

U: SND Committees

MODULE U: SPECIAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES (SND) COMMITTEES

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All BSA councils can benefit from cultivating knowledgeable local resources (volunteers, professionals, and consultants) to help districts, units, leaders, and families; providing special needs information and strategies. Approximately 15% of BSA youth^[1] are known to have special needs/disabilities and there are more that have not been formally diagnosed or who keep that information private. This module discusses how to provide this support with a Council Committee or an individual champion. **One size does not fit all**, but however you decide to organize your committee, the overall goal remains the same: Provide support to Scouts with special needs and their leaders, to ensure the fullest possible participation in the Scouting program. **Most special needs & disabilities committees will start with a limited number of goals that address the Council's most pressing needs.** Over time, the work of the committee typically broadens as new opportunities are identified and volunteers recruited. A successful committee is one that is responsive to the needs of its Scouting Community.

This usually begins with an individual, a “special needs/disabilities inclusion specialist” or “champion”, who advises leaders and fields questions for youth who have special needs/disabilities. Over time, as the council sees new opportunities and better understands its special needs population, this often leads to forming a committee to better serve this population. Depending on the needs of the council, this group is often organized first as a subcommittee of advancement or membership, but it can be much more than this. While it may start out with a particular focus, in time we recognize that such a committee will touch on every key element^[2] of the council.

PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES FOR A COMMITTEE

Each council knows its own needs and priorities best, and the charter of a special needs & disabilities committee[3] needs to reflect those priorities. The following lists of possible purposes and objectives are more comprehensive than most councils have resources for. Do not let this overwhelm you. Instead, **think of these as a menu of possibilities for your council to choose from.** There is no single way to run such a committee and no one expects a special needs & disabilities committee to do everything that is listed here.

Membership[4] – grow the number of youth participating in Scouting by encouraging recruitment and retention of youth with special needs[5]

- Identify special needs service organizations and schools that could charter a Scout unit
- Identify special needs organizations and schools that could host a parent talk, youth talk, or recruiting rally
- Have special needs and disability specialists on-call to help individuals and units during recruiting drives
- Develop relationships with other organizations that Scouts could serve, enhancing goodwill and building the reputation of Scouting in the community
- Promote inclusion of youth with special needs into traditional Scouting units
- Consult with people who want to found a special-purpose Scout unit for a specific disability
- Encourage units to make use of adults with special needs as leaders
- Organize membership surveys to identify what kinds of special needs are represented and in what numbers
- Facilitate the registration of Lone Scouts where that is the best program option for the Scout.

Training/Leader Development – develop volunteer leaders that are prepared to serve Scouts with special needs or disabilities

- Provide one-on-one consulting for leaders, Scouts, or families that are having struggles in the Scouting program
- Organize and teach training sessions at the district or council levels (Roundtables, University of Scouting, College of Commissioner Science, etc.)
- Support youth and adults with disabilities in participating fully in other training, such as Wood Badge or NYLT
- Help recruit leaders/adults with special needs or disabilities to serve on training course staff
- Disseminate newsletters and training materials developed by the national special needs & disabilities committee
- Support camp staff training
- Promote and complete nomination procedures for BSA and non-BSA awards and recognitions for volunteers and youth in the council's special needs programs

- Encourage volunteers and professionals to attend national special needs conferences at the Philmont Training Center (summer) and Sea Base (January)

Advancement

- Consult with Scouts, parents, guardians, and unit leaders that need to come up with alternative advancement requirements and merit badges
- Help people use the required forms for requests for advancement alternatives and registration beyond the age of eligibility
- Advise the council advancement committee as they review applications for alternative requirements and merit badges
- Advise the committee designated by the council executive board [\[6\]](#) as they review applications for registration beyond the age of eligibility
- Consult with units and districts that are performing boards of review for Scouts with special needs

Commissioners

- Serve as a resource for commissioners when a unit has a struggle related to special needs or disabilities
- Maintain a library of reference literature that commissioners can use with units
- Provide commissioner service to Lone Scout Friends/Counselors

Liaison/Communication

- Advocate for Scouts, Scouters, and participating family members with disabilities as they interact with the Scouting organization
- Recruit/maintain a special needs/disabilities inclusion specialist for each district
- Assist with council websites and media communication to maintain awareness of special needs
- Seek out and share stories of accomplishments by Scouts in your council who have overcome difficulties or have served the special needs community
- Identify people with specific skills or knowledge in special needs to serve as consultants or committee members
- Maintain lines of communication with the national special needs & disabilities committee as well as area and region special needs champions
- Ensure that the needs of youth with special needs and disabilities are included in the local council strategic plan, integrating the key issues from the National Strategic Plan

Camping/Program/Facilities – Provide guidance and resources to the council, districts, and units for reducing barriers at facilities and using technologies for overcoming remaining barriers.

