



# Mississippi Valley Therapeutic Horsemanship

192 Hope Hill, Oak Ridge, MO 63769



## Volunteer Orientation & Training: Meeting People With Disabilities

### When you meet a person with a disability:

If you have never had the opportunity to meet people with disabilities, this aspect of working at a NARHA center can be intimidating and a little frightening at first. You may be feeling insecure about how to act or react to people who may look, sound, move, and behave differently than how you would usually expect. It can also be unsettling to meet a person who you know has a terminal illness or the parent of a teenage child who has cognitive limitations. What should you say? What is the best way to help? These questions and the feelings of uncertainty they bring with them are perfectly normal. You need not be embarrassed by them.

### Here are some basic suggestions on how to relate to individuals with disabilities:

- A person with a disability is an individual first and is entitled to the same dignity, respect, and considerations as anyone.
- Treat adults as adults. Only call an adult person with a disability by his/her first name after asking for that privilege.
- Only help a person with a disability if they ask for assistance. You may offer assistance, but if declined, do not be offended.
- When assisting an individual with a disability, always ask "how" you can help. Do not take over.
- Always address the person with a disability directly. Do not speak about them as if they are not present.
- Do not shout. Hearing aids make noises louder, not clearer. Blindness does not affect a person's hearing.
- If a person has difficulty speaking, allow them to finish their sentence. If you do not understand what they are saying, tell them so. Do not pretend to understand if you didn't.
- When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself. Tell them you are leaving before walking away.
- Do not push a person's wheelchair, grab their arm, or try to help without asking first. Never move someone's crutches, walker, cane, service animal, or other mobility aid without permission.
- When speaking to a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair, find yourself a chair or crouch down at a comfortable distance so that you can converse on the same level.
- When speaking to someone with a hearing impairment, speak slowly, clearly, and face them directly.

### "People First" language:

- The individual is always placed before the disability. It is a "person with a disability", not a "disabled person".
- Never refer to a person by their disability. The accepted terminology is "a person who is blind" and "a person who has paraplegia", NOT "a blind person" or "paraplegic".
- People are NOT "confined" or "bound" to a wheelchair. They use these devices as mobility aids to enhance their freedom. It is more appropriate to say "a person who uses a wheelchair".
- Completely avoid emotional laden terms such as "suffering with a disease", "afflicted with...", "burdened by...", and etc. A person with a disability may "have" an illness or be "challenged" by a condition, but one should never assume that a person is suffering, burdened, or afflicted.
- When writing or speaking about individuals with disabilities, always focus on ability, accomplishment, and quality of life.
- Avoid using "us" and "them" language when speaking of people with disabilities versus people who are able-bodied. Statistics have shown that most able-bodied people will experience a disability at some point in their life.
- We are all people first!

### Building supportive, safe, and appropriate relationships:

As a MVTH volunteer, your role is to be a helpful presence and to support the staff in whatever way you are asked. Over time your role will develop friendships and personal relationships with center participants of all ages. This is a wonderful benefit of being a MVTH volunteer, as it allows you to become part of the lives of a variety of people and lets you share your personal skills and talents.

Since many MVTH participants are children, you will get to know parents, grandparents, and siblings of participants who may come along to observe a lesson. You may get to participate in the rehabilitation of participants who may be recovering from an injury, or share the progress and setbacks of participants who have particular life challenges. You must prepare yourself for clients who, due to their disability or personality, may be difficult, possibly rude, or overly dependent and attached to you. Remaining professional will help you deal with those situations.

The key to building supportive, safe, and appropriate volunteer relationships is to help where you can, but keep in mind that you are a MVTH volunteer- NOT a psychologist, a counselor, or therapist. Understand your limits and role. After the lesson, volunteers are encouraged to privately discuss their observations on the effectiveness of the lesson and the progress made by the participant with the instructor. Recognize and respect the instructor's authority to set goals for the rider, and utilize their preferred activities to help the participant reach their goals.

Volunteer Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_