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DISABLED HOCKEY WORKSHOP MEETS VIRTUALLY TO GROW THE GAME

By Heather Rule, 11/19/20, 11:15AM MST

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Day-long workshop explored all aspects of setting up disabled hockey programs for growth and success

Video conferences have become the norm in 2020 and this year's USA Hockey Disabled Hockey Workshop followed suit.

The virtual workshop consisted of four segments on Nov. 14, starting with fundraising and grant writing; volunteer recruitment, management and retention; and inclusion & collaboration within disabled hockey. The day ended with a two-hour virtual town hall discussing disabled hockey growth, news and upcoming events.

"Any way we can grow disabled hockey, we're going to try," said Alfredo Corona, who runs the Dallas Sled Hockey team and is the USA Hockey Rocky Mountain District representative for USA Hockey's disabled hockey section.

The virtual workshop actually opened it up to a wider audience, Corona said, because all participants needed was a computer at home, rather than trying to figure out travel.

"You can have numerous people in these workshops and you can get a lot more out of them, as far as I'm concerned, because all the information is right there," Corona said. "You have an open environment so you can ask any kind of question you want."



Disabled Workshop

Participants asked questions and connected via the chat window, getting the ball rolling for follow-up interactions as well.

In the inclusion and collaboration session, Corona wanted to make sure participants knew that multiple groups within disabled hockey can work together to meet the same goal. For example, having one disabled hockey ambassador present plans to organizations to streamline communication.

To help grow disabled hockey, it's important to look at what programs exist, he added. He was part of an established sled hockey program in Dallas, when a blind hockey program started. Corona invited the blind hockey program to practice with sled hockey, splitting the sheet of ice in the middle using dividers and lessening the cost of ice time.



Disabled Hockey Home

That's a prime example of how collaboration can work out, netting better results than if a discipline tries to go at it alone. Some might not think of putting blind hockey and sled hockey together on the ice, according to Corona.

"When you split up the ice, it does help everyone," Corona said. "We're multiple disciplines and we can all help each other."

Corona joined together with Lonny Evans in presenting about inclusion and collaboration to share best practices about growing individual programs. Evans oversees the Minnesota Wild Blind Hockey program, in its third season.

Key concepts included creating opportunities and cultivating relationships. Part of this allows people to understand the effects of disabled hockey programs and how they change lives, Evans said. He encouraged workshop participants to share individual stories that help tell the big-picture pieces with others as part of cultivating relationships.

In his presentation, Evans talked about a Minnesota Wild blind hockey player named Mike, who offered these words to share with the group: "Living with vision loss for over 50 years, a lot of things have been taken from me, including hockey. Oct. 29, 2019, I took hockey back."

"If you hear that and it doesn't resonate with you, it's probably not going to click ever," Evans said.

These personalized stories help break down the overwhelming numbers regarding people with disabilities and it might give someone inspiration to get involved, whether financially or as a volunteer, to help change people's lives, Evans said.

Evans also discussed how programs can continue with dignity. These programs don't need to bring people dignity, because it's already theirs, but instead disabled hockey can do a lot to reinforce that dignity based on interactions with disabled hockey players.

Even something like encouraging disabled hockey players to wear their jerseys to school is a great way to grow the programs, according to Evans. It might get people to ask questions or players to share their stories.

"I just think anything we can do to get the word out there that doesn't cheapen our product or strip away someone's dignity," Evans said.

Earlier in the workshop, Ashley Thomas, founder and CEO of Bridge II Sports, led the session on volunteer recruitment. She discussed the roles of parents and coaches within disabled hockey organizations. Creating boundaries is step No. 1 in building volunteers, because boundaries help people live in-tune with their desires, needs and feelings, Thomas presented.

In order for disabled hockey programs to get quality volunteers, Thomas recommends writing a job description for the roles to determine what a group is looking for and the type of skills a person needs to fulfill a role. A job description should give a clear understanding and expectation of the volunteer role and answer questions about time commitments, necessary skills and other specific needs.



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"You've got to identify the need," Thomas said. "I think that's just really clarifying the different roles and then saying, 'We're looking for volunteers to do this specific task,' and then honor that."

She also discussed the roles of parents within disabled sports; Bridge II Sports doesn't allow parents to coach. Parents have a lot on their plates caring for children with disabilities, and that care is their first role, according to Thomas. Plus, this eliminates any friction caused by a parent's bias toward his or her child.

Parents help with phone trees, in groups of three, and, as with any other sport, help with fundraising, Thomas said.

As far as volunteer retention, honoring volunteers and making a point to let them know "we couldn't do it without these volunteers," Thomas said.

Finding the right roles for volunteers goes a long way, too. If someone finds a passion and fulfilling work as a volunteer, they will stay, Thomas said, adding that it's why the job descriptions are so important.

"The thing is, if you get the right fit, you do create sustainability," Thomas said.

Ultimately, if a disabled hockey program wants to find good volunteers, it takes work, like trying to find corporate sponsors or teaching a drill, Thomas said. If they want to grow in disability sports, it means having qualified people in key roles.

Story from Red Line Editorial, Inc.

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