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Focus Group Synthesis for Increasing Access to Nature for People with Disabilities

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This report, along with several others, is informing the launching of a new initiative in New Jersey, *Access to Nature Forum: Collective Action for Disability Inclusion in NJ*, that is comprised of a planning committee that includes: the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, the New Jersey Department of Human Services Division of Disability Services, Duke Farms, and the Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.

This report was developed in conjunction with the New Jersey Division of Disability Services, New Jersey Department of Human Services, **Inclusive Healthy Communities** (IHC) grant program. IHC provides funding support to initiatives throughout New Jersey to advance lasting policy, systems, and environmental change that, through collaboration with people with disabilities, builds a healthier, more inclusive New Jersey.

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Executive Summary

This project is a component of a research-informed white paper focused on the challenges and opportunities associated with access to outdoor recreation for people with disabilities in New Jersey.

This report shares the key findings from three focus groups with people with disabilities across New Jersey, conducted by the study team in March and April 2023 in collaboration with community-based organizations focused on working with people with disabilities to increase their independence and expand their opportunities.

Studies have shown that being in nature can restore and strengthen our mental capacities, increasing focus and attention. However, research also points to the inequitable access to nature and outdoor recreation faced by people with disabilities. By conducting focus groups, the study team gained direct input from people with disabilities, family members, and representatives from organizations that serve people with disabilities to offer their insights on needs, challenges, and priorities that relate to expanding access for people with disabilities to nature and outdoor recreation in New Jersey.

Broadly, focus group participants were asked to share their knowledge and experience regarding the following:

1. Familiarity with available programs and resources locally and elsewhere,
2. Resources and amenities that make outdoor recreational opportunities inclusive,
3. Accessibility concerns, challenges, and opportunities,
4. Their ideas for increasing access to nature for people with disabilities in NJ.

Structured discussions flowed through five overarching topics; highlights from each topic area are briefly presented below.

Topic 1 - Places they like to go and why

Participants listed local sites and regional destinations they enjoy, as well as the benefits they experience when being in nature. Notable highlights include multiple “local” locations in Essex, Mercer, and Middlesex Counties, as well as regional destinations such as Duke Farms, the Pine Barrens, the Renaissance Faire, and the Watershed Institute in Pennington (noted for its accessible boardwalk).

The reasons participants enjoy these spaces include both the activities themselves (hiking, biking, walking, etc.) as well as how they feel when engaged in outdoors, such as refreshed, renewed, calm, or peaceful.

Topic 2 - Available programs and resources for getting information

To learn about available programs and resources, participants discuss seeking out websites of municipalities, public agencies (such as NJ.gov), or the organization running the event, but there is often not enough specific accommodation information included. They consult Google and Facebook for information and note that alternative resources promoting the event are currently more effective.

Topic 3 - Accessibility

Two primary themes emerged: the struggle with accessible transportation to get to the program or activity and the accessibility of the program activity or site itself. There was strong consensus that the lack of transportation is the most significant barrier for people with disabilities accessing outdoor activities. Public transit plays a significant role for people with visual impairments and other disabilities, and accessible transportation, including public transit, should be intentional and specific to outdoor opportunities.

Most participants mentioned obtaining specific information on the accessibility of an outdoor site is challenging, and that the path of travel to reach an outdoor recreational site may be problematic; varying conditions at the recreational site can be difficult to ascertain in advance. In addition, at larger sites (state parks, for example) internal circulation and traveling within the site can also be challenging.

Topic 4 - Positive and negative experiences with specific outdoor activities

Participants were asked to reflect on outdoor experiences that were positive, and what made them “work” for them as a person with a disability. Some common themes of positive outdoor recreational experiences include associations with family/friends/childhood memories, accommodating staff from both the transportation sector and the park, and the vicinity of nearby facilities. Positive experiences are associated with factors such as being in a group, inclusive and open staff members at the outdoor space, and using disability alliances as a resource.

Negative experiences focused on transportation barriers, navigating “unknowns” when it comes to determining a site’s accessibility, poor and ambiguous signage at recreational sites, and the lack of knowledgeable staff to address questions, especially about accessibility. Not having places to

sit or comfort stations outdoors was noted as particularly challenging for people with mobility impairments and other types of disabilities.

Topic 5 – Suggestions for improvement

Suggestions for making outdoor recreation more inclusive include the following:

- Include people with disabilities in the execution/management of outdoor spaces and events, which increase the likelihood that the event will be more accessible and inclusive.
- Acknowledge and reward recreation sites that work to improve their accessibility, and if they meet certain outcomes, provide preference for things like grant funding.
- Connect people with disabilities to more transportation options, including accessible public transit and Access Link, to provide much better access to outdoor recreational sites.
- Recognize the linkages between conservation efforts, the environment, and providing accessible opportunities for persons with disability to enjoy nature.
- Improve communication with better signage onsite, accessible websites for outdoor spaces, and a go-to, one-stop resource for outdoor accessibility in New Jersey.
- Assess and improve trails, paths, and signage at outdoor sites with better amenities for accessibility.
- ADA enforcement to ensure accessible outdoor spaces needs to be prioritized.

The report concludes with recommendations organized into five major themes, supported by examples and suggestions from focus group participants:

1. *Reframe “Inclusion” with Themes of Health Equity, Conservation, and Justice*

Create coalitions around mental health/well-being, the environment, conservation and accessible transportation, and self-advocacy within the disability community, so that the issue of people with disabilities accessing the outdoors is framed within a larger context.

2. *Enhance Access to Information*

With input from consumers and/or staff with disabilities, provide in-person staff support (a designated “Accessibility Coordinator”) to address accessibility questions as they arise onsite at outdoor locations including parks, festivals, events, and recreational spaces. Ensure that websites are accessible to assist with advance planning and research of outdoor programs, sites, and activities. Leverage and promote existing crowd-sourced national efforts and State agencies to identify, disseminate, and educate New Jerseyans about locally available accessible recreation. Within NJ.gov, information about accessibility of outdoor recreational sites should be standardized.

3. Ensure Physical Access at/to Site and Participation

Provide multi-modal transportation information that details how to get to outdoor recreation sites, venues, and activities, including travel via accessible fixed route public transit, Access Link, community transportation (local paratransit), other transportation options, and the availability and condition of accessible parking. Develop training and basic checklist for consistent ADA compliance, with physical and programmatic accessibility, at outdoor sites.

4. Explore Service Models and Strategy

Develop outreach efforts to educate officials about available capital funding for making outdoor spaces more accessible – including Green Acres, NJTPA, and NJDOT grantmaking, and the availability of low-cost initiatives such as adding benches, improving signage, inexpensively addressing path of travel issues (such as loose gravel on walking path), and quickly correcting seasonal obstacles (like puddles or mud after heavy rain) that limit physical accessibility. Develop a collaborative “Access Ambassador” program at selected parks. Adapt best practices from museums and indoor venues that provide smartphone commentary, tours, and guidance for cultural activities, and incorporate similar features for outdoor areas.

5. Examine Additional Data and Analysis

Inventory, report, and broadly disseminate information on the overall accessibility of state parks and county parks using a standardized tool. Encourage similar research on the local level to be shared on municipal websites and disseminated regionally.

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to prepare a research-informed white paper on the topic of challenges and opportunities associated with state policy to advance disability access to nature and outdoor recreation. This report will help inform a statewide convening in the fall on this topic that is currently being organized by a diverse planning committee with participation from conservation organizations, people with disability lived experience, state policymakers, and Bloustein School team members who are knowledgeable about state public policy and disability inclusion. This effort is an extension of the New Jersey Inclusive Healthy Communities (IHC) program that is a signature initiative of the New Jersey Department of Human Services and facilitated by the Bloustein School.

The study will generate vital information on barriers to nature and outdoor recreational space in New Jersey, as experienced by people with disabilities. It will inventory and examine existing policies in New Jersey, identify innovative and “best practices” from other places that could help to enhance access in New Jersey, and through focus groups, facilitate direct input from people with disabilities in New Jersey to gain insight on needs, challenges, and priorities for expanding access for people with disabilities to nature and outdoor recreation.

