

Inclusive Volunteerism in Action: The Northwest Youth Corps' ASL Inclusion Crew!

Posted on [November 16, 2015](#) by [Admin](#)

The following is a guest blog by Emma Bixler, Inclusion Coordinator at [Northwest Youth Corps](#).

For the past two years, I worked with Northwest Youth Corps (NYC) as a crew leader with the American Sign Language (ASL) Inclusion Crew.

Leading the ASL Inclusion Crews, I have worked with some of the hardest working youth. Their motivation to improve, work together, and move forward on projects impressed me and other people who heard about my crews. We completed projects to the highest expectations of the forest service, local land agencies, and state parks. This past summer, media outlets interviewed us multiple times throughout our session and each time when I prepped my crew for the interview, they would ask me, “Are they just interviewing us because we are Deaf?”



I wanted to say it was only because they were hard young workers, whose work and dedication to our projects deserved recognition. But in all reality, the hearing community is frequently unaware of the contributions of people in the Deaf Community and that there are plenty of fully capable Deaf individuals out there in the workforce.

Northwest Youth Corps offers a residential summer program where crews of youth go out and work on weekly projects in the wilderness such as cleaning up and restoring trails, removing invasive species, and creating places for people and animals to better enjoy the environment. The youth work and live together as a crew for up to six weeks at a time. In addition to working, the youth follow an educational curriculum that teaches environmental science, job skills, and leadership development. The crews work separately on projects throughout the state during the week and on the weekend meet up with other crews at a site where they can relax and interact with each other.

Two years ago, NYC formed their first American Sign Language (ASL) Inclusion Crew, which was a mixture of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and hearing youth. This created an immersion environment in ASL and Deaf Culture. This summer NYC expanded the program and formed their first all Deaf and Hard of Hearing crew. During the weekends, this crew would meet up

with other crews of hearing youth who had been learning ASL and about Deaf culture during the week. Organizing the program this way balanced an accessible and safe environment during the week with an inclusive and educational environment on weekends.

For Northwest Youth Corps, inclusion has not only meant inclusion within NYC but within the greater community as well. Like all NYC crews, the ASL Inclusion crew worked closely with different land agencies. Typically, agencies' employees haven't had the opportunity to work or interact with Deaf people before working with the ASL Inclusion Crew. Each project was an opportunity to demonstrate that our crew was full of hardworking, capable, and curious individuals.

This past summer, the ASL Inclusion Crew was able to work with a Deaf employee from the U.S. Forest Service. She shared her personal experiences looking for a job and working in the outdoors. She didn't look at our crew as 'the Deaf crew' but instead saw each youth's individual abilities and supported their personal experiences.

Although the ASL Inclusion Crew is relatively new to NYC's programs, NYC sees diversity as an important focus within its programs and is committed to growing and learning along with each crew member and crew leader they hire.

All youth, including youth with disabilities, can benefit personally and professionally by volunteering. Youth Service Professionals like Emma, have an important role to play in helping youth with disabilities select an opportunity that matches their needs, interests, and goals, and, if necessary assisting them in advocating for their inclusion and addressing potential barriers. For more information, check out [Fostering Inclusive Volunteering and Service Learning](#), NCWD/Youth's guide which provides information useful to youth service professionals and others interested in facilitating youth engagement in volunteer activities. It describes how youth benefit from volunteering, different types of volunteer opportunities, and ways to assist youth to prepare for, access, and learn from their experiences. It also provides relevant resources and tools that can enhance and foster successful outcomes.

Learn more about the [NYC ASL Inclusion Crew!](#)

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