

# Volunteering After Spinal Cord Injury

## A Resource for Volunteer Supervisors

### WHY CONSIDER A VOLUNTEER WITH SCI?

Most individuals with a spinal cord injury (SCI) have a work history and set of skills from their experience prior to their injury. Many went to school, began a career, raised a family, and held a job(s) before they were injured. They may have advanced degrees, military experience and a wide range of life experiences. Even though they may no longer be able to fulfill the physical demands of a full-time job, people with SCI still bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their roles as volunteers. Volunteering also improves the psychological wellbeing of people who participate in volunteering activities compared to people who do not.

People with SCI may need ongoing support and accommodations at a volunteer site. Someone with paraplegia may need an accessible bathroom, handicapped parking and access to the building or workspace. Someone with high-level tetraplegia may need help with positioning or personal care assistance during his or her shift. His or her own health care provider would provide help with personal care.

Job accommodations for a volunteer with SCI can include modifying work schedules, tasks or the work environment. Solutions can range from simple to high tech. Some examples include:

1. Raising the workspace, removing desk drawers to allow for wheelchair access, and/or adjusting the placement of the phone/monitor for ease of access
2. Ensuring aisles, workspaces and restroom areas are clear of objects for wheelchair access
3. Special software and hardware that allows for hands-free access for someone with limited to no use of their hands (these would be provided by the volunteer)
4. Adjusting work hours to accommodate a volunteer's morning care needs (this may mean a later start and end to the work day)

**Most importantly,** ask the individual what accommodations they might need to be successful.

### QUICK FACTS ABOUT SCI

- **Spinal cord injury (SCI)** is the result of damage to the nerves within the spinal canal, most often the result of trauma to the vertebral column. After such trauma, the spinal cord's ability to send and receive messages from the brain to the body's systems that control movement, sensation, bladder control and other bodily functions are impaired. The parts of the body impacted depend on where the spinal cord is damaged.



- People with **tetraplegia**, or quadriplegia, have injuries to one of the eight cervical vertebrae of the spinal cord that affects the use of all four limbs. Those with **paraplegia** have injuries to the thoracic, lumbar or sacral regions and generally have the use of their hands and arms.

- There are approximately **300,000 people in the U.S. living with SCI**, and about 80% are male. SCI primarily affects young adults. Motor vehicle crashes account for most cases, second is falls, followed by violent acts (primarily gunshot wounds) (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center).



- Many people with a variety of skills do not return to work after SCI. One year after injury, only **18%** of those employed pre-injury had returned to competitive work, rising to **32%** at 30 years post injury (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center).
- The average age at injury has increased from 29 years during the 1970s to **43** since 2015.
- Since 2015, about **25%** of persons with SCI have a college degree at the time of their injury.