- Consult with camp activity directors to create accommodations that allow Scouts with special needs and disabilities to participate and enjoy as many activities as they wish to.

- Recommend special equipment needed for persons with disabilities
- Develop and staff a council-wide disabilities challenge (experience) event, using traditional Scouts and leaders as staff. Such events will be underwritten as much as possible by community resources. Maximizing public exposure should be considered.
- Assist with planning of district and council events to assure all can participate
- Assist the Order of the Arrow chapter in identifying projects that will benefit campers with special needs

Finance/Development

- Identify and prioritize facility improvements and equipment purchases to increase access and opportunities for youth to participate fully in Scouting
- Solicit individuals and groups willing to fund improvements to support those with special needs
- Solicit funds for camperships for Scouts with special needs and to cover extra expenses for caregivers to attend camp
- Seek grants to support the council's special needs programs
- Seek in-kind donations or loans of equipment and supplies
- Provide tours of existing council facilities for potential donors to show what is needed and how it will be implemented
- Provide reports to supporters to show how their resources benefited youth

HOW TO CREATE A COUNCIL SPECIAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES COMMITTEE

This discussion assumes that your council already has an individual special needs/disabilities inclusion specialist in place. This person is likely to be the seed for building a committee, and may serve as its first chair. Here is a recommended process for growing to the next level. Remember the Area and Region special needs and disabilities champions stand ready to offer advice and support during this process.

- Council President in consultation with the Scout Executive recruits a committee chair
- Scout Executive appoints a staff adviser for the committee.
- The committee chair and staff adviser determine the potential for the council to serve youth with disabilities. They make a preliminary survey to:
 - assess how many Scouts in the council have special needs or disabilities, what needs are present, and which districts/units they are located in^[7]
 - estimate the Total Available Youth (TAY) with disabilities or special needs in the council or district territory^[8]
 - develop a list of local agencies and organizations that serve persons with disabilities or are interested in serving them, who could partner with BSA for events
 - survey commissioners and unit leaders to identify the most important needs for the council
 - develop a list of potential chartered organizations and recruiting

- partners[9]
 - develop a list of interested persons and organizations that could be funding sources for special needs Scouting programs
- The Council President, Scout Executive, committee chair, and staff advisor identify the priorities for the committee and establish its initial charter (scope of work)
- The committee chair and staff adviser recruit people with interest and knowledge to serve Scouting for youth with disabilities or special needs to serve on the committee. The committee composition includes the skill set to support the current objectives.
- The committee holds launch events/meetings at the district level to explain what the committee will do and how it will help local Scouting
- The committee hosts a disabilities awareness training opportunity
- Once the committee is established and functioning, make plans to periodically reassess council needs and update the committee charter to prioritize those needs. A survey to identify numbers of Scouts being served can be done alongside the recharter process each year[10]. The composition of the committee may need to be realigned to support updated objectives.

RECRUITING ADVOCATES FOR A COMMITTEE

People who know how to serve youth with special needs/disabilities come from a variety of backgrounds. The best recruits for this committee will have a passion for working with these youth, and may have experiential or professional backgrounds with specific disabilities. If you ask around, you may find that there are Scout volunteers who are already doing this kind of work on their own. You may also find volunteers that are already serving in health and safety, shooting sports, outdoor program, and other elements of the council organization. In addition, you can look for parents of Scouts with disabilities, special educators, medical professionals, caregivers, adults who have disabilities, and volunteers for affinity organizations that serve a specific disability or special need. These are all excellent sources for committee members. The search team should try to identify the skills needed to support the assigned committee objectives. For example, if advancement support is a key objective, the team will want some members who understand the prevalent disabilities in the council, know advancement requirements, and are able to understand how a given disability will pose a significant challenge for a Scout (and therefore what alternatives make unique sense for that Scout.) The search should also consider Scout volunteers and members of the community who have expertise in accessibility issues and adaptive technology and devices.

ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATION STRUCTURES

The objectives chosen for your council's special needs & disabilities committee will determine where the committee would best fit into the council organizationally. Here are a few suggested alternative structures:

- The council committee can be a stand-alone committee answering to the

Council Executive Board and providing support to all other council committees.

- Where program functions comprise the key objectives (activities, advancement, camping, training), the committee can be a subcommittee within Program, providing input and support to the other Program subcommittees.
- Where advancement is the key objective, the committee can be a subcommittee to the council advancement committee.
- Where membership is the key objective, the committee reports to the council membership committee.
- The committee could be a “matrix” committee made up of representatives/liasons from each of the other council operating committees
- The committee could function as a separate district, with its own district structure and serving Scouts, leaders and units who have special needs/disabilities throughout the council

Aside from the organizational position, the council executive board will want to consider whether to make the lead volunteer a member of the council executive board and what title to assign the lead volunteer.

NATIONAL SPECIAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES NETWORK

At the time of this writing (2022) a national network is in its infancy. The representative element at the National Council is the National Special Needs & Disabilities Committee, which is currently part of the Program Development Support Committee. The near-term effort is to have an identified special needs and disabilities awareness champion for each Council, Area, and Region. A private Facebook group “BSA Special Needs Champion Network” has been created for these champions to communicate with one another and with the national committee^[11]. It is envisioned that these champions will be an integral part of the Program Committee at the Area and Region levels. In time, it is expected that special needs & disabilities committees will be formed at the Area and Region levels as well.

The intent of this network is to transfer information on best practices throughout the BSA organization and thereby support the successful delivery of the Scouting program to all youth. The network is expected to be a path for good ideas and unforeseen challenges to come in from the grassroots as well as for special needs/disabilities-related information to go out from the national committee. A second intent is to place knowledgeable specialists as close to their clients as practical within the BSA organizational structure.

The Area/Region champions are expected to support councils in forming their own special needs and disabilities committees and in identifying their goals. The champions would have deep knowledge of official BSA information on special needs/disabilities and the processes for providing a quality program for all youth. They would also acquire an understanding of the laws and regulations for the states in their area or region that relate to special needs and disabilities.

[1] In this Inclusion Toolbox, the words “youth” and “Scout” includes chronological adults who are registered beyond the age of eligibility (RBAE) and are functioning as youth in Scouting units.

[2] e.g., membership growth, advancement, outdoor program, training, properties, finance, and development

[3] There are a number of different names that councils are using for these committees. There is no specific recommended name for this group.

[4] See Footnote 5

[5] Ability diversity is another dimension of inclusion/diversity to keep in mind when growing membership, alongside gender, ethnicity, economic status, and religious affiliation.

[6] In this module, functions related to registration beyond the age of eligibility (RBAE) have been listed under Advancement because the procedures are described in the Guide to Advancement (BSA 33088). To be precise, review of RBAE applications is a responsibility of the council executive board, but the board can delegate this responsibility to another committee or group. While most often this is the council advancement committee, it could be the membership committee or some other group of council volunteers.

[7] A Council Special Needs & Disabilities Membership Tool (survey form) is available from the National Special Needs & Disabilities committee for you to tailor to this purpose.

[8] In general, we expect to see a higher percentage of special needs and disabilities in Scouting than in the general population due to the flexibility built into our program. You will need to be thoughtful about using estimates from educational organizations, advocacy groups, and government agencies; and adjust for the limitations in their primary data and the purposes for which they developed their estimates.

[9] A recruiting partner in this context is an organization that does not or cannot charter a unit but will give an audience to a recruiting presentation. Many schools and service organizations fall into this category.

[10] See footnote 7

[11] Other resources you may be interested in are the “Abilities Digest” and “No Scout Left Behind: A Guide to Working with Scouts with Disabilities” Facebook groups and AbleScouts.org. The national committee can also be reached at SpecialNeedsChair@scouting.org