BSA FACT SHEET

Scouts With Disabilities and Special Needs

Background

Since its founding in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America has had fully participating members with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities. Dr. James E. West, the first Chief Scout Executive, was himself disabled. Although most of the BSA's efforts have been directed at keeping such boys in the mainstream of Scouting, it has also recognized the special needs of those with severe disabilities.

The *Boy Scout Handbook* has had braille editions for many years; merit badge pamphlets have been recorded on cassette tapes for blind Scouts; and closed-caption training videos have been produced. In 1965, registration of over-age Scouts with mental retardation became possible—a privilege now extended to many people with disabilities.

Today, approximately 100,000 Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Venturers with disabilities are registered with the Boy Scouts of America in more than 4,000 units chartered to community organizations.

Recognition of Needs

The basic premise of Scouting for youth with disabilities is that they want most to participate like other youth—and Scouting gives them that opportunity. Thus, much of the program for Scouts with disabilities is directed at (1) helping unit leaders develop an awareness of disabled people among youth without disabilities, and (2) encouraging the inclusion of Scouts with disabilities in Cub Scout packs, Boy Scout troops, Varsity Scout teams, Venturing crews, and Sea Scout ships.

There are many units, however, composed of members with identical disabilities—such as an all-blind Boy Scout troop or an all-deaf Cub Scout pack—but these disabled members are encouraged to participate in Scouting activities at the district, council, area, regional, and national levels along with other Scouts. Many of these special Scouting units are located in special schools or centers that make the Scouting program part of their curriculum.

Many of the approximately 315 BSA local councils have established their own advisory committees for Scouts with disabilities. These committees develop and coordinate an effective Scouting program for youth with disabilities, using all available community resources. Local councils also are encouraged to provide accessibility in their camps by removing physical barriers so that Scouts with disabilities can participate in summer and resident camp experiences. Some local councils also have professional staff members responsible for the program for members with disabilities.

Advancement Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Varsity Scouts, and Venturers with disabilities participate in the same program as do their peers.

The BSA's policy has always been to treat members with disabilities as much like other members as possible, but it has been traditional to make some accommodations in advancement requirements if necessary. A Scout with a permanent physical or mental disability may select an alternate merit badge in lieu of a required merit badge if his disabling condition prohibits the Scout from completing the necessary requirements of a particular required merit badge. This substitute should provide a "similar learning experience." Full guidelines and explanations are available through the BSA local council and on the Application for Alternate Eagle Scout Rank Merit Badges, No. 58-730. The local council advancement committee must approve the application. A Scout may also request changes in the Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class ranks. The procedures are described in *Boy Scout Requirements Y2K*, No. 33215C.

This policy is designed to keep Scouts with disabilities as much in the mainstream as possible. Practical suggestions are made to leaders as to approaches and methods they can use. Thus, a Scout in a

wheelchair can meet the requirements for hiking by making a trip to places of interest in his community. Giving more time and permitting the use of special aids are other ways leaders can help Scouts with disabilities in their efforts to advance; the unit leader plays a crucial role in that effort.

Program Developments

BSA local councils have formed cooperative relationships with agencies, school districts, and other organizations in serving disabled people. Many of these organizations have played a part in the development of literature, audiovisuals aids, and media in braille for Scouts with disabilities and their leaders.

Each year, the BSA awards the national Woods Services Award to an adult in Scouting for serving disabled youth (given by the Woods Services in Langhorne, Pennsylvania). The Woods Services Award is the highest recognition awarded by the BSA in this area of service. The award is presented to that individual who has demonstrated exceptional service and leadership in the field of Scouting for disabled people. The Torch of Gold Award is available for similar presentation by local councils.

Other national support projects include materials relating to disabled people in the National Camping School syllabi as well as production of special manuals on Scouting for youth with emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, hearing impairment, physical disabilities, visual impairment, and mental retardation. A weeklong training course for people working with Scouts with disabilities is offered each summer at the Philmont Training Center.

In August 1977, the first handicap awareness trail was incorporated into the program of the national Scout jamboree at Moraine State Park in Pennsylvania. More than 5,000 Scouts participated. Since then, many local councils have created their own awareness trails, designed to make nondisabled people aware of the many problems faced by people with disabilities. Recent Scout jamborees have continued this tradition. Some local councils hold handicamporees and jamborettes that feature camping and outdoor activities for Scouts with disabilities.

An interpreter strip for Signing for the Deaf can be earned by all Scouts.

Requirements and merit badge pamphlet for a Disabilities Awareness merit badge were published in 1981 and revised in 1993. The purpose of this merit badge is to help many thousands of America's youth develop a positive attitude toward individuals with disabilities. This attitude, based on study and personal involvement of people with disabilities, creates an excellent foundation for acceptance, mainstreaming, and normalization of those who are disabled.

The learning experiences provided by working toward the Disabilities Awareness merit badge helps produce changes in the attitudes of America's youth as these boys pursue new experiences then share their new knowledge with friends.

In 1995, alternate requirements for Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class ranks were established. These requirements can be found in the "Scoutmaster's Guide to Working with Scouts with Disabilities" (No. 33056A).

More Information

Additional information and lists of literature and other aids are available from the Boy Scout Division, Cub Scout Division, and Council Services Division at the Boy Scouts of America, 1325 West Walnut Hill Lane, P.O. Box 152079, Irving, TX 75015-2079.