This report shares the key findings from three focus groups with people with disabilities across New Jersey, conducted by the study team in March and April 2023 in collaboration with community-based organizations focused on working with people with disabilities to increase their independence and expand their opportunities. The focus group findings are part of the data that will be incorporated into the public white paper that outlines state policy challenges and opportunities associated with enhancing access for people with disabilities to nature and outdoor recreation. With support from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, the Bloustein School team is conducting a series of four additional similar focus groups in New Jersey’s coastal region in summer 2023.

Studies have shown that being in nature can restore and strengthen our mental capacities, increasing focus and attention. However, research also points to the inequitable access to nature and outdoor recreation faced by people with disabilities. By conducting focus groups, the study team gained direct input from people with disabilities, family members, and representatives from organizations that serve people with disabilities, to offer their insights on needs, challenges, and priorities that relate to expanding access for people with disabilities to nature and outdoor recreation in New Jersey.

Scope

The research team used two in-person focus groups and one virtual focus group discussion (via Zoom), hosted by three different community organizations that provide direct service to people with disabilities to connect with adults with disabilities and have them share their experiences with access to nature and outdoor recreational sites in New Jersey. The three host organizations, the Joseph Kohn Training Center in New Brunswick, the Alliance Center for Independence in Edison, and The Progressive Center for Independence with offices in both Hamilton and Lebanon, recruited a total of 32 participants. Each host site determined the best format for engagement, whether in-person or virtual, based on participants' accessible transportation options.

Methodology

Design of Focus Groups

A total of three focus groups were conducted, on March 27, March 30, and April 4, 2023. Focus group times were established in consultation with host organizations to ensure greatest participation. Two sessions were held at agency locations, the Joseph Kohn Training Center (JKTC) on March 27 and the Alliance Center for Independence (ACI) on March 30; the final focus group, hosted by the Progressive Center for Independent Living (PCIL) was conducted on Zoom on April 4.

Participants were drawn from host agency outreach and recruitment. Participants were required to be over age 18, interested in outdoor activities and recreation in New Jersey, and either self-identified as a person with a disability or staff from an agency that serves people with disabilities; in many cases, the staff that participated also identify as a person with a disability.

The types of disabilities represented by participants within the groups included people with low vision or blindness, people using a range of mobility devices including both manual and power wheelchairs, people with other mobility limitations, and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants from the two Independent Living Centers were offered a \$30 gift card to compensate them for their time; the group from the Joseph Kohn Training Center participated in the focus group during their program day and were not offered an incentive other than very generous snacks. ACI and PCIL both received honorariums of \$300 to thank them for their efforts with recruitment and hosting; JKTC declined an honorarium.

Key Questions

Broadly, focus group participants were asked to share their knowledge and experience regarding the following:

1. Familiarity with available programs and resources locally and elsewhere,
2. Resources and amenities that make outdoor recreational opportunities inclusive,
3. Accessibility concerns, challenges, and opportunities,
4. Their ideas for increasing access to nature for people with disabilities in NJ.

Development of Script(s)

The focus group questions were initially drafted by Karen Alexander, who led the Focus Group effort, and then reviewed and refined with other members of the study team, including Josephine O’Grady and Andrea Lubin. Professionals from sites hosting focus groups also offered feedback and input. The focus group script and study protocol were approved by the Rutgers Institutional Review Board on March 24, 2023.

Personnel and Oversight

Focus groups were conducted within the framework of the IRB approval, and conducted by Karen Alexander with support and assistance from Andrea Lubin and Josephine O’Grady.

Limitations

As participant recruitment was the responsibility of host organizations, the range of disabilities represented in the sample reflected the populations those agencies serve. Future focus groups should also include people with hearing impairments or those who are Deaf. The study team is currently planning a follow-up set of focus groups targeting disability access and coastal recreation and is partnering with an organization that serves those that are hard of hearing or Deaf in recruitment and execution.

Participant Profile

Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 adult participants.

JKTC: 12 participants, 5 male, 7 female. In person, with participants from communities across New Jersey, as the Center serves a statewide population. Participation from both program participants and staff. Their primary disabilities related to vision loss or blindness.

ACI: 8 participants, 3 male, 5 female. In person, participants resided primarily in Middlesex County in the following municipalities: Sayreville, Woodbridge, Edison, and North Brunswick. One resided in Newark (Essex County) and another in Elizabeth (Union County). Participation from both program participants and staff. This group included a number of people with mobility impairments, including two participants using mobility devices. In addition, there were participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities and sensory issues represented.

PCIL: 12 participants, 3 male, 9 female. Virtually, with participants from Mercer County, Monmouth County, Essex County, and Burlington County. The cohort recruited by PCIL participated via Zoom, and also included twelve participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities, people with ambulatory issues as well as wheelchair users, and people who identified as being on the autism spectrum.

Focus Group Findings by Topic

The facilitated focus group discussions offered participants an opportunity to reflect and share their experiences with outdoor recreation, both passive (e.g., walking, picnicking, birding, fishing, etc.) and active (e.g., surfing, kayaking, biking, hiking, swimming, etc.). Their discussions and observations spanned five different broad topics, listed below:

- **Topic 1** identified places they like to go and why.
- **Topic 2** addressed available programs and resources for getting information.
- **Topic 3** focused on Accessibility – both in getting to a location and at a recreational site.
- **Topic 4** gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their own positive and negative experiences with specific outdoor activities.
- **Topic 5** asked participants to offer suggestions for what could be done in NJ to improve access to the outdoors for people with disabilities.

Each section below begins with a topic or question, with illustrative quote(s) from participants in italicized and bold font, and then a synthesized discussion of the key themes that emerged across all three focus groups. The **Appendix** for this report includes a summary of each individual focus group.

Topic 1 - Where do you go to be outdoors, and what do you enjoy about being in nature?

Participant quotes:

“Nature makes me feel grounded and connected”

“Makes me feel relaxed.”

Participants reported that they enjoy being outdoors at places that are local or close to where they live (sometimes within walking distance of their home), as well as regional destinations in New Jersey, and also in New York.

Local places listed alphabetically by county include:

- New accessible park in Hainesport with big swings.¹ (Burlington County)
- Independence Park, Newark (Essex County)
- South Mountain Reservation (Essex County)

¹ <https://www.hainesporttownship.com/home/news/new-municipal-park-playground-now-open>

- Liberty State Park and Lincoln Park (Hudson County)
- Local playgrounds accessible by foot, especially those with waterfront, as in Jersey City.² (Hudson County)
- Veterans Park and Mercer County Park, parks in Princeton and Hopewell (Mercer County)
- Carteret Waterfront (Middlesex County)
- Johnson Park, Piscataway (Middlesex County)
- Kennedy Park, Sayreville (Middlesex County)
- Middlesex Greenway (Middlesex County)
- Roosevelt Park (Middlesex County)
- Spring Lake Park, South Plainfield (Middlesex County)
- Eastside Park in Paterson (Passaic County)

Regional destination sites include:

- Beaches - but it was noted that often a person with a disability may be able to get to the sand with ramps or mobi-mats, but cannot get to the water
- Bear Mountain (New York State)
- Cape May Beach (Cape May County)
- Cape May Zoo (Cape May County)
- Central Park (New York City)
- Duke Farms (Somerset County)
- Pine Barrens - driving (participant was unsure of where there are accessible trails for manual wheelchair access)
- Historical parks like Jockey Hollow in Morristown (Morris County)
- Trenton Punk Rock Flea Market – held in accessible outdoor space, with accessible parking, and good for wheelchair users. (Mercer County)
- Renaissance Faire (Burlington County Fair Grounds in Columbus)
- The Watershed Institute in Pennington which features an accessible boardwalk (Mercer County)

When asked what they enjoyed about being outdoors, participants shared specific activities and how those activities make them feel.

