefits of volunteering as teenagers, including topics of self esteem and future roles in society. The second analysis will be on family's perceptions of the benefits of using teenage volunteers. These will be measured using a reliable questionnaire format.

## RESULTS

The study is currently still in progress, however the data suggest the following results may be anticipated.

- Increased respite hours.
- Increased number of programs offered by the agency.
- Increased retention rate of personnel within the organization.
- Increased social benefits for participants, both volunteers and children with disabilities.
- Stronger relationships between families and the organization.
- Increased numbers of professionals in the community industry.

## DISCUSSION

As the formal study is incomplete and the results unclear, the discussion is not finalized either. The results are fully expected to support the agency's existing assumptions.

## REFERENCES

- Acheson D (1998), Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health, The Stationary Office, London.
- Gourlay M, (2001), Preschool – Platform for a Life of Inclusion, Notice Board – Magazine of the Association for Children with a Disability Inc., November
- Locke F, Rowe P, Oliver R, (2004), The Impact of Participation in the Community Service Component of the Student Work and Service Program on Students' Continuing Involvement in the Voluntary, Community-Based Sector.