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Interview with Irv Segal

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INTERVIEW WITH IRV SEGAL

BY

DAVID L. GROVES

ABSTRACT

Irv Segal is President of Guided Tours. The specialty of this particular company is providing tours for special populations, for the physically handicapped and mentally retarded. He is one of the pioneers in the field and has had tremendous success with his operation by increasing the quality of life for this particular segment of the population.

PERSPECTIVE ON TRAVEL AND TOURISM FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Question 1: What has been one of the most important problems in operation of a travel and tourist business for the physically handicapped and mentally retarded?

Answer: Finances is the biggest problem because participants do not have the necessary capital resources to financially afford the travel. Most state and federal government agencies associated with special populations do not recognize the importance of travel as a component to enrich the life of special populations. They consider it a frill and not a necessity to the improvement in the quality of life. Therefore, regulations have been selectively designed to limit the amount of money available for extended visits outside most institutions and community based programs. These regulations have severely limited the number of opportunities and placed financial stress upon individuals who are trying to serve this particular population and utilize the travel experience as an enrichment element. In fact, those agencies that have geared their programs completely to government subsidy have been mortally damaged to the point that they are fighting for their very existence, and most have lost the battle. The way that we have survived has been that we have never geared a large part of our program to government subsidies. We have tied most of our efforts to private dollars. The primary challenge has been trying to find creative financing in ways to keep going and yet serving a wider population. The reality of these regulations and their impact has been felt in many ways. One example is that, in many states, the government has been able to directly audit the accounts of clients and remove money based upon its availability for what they consider the necessities, such as room and board. The basic problem is one of attitude that translates into regulation. It does not recognize the importance of the travel component to maintaining the quality of life and as an important element in the institutionalizing of many individuals.

Question 2: What are the most important impacts in the travel program upon the individual clients?

Answer: In addition to increasing the quality of life, one of the primary outcomes of the program is showing the individuals how to utilize resources to become more independent and also instill in them a desire for such independence. One example was a gentleman who had been in a community based program in a state institution for fifty-two years. He won a trip to New York City and, as a result of his travel, experience he has realized his potentials and abilities to function in the community. From this experience, he has taken subsequent trips and has obtained a job in the community that indicates a higher level of independence. These types of programs are helping many individuals see opportunities and instilling in them an attitude that helps them become deinstitutionalized and more independent. It is one of the few programs that can achieve this because its primary focus is outside and teaches the individual to use community resources.

Question 3: What are some of the more important operational aspects to conducting tours for special populations?

Answer: They are no different than any other population in terms of their basic needs. It may take more careful planning because of the public's attitudes and the need for accessibility in certain cases for the physically handicapped. The primary recommendation would be that the individual who is developing the tour first take the trip himself/herself to see what types of situations may be encountered and then project through his experience with special populations the particular needs of certain individuals. Any particular population cannot be stereotyped and the needs of the individuals must be met. Another essential element is the establishment of communications with administrative authorities of the facilities that are being used as well as the larger community in which the individual is working. There are many false assumptions about special populations and these myths can only be dispelled through better communication, and even more importantly, through having a successful experience. The key element to having a successful experience is close supervision and having the properly trained staff. It helps to eliminate the anxieties of the client and, therefore, put them in a state of mind in which they naturally react with the community to endear themselves and help change attitudes. In fact, one summer, I had a program at the seashore and a private home was rented in a very exclusive residential community. At the close of the season, the residents appointed a spokesperson to interact with us in hopes that we would become permanent residents of the community because of the positive interactions with our clients. This is not an atypical attitude, especially after interaction with a particular special population group. Once people understand, positive lines of communication can be established and, there are few problems. I have not encountered many problems in regard to peoples' attitudes toward special populations. I will say that attitudes have changed significantly and are continuing to change in terms of the community's attitudes toward special populations and their travel within and outside their community.