² For a list of inclusive and accessible playgrounds in NJ, see <https://www.jerseyfamilyfun.com/best-inclusive-accessible-playgrounds-nj-new-jersey/>

Activities that participants enjoy including:

- Walking
- Hiking
- Being near water
- Sitting on benches
- Smelling fresh air
- Sounds of nature
- Hearing and seeing birds
- Seeing the seasons change
- Enjoying wildlife including geese and other birds
- Enjoying trees
- Playing sports like baseball
- Barbecues
- Spending time with others, like friends and family – *“I like sitting on the bench with my dad”*

Reasons for liking being outdoors include:

- Nature is associated with spending time with family and friends.
- Pleasant childhood memories of being outdoors with family and friends.
- Being outside brings feelings of peacefulness, calm, “recharging,” and serenity.

Participants also brought up key examples of places they love to go to be outside but can’t go to very often because of barriers, primarily those related to transportation and accessibility of the outdoor site or getting a ride; they primarily go outdoors on foot, to local places, with which they are already familiar.

TOPIC 2 - Available programs and resources - getting information

Participant quotes:

“I really don’t want to be limited to disability-only events”

“Access info should be provided for ALL outdoor activities regardless of who the event organizer thinks will attend.”

To learn about available programs and resources, participants discuss seeking out websites of municipalities, public agencies (such as NJ.gov), or the organization running the event, but there

is often not enough specific accommodation information included. They also consult Google and Facebook for information and note that alternative resources promoting the event are currently more effective.

Resources for Finding Outdoor Recreational Offerings

Participants found multiple ways to gain information regarding outdoor recreation sites and activities, as listed below:

- Internet research with specific keywords for the activity that they would like to do (e.g., accessible kayaking and bike-riding).
 - Using online using search engines such as Google. For example, one participant said the search term she might use would be “where is a beautiful mountain near me?” Another said he might search “What is going on in NJ this weekend?” Another noted he might search “parks or trails near me.”
 - Several people seek reviews online (e.g., Google reviews) for outdoor sites to determine if they would like to visit. As one person said, “I feel better knowing if others have been there.”
- Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are used to learn about outdoor recreation options. These alternative promotional outlets are often more effective for getting specific information on an outdoor event.
- Calling town/municipal government for accessibility information for local parks/ suggestions for places to go or calling a nearby senior or recreation center. It was noted that local parks are easy to learn more about because they are nearby.
- Consulting county parks and recreation webpage to learn what parks are available.
- Participants rely on their friends for information about outdoor spaces they enjoyed.
- Trusted organizations serving people with disabilities, including:
 - REI “Accessible Adventures” advertised at the store on a chalkboard
 - Helen Hayes Hospital in New York – because they consider the greatest number of factors of accessibility
 - Trips with the Brain Injury Alliance of NJ
 - Pocono Environmental Education Center in Pennsylvania
 - Using visual impairment advocacy groups/organizations such as the Visual Loss Alliance and the American Council for the Blind.

Information Limitations and Considerations

- Participants mentioned not doing some “far away” activities like camping, going to the beach, and events/concerts/festivals because they involve multiple planning steps and “guessing” regarding whether information will be accessible, and transportation barriers making it impossible to get there.

- Vague information on park websites that discuss “accessibility” but do not offer detail on what this means.
- Transportation-related issues (how to get there, how to get home, and coordinating drop-off place) is difficult to ascertain.
- Information on accessible restrooms is often not available.
- Often outdoor spaces do not have an online presence, so there is no accessibility information online.

TOPIC 3 – Accessibility

Participant quote:

“Transportation is the single largest barrier to accessing the outdoors, going to work, and just... everything.”

The group discussions focused on two primary themes, the struggle with transportation to get to the program or activity, and the accessibility of the program activity or site itself.

Accessible Transportation

Public transit plays a significant role for people with visual impairments and other disabilities. When a person becomes visually impaired or disabled, often they may transition to utilizing public transportation such as bus routes. There was consensus that accessible transportation should be intentional and specific to outdoor opportunities; this would include public transit. When utilizing accessible public transit to access an outdoor recreation site such as a beach, participants noted that the path of travel from the rail station or bus stop to the site may not be accessible.

There was strong consensus that the lack of transportation is the most significant barrier for people with disabilities accessing outdoor activities. Participants discussed how transportation is a barrier in a myriad of ways, including:

- Capacity of transportation – meaning limitations on hours/days of service;
- Time management of transportation (will the transportation pick us up on time, will we need accessible transportation to reach a nearby location at any point during the event);
- How close the pick-up/drop-off locations are to the event/facility they are traveling to, and how far is accessible parking from the location;
- Limitations of NJ TRANSIT accessible fixed route service to outdoor locations and events and NJ Access Link ADA Paratransit for eligible riders with disabilities;
- Circulation within outdoor site, concerns about distance and places to rest, like benches, if needed.

These barriers may connect with participants' earlier comments about primarily relying on friends/family with cars to go places, limiting outdoor activities to places they can access on foot, or relying on less accessible forms of transportation. One participant mentioned "Wheelin' to Go" as a transportation service funded through NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) they found useful.

Programs, Activities, and Site Accessibility

Most participants mentioned obtaining information on the accessibility of an outdoor site is challenging, and some offered specific resources they use to learn more, as summarized below.

- The group reported that many outdoor sites (including beaches) have some accessible sections/components, but they are not fully accessible. For example, a park restroom may be accessible, but the trails at that park are not accessible. One noted that the law has been "too lenient" regarding enforcing the ADA and that contributes to limited accessibility at outdoor public spaces.
- Lighting was cited as vital to ensure accessibility of a given outdoor site.
- Two participants shared mobile apps that participants utilize to learn about site accessibility that rely on crowdsourced data. One is called "**Access Now**"³ and the other is called "**iAccess Life**."⁴ The person using Access Now complained that the information available on the app is limited due to the nature of crowdsourced information.
- Several reported that they utilize **Google Street View** or **Google Earth** to try to assess if a site is accessible. One noted he seeks **U.S. Geographical Survey** information on park websites. Using these types of online resources can help persons with disability to ascertain if a given site's roadway and paths are flat or elevated and if they are paved or gravel.
- Wheelchair users emphasized that surveying the property online in advance of a trip to determine issues, such as if the site is level, is important.

More Information About Amenities and Accessibility Features is Required

The information needed to plan and execute an enjoyable outdoor recreation activity can be difficult to find. Information about some of the key amenities that could foster greater participation at outdoor events include the following:

- Accessible crosswalks
- Smartphone navigation (like in museums, but offered outside, too)

3 More information on the "Access Now" app can be found here: <https://accessnow.com/>

4 More information on the "I Access Life" app can be found here: <https://www.iaccess.life/>

- Handrails and barriers on trails
- Good detail on accessibility features, including accessible restrooms⁵
- Clear and accessible paths of travel at outdoor sites, with accommodations for people with visual impairments.

Circulation and Inclusion at Large Outdoor Sites

Internal circulation at larger outdoor sites was also discussed, with the suggestion of using golf carts/similar carts at large outdoor sites to help people with disabilities be more mobile. This approach could also be used to introduce a “safari experience” to outdoor recreational activities, in which visitors are taken to different places/sights/facilities in the outdoor area and listen to a narration by a guide who describes what they are seeing. This type of service would be useful for people with a wide range of disabilities, including vision loss, mobility impairments, conditions associated with wandering or limited executive function, and other limitations.

Topic 4 – Outdoor recreation experiences – a mixed bag

Participant quotes:

“I don’t think I’ve ever had my picture taken so much in my life.” (While in character at the Renaissance Faire in NJ)

Accessibility is, “clearly not an afterthought in California...ramps are built into the infrastructure and not an add-on.”

Positive Experiences

Participants were asked to reflect on outdoor experiences that were positive, and what made them “work” for them as a person with a disability. Some common themes of positive outdoor recreational experiences include associations with family/friends/childhood memories, accommodating staff from both the transportation sector and the park, and the vicinity of nearby facilities.

Illustrative examples are listed below:

- Branch Brook Park (Essex County) has a park with high contrast playground equipment, which (as a child) made it easy to clearly distinguish between the railings, the steps, and the slides, and allowed her to navigate safely and enjoy the park independently with vision loss.
- When visiting Liberty State Park, there was strong coordination with Access Link. The

⁵ See NPR story on accessible restrooms for outdoor events here: <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/28/1178645012/this-mobile-bathroom-is-designed-to-meet-the-specialized-needs-of-the-disabled-p>

person was dropped off at the Liberty Park Guest Center close to picnic tables and bathrooms and did not have to traverse the park to get to these amenities with her family.

