

Self-Disclosure

As the disabilities coordinator for KCCVS, it is my job to recruit people with disabilities to participate in Kentucky AmeriCorps programs. In so doing, I am asking them to reveal, or self disclose, to others that they have disabilities. A wide network of information, referrals, accommodations and services is available to help AmeriCorps members with disabilities; however, before I can offer these services to prospective members, they first must self disclose that they have disabilities. Disclosing a disability isn't always an easy thing for people to do.

People with disabilities often hesitate to self disclose because of negative reactions they sometimes get from friends, co-workers or strangers. They fear that by knowing about their disability, people will avoid them, make fun of them or treat them like a child. Many people won't acknowledge they have a disability and may go to great lengths to conceal it if possible. This is especially true of learning disorders and other cognitive or hidden disabilities.

Undisclosed hidden disorders often are a source of ridicule and teasing, not to mention embarrassment. Many people are unfairly accused of being "stupid" who have cognitive disorders that make it difficult for them to read, do math or get along well with others. Not all hidden disabilities are cognitive in nature. People with heart conditions, for instance, may be considered lazy because they aren't as physically active as others are. But to many people with disabilities, those unfair labels and attitudes are preferable to having others know they have disabilities.

Someone with epilepsy may choose not to disclose her condition rather than deal with the fears and prejudices of others who may not fully understand her disorder and the reaction and overreaction of friends and co-workers once she discloses that she has a disability.

Among those who often experience dramatic negative reactions from others are people with HIV and AIDS. Once HIV positive status or AIDS is disclosed, people may be subjected to attitudes ranging from sympathy and coddling to loathing and rejection, all the result of misinformation and irrational fear.

Misconceptions about disabilities, conditions and diseases stem from a lack of information and education and lingering societal fears of contagion. In spite of great strides in both medicine and basic attitudes, fears and misperceptions still exist and people with disabilities still suffer indignities and hardships as a result, which lead many to choose to keep their disabilities a secret.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a disability is an impairment or physiological disorder or condition that results in substantial limitation of basic activities that the average person in the general population can perform with little or no difficulty, such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning and working.

I encourage prospective AmeriCorps members to self disclose their disabilities to fellow AmeriCorps members, their site supervisor, their program director, or to me as their disabilities coordinator especially when those disabilities may interfere with performing tasks or functions related to their service duties. By stating, either verbally or in writing, that a disability exists, a person with a disability is then afforded and entitled to all the protections and provisions of the ADA. Disability related information provided in writing is, by law, kept confidential and

separate from other personnel documents and may only be shared with others on a need-to-know basis.

It is up to each person to decide whether, when, how and to whom he or she will self disclose his or her disability. But, unless or until self-disclosure is made, a person with a disability is not protected by the ADA. Kentucky AmeriCorps programs are required to recruit members with disabilities and provide those members with reasonable accommodations to allow them to perform their service. Since the law prohibits asking if or assuming that a person has a disability, no matter how obvious a disability may appear, documentation of and accommodations for a disability cannot be provided until self disclosure has occurred. If the individual does not self disclose, he or she is not protected by the ADA and accommodations cannot be provided.

That is why it is important for AmeriCorps members who have a disability, either visible or hidden, to disclose that fact to someone in their chain of command. Even if they do not require an accommodation today, the self-disclosure could reduce the response time for a needed accommodation later, especially if medical documentation is required.