- One participant shared her experiences at the Renaissance Faire in New Jersey, where she attended in character; once she communicated her needs as a person with a visual impairment, she was able to fully participate.
- A nature reserve where park staff asked for feedback before, during, and after the event about how accessible their reserve was for people with disabilities.

Positive experiences are associated with factors such as being in a group, inclusive and open staff members at the outdoor space, and using disability alliances as a resource.

Several participants also discussed positive experiences in museums, festivals, and other community events that were indoors, such as the Montclair Film Festival, performances at Kean University's Premiere Stage, and the Theater at the Living Arts in Philadelphia - a historic arts venue with "ADA Details" clearly posted on website. Accessibility features and strategies from these venues (e.g., self-guided tours on your smartphone) could be adapted for outdoor spaces.

Positive examples offered from outside NJ include:

- North Carolina – (When I was) *"paddleboarding there was less distance between the pier and the water - made it much smoother."*
- Colorado – Hiking and skiing programs are accessible, there are lots of public activities and much better access to transportation.
- California - Accessibility is *"clearly not an afterthought in California...ramps are built into the infrastructure and not an add-on."* Access in Berkeley, the home of the Independent Living movement, and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, was especially good.

Planning Is Key

Regarding planning, participants focused their comments on advance preparation, research, and transportation resources:

- One shared that to visit his favorite park he typically brings bread for the ducks; a book; a flashlight; a towel to use in case he gets sweaty from exercise; and something to drink and eat.
- One shared it is helpful to find out ahead of time, prior to visiting an outdoor site, if there is an information center and other contact information available.
- Transportation is an important part of planning for outdoor recreation. Lack of transportation and/or connections to access many NJ outdoor recreation sites was noted.
 - Knowledge about how to use available transportation modes was also cited as a barrier, such as how to make transfers.

- Limited accessible transportation is available for group outings to outdoor sites. For example, Middlesex County paratransit (MCAT) will only transport small groups for outdoor recreation on their 10-seater bus and will not use their larger, 16-seat vehicle.
- Several shared that using NJ TRANSIT Access Link to access outdoor recreation is difficult because of its service window and limited hours of service.

Desired Experiences

Participants discussed some outdoor activities they would like to do in NJ but have not for a variety of reasons, such as starting an adaptive bike club or going to the beach. For one participant, the lack of cooling stations or shady rest areas precludes outdoor activities, as she is very heat sensitive due to her disability. Another person shared his memories of fishing as a child, before experiencing vision loss, and the desire to find an accessible fishing location.

Mixed Experiences

Some participants shared experiences that were both positive and negative with outdoor recreation in terms of accessibility:

- One participant traveled with a friend who uses a wheelchair to Bear Mountain in NY state. Her friend was able to use the elevator to travel up, **but the elevator down was broken** so the wheelchair had to be carried down many flights of stairs. There was no signage to indicate the elevator down was broken, which would have prevented this very challenging situation.
- One participant shared he enjoyed a visit to an accessible circus, **but the layout was poorly designed** from an accessibility standpoint, with very steep ramps making travel by wheelchair difficult. It would have been helpful if the circus had been more intentional in their accessibility design.
- One shared that while some beaches offer accessible mats to access the ocean, they **often do not have parking located near those accessible mats**, making the path of travel to connect to the accessibility feature at that site inaccessible.

Challenges and Obstacles

Available transportation is true obstacle, and many locations cannot be reached using public transit. However, even with accessible transportation there is still trepidation with new outdoor experiences when you have a visual impairment, because of all the other “unknowns” when it comes to determining a site’s accessibility.

Poor and ambiguous signage at recreational sites makes it challenging to visit outdoor sites; using high contrast and bright colors in signage increases accessibility for people with visual impairments. The NJ Renaissance Faire was cited as a specific example of using signage effectively at an outdoor venue.

The lack of park staff to address questions, especially about accessibility, either in person or by phone, is a challenge. The same participant suggested having dedicated accessibility ambassadors or guides to respond to accessibility inquiries and issues.

Not having places to sit or comfort stations outdoors is challenging for people with mobility impairments and other types of disabilities.

Topic 5 - How can we make it better?

Participant quotes:

"We're here, listen to us...we're not going anywhere, and we care about the world we live in."

"The most accessible events are events where disabled people are on the event staff."

Participants had specific suggestions for making outdoor recreation more inclusive, they included the following:

- Include people with disabilities in the execution/management of outdoor spaces and events, which increase the likelihood that the event will be more accessible and inclusive. Specific suggestions include:
 - Improve education/awareness among staff and officials regarding what is required for better accessibility and incorporate more people with disabilities into the access conversation.
 - List an accessibility coordinator on the organization/department website, so people with disabilities have a clear person to talk to for accommodation questions.
 - Have more outdoor space/park staff that are people with disabilities; as one participant put it, "The most accessible events are events where disabled people are on the event staff."
 - Include people with disabilities in all stages of the planning process, with better communication up front so, "we don't have to work so hard just to plan."
- Acknowledge and reward recreation sites that work to improve their accessibility, and if they meet certain outcomes, provide preference for things like grant funding. Additionally, explicitly document and describe accessibility interventions to make it easy for both officials and the public to tell that they are accessible (e.g., a "blue ribbon" site).
- Transportation is the biggest barrier to accessing outdoor recreational opportunities and spaces.
 - Focus on connecting people with disabilities to more transportation options, including accessible public transit and Access Link, to provide much better access to outdoor recreational sites.

- Offer more accessible group transportation options to enable persons with disabilities to access NJ outdoor recreation.
- Recognize the linkages between conservation efforts, the environment, and providing accessible opportunities for persons with disability to enjoy nature.
- Improve communication
 - Better signage at outdoor sites and better communication with the visitors off-site (e.g., on websites and in promotional materials) to clearly identify if/how the site is accessible and if so, with what features and amenities, *“rather than you getting there and guessing.”*
 - Ensure websites of outdoor spaces are accessible as well – so that useful information is readily available online in usable formats, e.g., alt text for screen readers and downloadable.
 - Create and circulate a go-to resource for outdoor accessibility in New Jersey, like an accessibility Wikipedia, with crowd-sourced input from people with disabilities.
- Create a one-stop informational resource/directory/atlas on accessible parks and trails in NJ, including specific information on the accessibility of all park components/features and transportation access.⁶
 - The resource must be updated with current environmental conditions and maintenance issues that impact site accessibility.
 - Users need an easy-to-use mechanism to report site conditions impacting accessibility.
 - Assess and expand transportation connectivity to outdoor recreation sites needs.
- Assess and improve trails, paths, and signage at outdoor sites.
 - Many strategies that could enable increased utilization of outdoor recreation among persons with disabilities, such as increasing benches at parks, are not cost prohibitive.
 - Trails and paths should be individually marked with accessibility signage.
 - Lighting is vital to ensure safety at outdoor sites and needs to be prioritized.
 - Bright signage depicting accessibility features should also be installed.
- Enhance amenities for greater accessibility.
 - Provide charging stations for motorized wheelchairs should be more readily available at NJ outdoor recreation sites.
 - Public e-bike programs should include adaptive equipment.

⁶ The Kelly Brush Foundation is attempting this on a national level through their Active Project which is creating a national resource on adaptive sport opportunities. Link here: <https://activeproject.kellybrushfoundation.org/>

- Include cooling stations/areas and shady spots for persons to utilize at outdoor recreation sites.
 - Create more accessible gardens with raised flower/vegetable beds, etc. for passive accessible recreation.
- ADA enforcement to ensure accessible outdoor spaces needs to be prioritized.
 - Persons with disability need a seat at the table when planning for accessible outdoor recreation.
 - Build more accessible playgrounds and other park accessibility features such as accessible picnic tables. Overall, more wheelchair-friendly parks are needed in NJ.
 - Make more NJ beaches fully accessible, encompassing necessary paths of travel.

Recommendations

Reframe “Inclusion” with Themes of Health Equity, Conservation, and Justice

Create coalitions around mental health/well-being, the environment, conservation and accessible transportation, self-advocacy within the disability community, so that the issue of people with disabilities accessing the outdoors is framed within a larger context.

Create more opportunities for people with disabilities to be part of accommodation interventions so that accessibility and inclusion efforts better reflect the real needs conveyed by the disability community. Incorporate input from people with disabilities early-on when designing for accessibility and inclusion; so that people with disabilities have, “a seat at the table,” rather than “a rubber stamp at the end.”

Inclusion and accessibility education must be prioritized for park/outdoor site on-site staff and the officials that make policy for these outdoor sites, so that they can better anticipate and address the needs of people with disabilities and incorporate inclusion into routine programming and service delivery.

Beyond inclusion, there was strong consensus that access to information about accessibility and amenities, transportation, and ensuring physical access to recreation sites are paramount. Specific challenges frequently cited when “accessing the outdoors” include accessible parking, driving limitations, finances, path of travel and distance concerns, and comfort stations.

Enhance Access to Information

With input from consumers and/or staff with disabilities, provide in-person staff support (a designated “Accessibility Coordinator”) to address accessibility questions as they arise onsite at outdoor locations including parks, festivals, events, and recreational spaces. Accessibility support should be provided not only at events or venues that are specifically marketed as “accessible” or targeting people with disabilities, but for all programs and venues.

Ensure that websites are accessible to assist with advance planning and research, of outdoor programs, sites, and activities. Provide chat or voice real-time communication during business hours for inquiries originating from web contact. Help potential attendees “*begin to evaluate the space for... individual needs,*” with online video/photo walkthroughs for activity sites, and real-time video feeds and/or updates of current site conditions, such as mud, downed trees, washed-out trails, etc.

Leverage and promote existing crowd-sourced national efforts like those of the **Kelly Brush Foundation**, **Access Now**, and **iAccessLife** to identify, disseminate, and educate New Jerseyans about locally available accessible recreation. In addition, work with State Departments (such as Education, Developmental Disabilities, Transportation, Human Services, Health, Environmental Protection, and Community Affairs) to encourage people to include information on accessibility in Google, Yelp, Tripadvisor and other website reviews, so that accessibility information is included in those platforms as well.

Within NJ.gov, information about outdoor recreational sites should include a standardized discussion/review of the accessibility features at the location, most notably parking and rest rooms, and access to the location via public transit. Develop a *“uniform system for gauging accessibility,”* and consider piloting a program that identifies and then rewards more accessible sites with designation of “blue ribbon” access, preference on grant applications, or something similar.

Ensure Physical Access at/to Site and Participation

Provide multi-modal transportation information that details how to get to outdoor recreation sites, venues, and activities, including travel via accessible fixed route public transit, Access Link, community transportation (local paratransit), other transportation options, and the availability and condition of accessible parking.

Develop training and basic checklist for consistent ADA Compliance, with physical and programmatic accessibility, at outdoor sites. If publicly funded, the standards will likely be greater to ensure non-discrimination, but sites that are open to the public and privately owned also have ADA requirements. Work with existing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts also incorporate ADA compliance in their educational scope.

Use “best practice” guidance to address major accessibility challenges and opportunities in a systematic way. One tool for quickly appraising basic accessibility of outdoor spaces is the article, “How to Improve the Accessibility of Parks and Trails”⁷ from BlueDAG. Their nine-point list addresses many of the key concerns raised in focus group discussions around onsite features/amenities, such as accessible restrooms, parking, ramps, paths and trails, handrails, signage, etc.

Pay attention to the accessible path of travel from parking or transit stop to the site. Consider internal circulation in larger sites; provide jitneys, golf carts, “safari-type” trips for visits, comfort stations for cooling down, and/or benches for resting if distances are far within a venue, such as on the two-mile waterfront walk at Liberty State Park.

⁷ “How to Improve the Accessibility of Parks and Trails” posting from Blue DAG, can be found here: <https://www.bluedag.com/how-to-improve-the-accessibility-of-parks-and-trails/>

Explore Service Models and Strategy

Develop outreach efforts to educate officials about available capital funding for making outdoor spaces more accessible – including Green Acres, NJTPA, and NJDOT grantmaking, and the availability of low-cost initiatives such as adding benches, improving signage, inexpensively addressing path of travel issues (such as loose gravel on walking path) and quickly correcting seasonal obstacles (like puddles or mud after heavy rain) that limit physical accessibility.

Educate recreation/DEP/park departments on accessibility, inclusion, and non-discrimination. Develop a collaborative “Access Ambassador” program at selected parks, working in partnership with local disability organizations to promote local recreation options for people with disabilities, and incorporate guidance from local organizations on enhancing access and inclusion efforts.

Adapt best practices from museums and indoor venues that provide smartphone commentary, tours, and guidance for cultural activities, and incorporate similar features for outdoor areas. Enable people with disabilities to leverage the accessibility features of apps (such as Be My Eyes and Tap, Tap See⁸) and smart phone technology to increase enjoyment and wayfinding at sites.

Examine – Additional Data and Analysis

Inventory, report, and broadly disseminate information on the overall accessibility of state parks and county parks, using either the nine-point list of recommendations presented in the BlueDAG posting or another standard tool. Encourage similar research on the local level, to be shared on municipal websites and disseminated regionally.

Evaluate and address the accessibility and comprehensiveness of information on accessible outdoor recreational sites and programming presented on publicly funded websites, including the 21 NJ County Recreation sites, NJ Department of Environmental Protection, and NJ Division of Travel & Tourism. Expand the quality and detail provided regarding recreational sites and their accessible features.

Evaluate website information on accessible recreational sites and programming in NJ as posted by non-governmental outdoor recreation entities, such as the NJ Conservation Foundation, Rails to Trails Conservancy, and AllTrails, and explore how to improve data on accessible sites in NJ.

Evaluate and potentially expand the availability of NJ TRANSIT accessible fixed route transit service (bus, train, and light rail) and ADA Paratransit (Access Link) to the most popular/accessible outdoor sites during recreational hours, working in partnership with advocates, policymakers, riders with disabilities and disability organizations.

Appendix: Focus Group Discussion Guide and Summaries

New Jersey State Policy Lab - Environmental, Analysis and Communications (EAC) Group

Access to Nature for People with Disabilities – Focus Group Guide

Study Aim: The purpose of this project is to prepare a research-informed white paper on the topic of challenges and opportunities associated with state policy to advance disability access to nature and outdoor recreation. The white paper will serve to inform a fall statewide convening on this topic that is currently being organized by a diverse planning committee with participation from conservation organizations, people with disability lived experience, state policymakers, and Bloustein School team members who are knowledgeable about state public policy and disability inclusion. This effort is an extension of the New Jersey Inclusive Healthy Communities (IHC) program that is a signature initiative of the New Jersey Department of Human Services and facilitated by the Bloustein School.

Researchers from EAC group at the Bloustein School will conduct three (3) focus groups in conjunction with three (3) community-based organizations that serve people with disabilities, either onsite at host organizations and/or over Zoom, to collect insights into how individuals with disabilities in New Jersey access nature and use outdoor recreational spaces.

Broadly, focus group participants will be asked to share their knowledge and experience of 1) Familiarity with available programs and resources locally and elsewhere, 2) Resources and amenities that make outdoor recreational opportunities inclusive, 3) Accessibility, 4) Opportunities for increasing access to nature for people with disabilities in NJ.

Overarching Research Questions:

- What opportunities and obstacles do people with disabilities encounter when trying to access nature and outdoor recreational opportunities?

Secondary Research Question:

- What kinds of state policies could support making active and passive outdoor recreation more inclusive (and equitable) for people with disabilities?

Welcome & Introductions – Karen

Good afternoon everyone! We truly appreciate you taking the time to participate in our focus group today.

My name is Karen Alexander and I am a managing director at the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University. Here with me today is my colleague

Andrea Lubin, who is a senior researcher at the center. I'm excited to lead our conversation today to learn about your interests and thoughts on accessing nature and outdoor recreational opportunities here in NJ. The information we collect today from all of you will help policymakers and other stakeholders to develop ways for improving access to nature and outdoor recreation for persons with disabilities in our state.

Some quick general guidelines for our discussion today:

- Our conversation will last about 1 hour.
- We want to hear from all of you today, but we ask that you don't speak at the same time or over one another so that we can clearly hear everyone's comments.
- If you need to take a break or use the restroom, please feel free to do so at any time.

Now I would like to ask my colleague, _____, to read aloud a form to you that asks for your consent to participate in our discussion today. As researchers with Rutgers University, any work we undertake that involves human subjects (which you are today) requires we receive consent from each of you before we begin.

READ CONSENT, INCLUDING AUDIO TAPING REQUEST, ALOUD. HIT RECORD!

Let's start by taking a few minutes to introduce ourselves.

1. Please tell us your first name, the town you live in, and share with us the names of some places you like to go in NJ to be outdoors.
2. What do you enjoy about being in nature? (Prompts if needed: fresh air, feeling of independence, seeing signs of nature like flowers, trees, wildlife, birds, etc.)
3. If you want to be outdoors close to home, what kinds of activities do you try to find? Further from home, what kinds of activities do you like to do outdoors?

Topic: Information and Awareness – Available Programs and Resources

What tools, information and resources help people with disabilities connect with nature and outdoor recreation in New Jersey?

4. How do you find out about outdoor activities to do individually, with friends or family, or with organized groups? What specific resources do you use, e.g., websites, guidebooks, word of mouth, groups, etc?
 - Do you have a hard time finding out about accessible outdoor activities available here in NJ?
5. What kinds of information is most important to you when planning an outdoor activity? For example, the activity itself, how you would get to the activity, the conditions at the site, etc.?
6. What kinds of outdoor activities would you like to do in NJ, but you haven't? Why?

- Have you been able to do those activities in other places outside of NJ? If yes, what made that possible?

Topic: Amenities and Inclusion

How do the right resources and amenities encourage people with disabilities to access nature and outdoor recreation? What needs to be in place for people with varying types of disability to feel comfortable and welcomed in outdoor recreational spaces?

7. Is it important to you to have an instructor, guide, or a group, to enjoy outdoor activities or be in nature? If yes, why?
8. Are there outdoor activities that you would like to do independently, or by yourself, but you don't? Why?
9. What needs to be in place for you to feel comfortable and confident to participate in an outdoor physical activity or just to be relaxing outdoors "being in nature"?

Topic: Accessibility

How does transportation, accessible parking, path of travel and ADA compliance onsite impact people with disabilities getting to and participating at outdoor recreational sites?

10. When you are trying to decide if an outdoor destination is right for you, are you concerned if the facility will be accessible for persons with disabilities?
 - If yes, how do you find out if the site is accessible?
11. What do you need to know in advance for planning?
12. How likely are you to return to a location (independently or with others) if you've been there before with a guide or as part of group?
13. How does transportation fit in when determining whether or not to do a particular activity or visit an outdoor place?

Topic: Opportunities and challenges for increasing access to nature for people with disabilities

In thinking about your activities outdoor, what worked well and what could work better?

14. In thinking about your **positive** outdoor recreational experiences, can you tell us what happened that made those such good, memorable experiences?
15. When you think of a time that you tried to do something outdoors, whether active or passive (give examples), and it **did not go well**, what happened? What could make that kind of situation different or better in the future?
16. What are your ideas for how NJ can make outdoor recreation and access to nature more available and accessible to other people with disabilities, whether similar to yours or different?

Closing Question/Discussion

What's your best piece of advice for the heads of government agencies that protect outdoor spaces and encourage recreation for all New Jersey residents, about increasing access to nature for people with disabilities?

17. Overall, what do you feel are the biggest challenges/obstacles to persons with disabilities in NJ accessing outdoor recreation and nature?
18. What's one thing that could make access better to outdoor recreation and nature here in NJ for persons with disabilities?

Group #1 - Joseph Kohn Training Center, on March 27, 2023

– Topic 1. Outdoor Places participants enjoyed and why?

The outdoor places participants enjoy or recall enjoying included the following:

- Liberty State Park and Lincoln Park (Hudson County)
- Duke Farms (Somerset County)
- Roosevelt Park (Middlesex County)
- Central Park, New York City
- Middlesex Greenway
- Carteret Waterfront (Middlesex County)
- South Mountain Reservation (Essex County)
- Local parks (Kennedy Park in Sayreville/Parlin, Eastside Park in Paterson)

The people in the focus group listed a range of attributes and feelings they associate with recreation outdoors – the most frequently attributes included the *“sounds of nature,”* fresh air, along with hearing and seeing birds. Several participants emphasized how much they love being **near water.**

Multiple participants brought up reasons for their liking to be in nature associated with spending time with family and friends, or childhood memories of being outdoors with family and friends.

Participants also brought up key examples of places they love to go to be outside but can't go to very often because of barriers, primarily those related to **transportation and accessibility of the outdoor site.**

- Topic 2. Ways of finding out about available programs, resources, and amenities

Participants found multiple ways to gain information regarding outdoor recreation sites and activities, as listed below:

- Internet research with specific keywords for the activity that they would like to do (e.g., accessible kayaking and bike-riding).
- Using visual impairment advocacy groups/organizations such as the Visual Loss Alliance and the American Council for the Blind.
- Calling town/municipal government for accessibility information for local parks/ suggestions for places to go or calling a nearby senior or recreation center.
- Local parks are easy to learn more about because they are nearby...
- Participants mentioned not doing some “far away” activities like camping, going to the beach, and events/concerts/festivals because they involve multiple planning steps and “guessing” regarding whether information will be accessible, and transportation barriers making it impossible to get there.

However, they also noted that key information needed to plan and execute outdoor recreation activities they would enjoy can be difficult to find, noting that there is often vague information on park websites that discuss “accessibility” but no detail on what this means; transportation-related issues (how to get there, how to get home, and coordinating drop-off place) is difficult to ascertain, and there is often not information on whether there are accessible restrooms nearby.

Some of the key amenities that could foster greater participation include the following:

- Accessible crosswalks
- Smartphone navigation (like in museums, but offered outside, too)
- Handrails and barriers on trails
- Good detail on accessibility features
- Clear and accessible paths of travel at outdoor sites, with accommodations for people with visual impairments.

- Topic 3. Accessibility

There was significant discussion of the role public transit plays for people with visual impairments, and the transition to using bus routes when a person becomes visually impaired. There was consensus among the group that accessible transportation should be intentional and specific to outdoor opportunities; this would include public transit.

The group also discussed using golf carts/similar carts for internal circulation at large sites, like state parks, as well as to introduce a “safari experience” to outdoor recreational activities, in which visitors are taken to different places/sights/facilities in the outdoor area and listen to a narration by a guide of what they are seeing.

- *Topic 4. Opportunities and Obstacles*

Participants shared the following positive observations about enjoy outdoor recreation:

- Branch Brook Park (Essex County) has a park with high contrast playground equipment, which made it easy to for one participant to clearly distinguish between the railings, the steps, and the slides, and allowed her to navigate the park safely and enjoy the park independently with vision loss.
- Another participant reflected on visiting Liberty State Park, and strong coordination with Access Link. She was dropped off at the Liberty Park Guest Center close to picnic tables, bathrooms, and did not have to traverse the park to get to these amenities with her family.
- Another participant reflected on a park visit where he needed help from park staff to get to the restroom, and park staff was available to assist.
- One person shared his memories of fishing as a child, before experiencing vision loss, and the desire to find an accessible fishing location.
- One participant shared her experiences at the Renaissance Faire in New Jersey, where she attended in character; once she communicated her needs, was able to fully participate, saying, *"I don't think I've ever had my picture taken so much in my life."*

Some common themes of positive outdoor recreational experiences include associations with family/friends/childhood memories, accommodating staff from both the transportation sector and the park, and the vicinity of nearby facilities.

In terms of obstacles and some opportunities, participants shared the following:

Available transportation is true obstacle, and many locations cannot be reached using public transit. However, even with accessible transportation there is still trepidation with new outdoor experiences when you have a visual impairment, because of all the other "unknowns" when it comes to determining a site's accessibility.

Poor and ambiguous signage at recreational sites makes it challenging to visit outdoor sites; using high contrast and bright colors in signage increases accessibility for people with visual impairments.

The lack of park staff to address questions, especially about accessibility, either in person or by phone, is a challenge. The same participant suggested having dedicated accessibility ambassadors to respond to accessibility inquiries and issues.

- *Topic 5. Opportunities to Make Things Better*

While there is consensus that many accommodations are nonexistent or lacking, there was also agreement that structural issues need to be transformed around the accessibility education and knowledge of park/outdoor site staff and the officials that maintain these outdoor sites. In

addition, incorporating input from people with disabilities when designing for accessibility and inclusion is key, it is, *“having a seat at the table.”*

Creating more opportunities for people with disabilities to be part of accommodation interventions is a solution not just to inclusivity issues, but a practical solution that makes accessibility more accurate and reflective of the real needs conveyed by the disability community.

Participants had specific suggestions for making outdoor recreation more inclusive, they included the following:

- Improved communication
 - Better signage at outdoor sites and better communication with the visitors off-site (ex: website and promotional materials) to clearly identify if/how the site is accessible and if so, with what features and amenities, *“rather than you getting there and guessing.”*
 - Ensure websites of outdoor spaces are accessible as well – so that useful information is readily available online in usable formats, e.g., alt text for screen readers and downloadable.
 - Create and circulate a go-to resource for outdoor accessibility in New Jersey, like an accessibility Wikipedia, with crowd-sourced input from people with disabilities.
- Improve education/awareness among staff and officials regarding what is required for better accessibility and incorporate more people with disabilities into the access conversation. As one participant put it, *“We’re here, listen to us...we’re not going anywhere, and we care about the world we live in.”*
- Reward recreation sites that work to improve their accessibility, and if they meet certain outcomes, they get preference for things like grant funding. Additionally, explicitly document and describe accessibility interventions to make it easy for both officials and the public to tell that they are accessible (e.g., a “blue ribbon” site).

Group #2 - Alliance Center for Independence, on March 30, 2023

– Topic 1. Outdoor Places Enjoyed

Places participants reported that they enjoy visiting outdoors in New Jersey include:

- Kennedy Park, Sayreville
- Johnson Park, Piscataway
- Cape May Beach
- Other beaches (not named)
- Other parks (not named)

- Cape May Zoo
- Historical parks like Jockey Hollow in Morristown
- Independence Park, Newark
- Spring Lake Park, South Plainfield
- Bear Mountain, New York

Participants shared what they enjoy doing outdoors (both active and passive recreation), with some noting how being outdoors makes them feel:

- Walking
- Hiking
- Sitting on benches
- Smelling fresh air
- Enjoying wildlife including geese and other birds
- Enjoying trees
- Playing sports like baseball
- Barbecues
- Spending time with others, like friends and family – *“I like sitting on the bench with my dad”*
- *“Nature makes me feel grounded and connected”*
- *“Makes me feel relaxed”*

Some noted they feel more comfortable and safe spending time outdoors in groups

- *Topic 2. Available Programs and Resources*

Participants discussed how they learn about available outdoor activities:

- Most indicated they learn about outdoor options by researching online using search engines such as Google. For example, one participant said the search term she might use would be “where is a beautiful mountain near me?” Another said he might search “What is going on in NJ this weekend?” Another noted he might search “parks or trails near me.”
- Some noted they use social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to learn about outdoor recreation options.
- Some shared they learn about outdoor options from friends.
- One shared that he accesses his county’s parks and recreation webpage to learn what parks are available in his area.
- Several noted they seek reviews online (e.g., Google reviews) for outdoor sites to

determine if they would like to visit. As one said, *“I feel better knowing if others have been there.”*

- Topic 3. Accessibility

Most participants mentioned obtaining information on the accessibility of an outdoor site is challenging, and some offered specific resources they use to learn more, as summarized below.

- The group reported that many outdoor sites (including beaches) have some accessible sections/components but are not fully accessible. For example, a park restroom may be accessible, but the trails at that park are not accessible. One noted that the law has been “too lenient” regarding enforcing the ADA and that contributes to limited accessibility at outdoor public spaces.
- Lighting was cited as vital to ensure accessibility of a given outdoor site.
- Two participants shared mobile apps that they utilize to learn about site accessibility that rely on crowdsourced data. One is called “**Access Now**” and the other is called “**iAccess Life**.” The person using Access Now complained that the information available on the app is limited due to the nature of crowdsourced information.
- Several reported that they utilize Google Street View or Google Earth to try to assess if a site is accessible. One noted he seeks U.S. Geographical Survey information on park websites. Using these types of online resources can help persons with disability to ascertain if a given site’s roadway and paths are flat or elevated and if they are paved or gravel.
- Wheelchair users emphasized that surveying the property online in advance of a trip to determine issues such as if the site is level is important.

Participants also discussed that when utilizing accessible public transit to access an outdoor recreation site such as a beach, the path of travel from the rail station or bus stop to the site may not be accessible.

- Topic 4. Obstacles/Challenges

Participants shared their experiences with planning outdoor activities, activities they would like to try but haven’t, and some positive and negative experiences with outdoor recreation, as detailed below.

Regarding planning, participants focused their comments on advance preparation, research, and transportation resources:

- One shared that to visit his favorite park he typically brings bread for the ducks; a book; a flashlight; a towel to use in case he gets sweaty from exercise; and something to drink and eat.
- One shared it is helpful to find out ahead of time, prior to visiting an outdoor site, if there is an information center and other contact information available.

- Transportation is an important part of planning for outdoor recreation. Lack of transportation and/or connections to access many NJ outdoor recreation sites was noted.
 - Knowledge about how to use available transportation modes was also cited as a barrier, such as how to make transfers.
 - Limited accessible transportation is available for group outings to outdoor sites. For example, Middlesex County paratransit (MCAT) will only transport small groups for outdoor recreation on their 10-seater bus and will not use their larger, 16-seat vehicle.
 - Several shared that using NJ TRANSIT Access Link to access outdoor recreation is difficult because of its service window and limited-service hours.

Participants discussed some outdoor activities they would like to do in NJ but have not for a variety of reasons, such as starting an adaptive bike club, and going to the beach. For one participant, the lack of cooling stations or shady rest areas precludes outdoor activities, as she is very heat sensitive due to her disability.

Some participants shared positive and negative experiences with outdoor recreation in terms of accessibility:

- One participant traveled with a friend who uses a wheelchair to Bear Mountain in NY state. Her friend was able to use the elevator to travel up, but the elevator down was broken so the wheelchair had to be carried down many flights of stairs. There was no signage to indicate the elevator down was broken, which would have prevented this very challenging situation.
- One participant shared he enjoyed a visit to an accessible circus, but the layout was poorly designed from an accessibility standpoint, with very steep ramps making travel by wheelchair difficult. It would have been helpful if the circus had been more intentional in their accessibility design.
- One shared that while some beaches offer accessible mats to access the ocean, they often do not have parking located near those accessible mats, making the path of travel to connect to the accessibility feature at that site inaccessible.

- Topic 5. Opportunities to Make Things Better

Suggestions/recommendations to improve outdoor access for New Jerseyans with disability include:

- Create a one-stop informational resource/directory/atlas on accessible parks and trails in NJ, including specific information on the accessibility of all park components/features and transportation access.
 - The resource must be updated with current environmental conditions and maintenance issues that impact site accessibility.
 - Users need an easy-to-use mechanism to report site conditions impacting accessibility

- Assess and expand transportation connectivity to outdoor recreation sites needs.
- Assess and improve trails, paths, basic amenities, and signage at outdoor sites.
 - Many strategies that could enable increased utilization of outdoor recreation among persons with disabilities, such as increasing benches at parks, are not cost prohibitive.
 - Trails and paths should be individually marked with accessibility signage.
 - Lighting is vital to ensure safety at outdoor sites and needs to be prioritized.
 - Bright signage depicting accessibility features should also be installed.
- Enhance amenities for greater accessibility.
 - Charging stations for motorized wheelchairs should be more readily available at NJ outdoor recreation sites.
 - Public e-bike programs should include adaptive equipment.
 - Include cooling stations/areas and shady spots for persons to utilize at outdoor recreation sites.
 - Create more accessible gardens with raised flower/vegetable beds, etc. for passive accessible recreation.
- ADA enforcement to ensure accessible outdoor spaces needs to be prioritized.
 - Persons with disability need a seat at the table when planning for accessible outdoor recreation.
 - Build more accessible playgrounds and other park accessibility features such as accessible picnic tables. Overall, more wheelchair-friendly parks are needed in NJ.
 - Make more NJ beaches fully accessible, encompassing necessary paths of travel.
- Recognize the linkages between conservation efforts, the environment, and providing accessible opportunities for persons with disability to enjoy nature.
- Offer more accessible group transportation options to enable persons with disabilities to access NJ outdoor recreation

Group #3 – Progressive Center for Independence, on April 3, 2023

This focus group was conducted on Zoom, and the vibrant discussion was complemented by a simultaneous and very active chat thread. Comments from chat are integrated into the summary.

– *Highlights*

- On site signage, better maps, and site guides for outside events and venues; websites need to include specific accessibility information, for example, availability of accessible restrooms.

- Increase accessible transportation options including public transit.
- Incorporate people with disabilities into upfront planning, “The most accessible (outdoor) events are events where disabled people are on the event staff.”
- Have an accessibility coordinator for website access and to provide information to the public on accessibility and respond to specific inquiries. “Create a uniform system of gauging accessibility.”
- It’s not necessarily about pouring more funding into this issue, but rather adapting, replicating, and prioritizing access issues moving forward with an eye to better practices.

– *Topic 1. Outdoor Places and Activities Enjoyed*

Participants most frequently brought up loving fresh air and associated feelings of peacefulness, calm, and serenity. They discussed limitations of cars in a few different ways: needing to rely on friends/other people with cars to get places, having the ability to drive but not wanting to drive too far and frequently primarily accessing local outdoor spaces on foot. Participants discussed loving the water, birds, seeing seasons change and how being outside contributes to a sense of being calm, peaceful, and “recharging” them.

Participants named specific outdoor locations and other places they enjoy, including:

- Local playgrounds accessible by foot, especially those with waterfront, as in Jersey City.
- New accessible park in Hainesport with big swings.
- Veterans Park and Mercer County Park, parks in Princeton and Hopewell
- The Watershed Institute in Pennington which features an accessible boardwalk
- Driving in the Pine Barrens (unsure of where there are accessible trails for manual wheelchair access)
- Going to the beach or bay; one can get to the sand with ramps or mobi-mats, but not to the water! Once on the sand, the participant cannot move without help.
- Trenton Punk Rock Flea Market – held in accessible outdoor space, with accessible parking, and good for wheelchair users.

– *Topic 2. Available Programs and Resources*

“I really don’t want to be limited to disability-only events”

“Access info should be provided for ALL outdoor activities regardless of who the event organizer thinks will attend.”

To learn about available programs and resources, participants discuss seeking out websites of municipalities, public agencies, such as NJ.gov, or the organization running the event, but there is often not enough specific accommodation information included. They also consult Google and Facebook—for information and note that alternative resources promoting the event are currently more effective.

Participants rely on their friends for information about outdoor spaces they enjoyed and also trusted organizations, including:

- REI “Accessible Adventures” advertised at the store on a chalkboard.
- Helen Hayes Hospital in New York – because they consider the greatest number of factors of accessibility.
- Trips with the Brain Injury Alliance of NJ.
- Pocono Environmental Education Center in Pennsylvania.

The challenges cited primarily include accessible parking, driving limitations, finances, and ambiguity around event accessibility information. Often outdoor spaces do not have an online presence, so there is no accessibility information online. Suggestions for increasing information on accessibility include websites offering transportation information on how to get to activities, a *“uniform system for gauging accessibility,”* and online video/photo walkthroughs sites so that potential attendees can, *“begin to evaluate the space for my individual needs.”*

- Topic 3. Accessibility

“Transportation is the single largest barrier to accessing the outdoors, going to work, and just... everything.”

There was strong consensus that the lack of transportation is the most significant barrier for people with disabilities accessing outdoor activities. Participants discussed how transportation is a barrier in a myriad of ways, including:

- Capacity of transportation – meaning limitations on hours/days of service.
- Time management of transportation (will the transportation pick us up on time, will we need accessible transportation to reach a nearby location at any point during the event).
- How close the pick-up/drop-off locations are to the event/facility they are traveling to, and how far is accessible parking from the location.
- Limitations of NJ TRANSIT accessible fixed route service to outdoor locations and events and NJ Access Link ADA Paratransit. (Origin to destination, curb to curb service for eligible riders with disabilities).
- Circulation within outdoor site, concerns about distance and places to rest, like benches, if needed.

These barriers may connect with participants’ earlier comments about primarily relying on friends/family with cars to go places, limiting outdoor activities to places they can access on foot, or relying on less accessible forms of transportation. One participant mentioned “Wheelin’ to Go” as a transportation service funded through NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) they found useful.

- Topic 4. Positive Experiences and Challenges

Positive experiences are associated with factors such as being in a group, inclusive and open staff members at the outdoor space, and using disability alliances as a resource. One participant offered an example of a nature reserve where park staff asked for feedback before, during, and after the event about how accessible their reserve was for people with disabilities.

Several participants discuss positive experiences in museums, festivals, and other community events that were indoors, such as the Montclair Film Festival, performances at Kean University's Premiere Stage, and the Theater at the Living Arts in Philadelphia - a historic arts venue with "ADA Details" clearly posted on website. Features from these venues could be adapted or replicated to outdoor spaces.

Negative experiences are associated with factors such as unclear or no signage, not enough places to sit, and not having guides. However, the NJ Renaissance Faire as a specific example of using signage effectively at an outdoor venue.

- Topic 5. Opportunities to Make Things Better

The overall consensus among participants is that transportation is the biggest barrier to accessing outdoor recreational opportunities and spaces. Addressing the transportation challenges will require specific focus on connecting people with disabilities to more transportation options, including accessible public transit and Access Link, to provide much better access to outdoor recreational sites.

In addition, a few participants discussed including people with disabilities in the execution/management of outdoor spaces and events, which increases the likelihood that the event will be more accessible and inclusive. Specific suggestions include:

- List an accessibility coordinator on the organization/department website, so people with disabilities have a clear person to talk to for accommodation questions.
- Have more outdoor space/park staff that are people with disabilities and participant put it, *"The most accessible events are events where disabled people are on the event staff."*
- Include people with disabilities in all stages of the planning process, with better communication up front so, *"we don't have to work so hard just to plan."*

Positive examples from other states include:

- North Carolina – When paddleboarding there was less distance between the pier and the water - made it much "smoother."
- Colorado – Hiking and skiing programs are accessible, there are lots of public activities and much better access to transportation.
- California – Accessibility is *"clearly not an afterthought in California...ramps are built into the infrastructure and not an add-on."* Access in Berkeley, the home of the Independent Living movement, and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, was especially good.

The New Jersey State Policy Lab assists the State of New Jersey and its many communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of state policies and programs by conducting rigorous evidence-based research that considers equity, efficiency, and efficacy of public policies and programs in holistic and innovative ways.

The lab leverages input from a robust network of multidisciplinary scholars, members of the community, and outside policy experts in New Jersey to craft innovative and equitable policy solutions that are sensitive to the needs of our state's diverse population.

By utilizing the combination of strong ties to New Jersey's diverse communities and significant expertise in collecting, cleaning, and analyzing data, the New Jersey State Policy Lab engages and collaborates with stakeholders such as community groups, the state government, and municipal governments to create high quality datasets and evidence that reflects our state's diversity and empowers state policy makers to address the needs of New Jersey communities more effectively, innovatively, and equitably.



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