



Increasing Access to New Jersey Coastal Recreation

Focus Group Synthesis

September 2023

*Prepared for the New Jersey Coastal Management Program
by the Environmental Analysis & Communications Group
and the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center,
Rutgers University, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy*

Andrea Lubin

Senior Researcher & Managing Director,
NJTIP @ Rutgers, Voorhees Transportation Center

Josephine O'Grady

Research Assistant,
Environmental Analysis and Communications Group

Jeanne Herb,

Executive Director,
Environmental Analysis and Communications Group



RUTGERS

Edward J. Bloustein School
of Planning and Public Policy

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

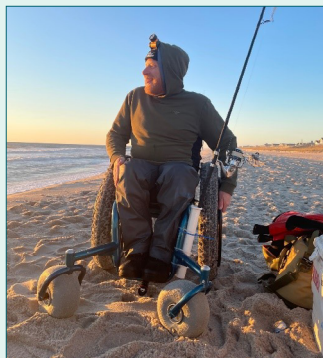
This report was made possible with financial assistance from the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended, as administered by the Office of Coastal Management, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Program through the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Coastal Management Program. The information contained in this report have not been formally disseminated by NOAA and do not represent and should not be construed to represent any agency determination, view or policy.

This project was undertaken through a grant with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), Coastal Management Program. The authors would like to acknowledge four organizations that collaborated as part of this project to host focus groups: The Arc of Ocean, The South Jersey Deaf and Hard of Hearing Coalition/Allies in Caring, The Dana and Christopher Reeve Foundation, and Heart of Surfing. In addition, the authors are grateful for the invaluable input received from focus group participants hosted as part of this project.

The views expressed in this report are the authors' own and do not reflect the official policies or positions of the interview participants, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Coastal Management Program, or Rutgers University.

This report was prepared as part of a collaboration between the Environmental Analysis and Communications Group at the Rutgers University Bloustein School, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, the New Jersey Division of Disability Services within the Department of Human Services, and Duke Farms to address barriers to accessing nature for people with disabilities.

Suggested citation: Lubin, Andrea, J. O'Grady and J. Herb. September 2023. *Increasing Access to New Jersey Coastal Recreation: Focus Group Synthesis. Prepared for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. New Brunswick, NJ: Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy; Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.*



Photos: Chris Czaszynski

I. Introduction

Purpose

The state of New Jersey (NJ) encompasses approximately 1,800 miles of tidal coastline that includes 126 miles along the Atlantic Ocean waterfront from Sandy Hook to Cape May. NJ's coastal zone includes tidal waters, non-tidal waters, waterfronts and inland areas. Millions of residents and visitors seek to access these coastal resources yearly to enjoy recreational pursuits that include but are not limited to swimming, boating, fishing, kayaking, navigating on trails, birdwatching, partaking in sports such as beach volleyball, and many other recreational activities. Coastal recreation is supported in NJ through the state's Coastal Management Program, which prioritizes public access for recreation purposes.

Literature demonstrates the varied mental and physical health benefits of being able to access outdoor recreation; however, inequitable access to nature and outdoor recreation, including coastal recreation, is often encountered by people with disabilities. For example, while public beaches must provide accessible entrances as per The Americans with Disability Act (ADA), there are no specific rules/regulations related to what other accessible features should be provided to ensure all persons, including those with a diversity of disabilities, can safely visit the state's numerous coastal resources. These accessibility challenges can exacerbate existing mental and physical health disparities among people with disabilities.

The purpose of this project was to gather information through a series of four focus group sessions on the topic of coastal recreational access in NJ convened with persons living with a diversity of disabilities (and family). Specifically, the research team sought to capture data on participant interest and experiences related to accessing NJ's coastal resources, challenges encountered in doing so, and recommendations to improve overall accessibility of the state's coastal recreational resources.

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. In addition, the information presented in this report will inform a fall 2023 statewide symposium on the topic of outdoor recreation access for all.

II. Methodology

Focus Group Design

Four total focus group sessions were conducted with 40 adults aged 18 or older as presented in Table 1. Two of the sessions were convened in-person and two were convened virtually, utilizing the Zoom platform. Each was organized in consultation and with support from a host organization. The primary role of each host organization was to assist the study team in recruiting a diverse, small group of persons with disabilities and/or family members interested in discussing the topic of New Jersey coastal recreational access for persons with disabilities. Host organizations also informed the study team on participant preference for an in-person or virtual session.

Table 1 – Focus Group Sessions

Host Organization	Session Date	Session Location	Participant total
<i>Allies in Caring – South Jersey Deaf & Hard of Hearing Coalition</i>	7/8/23	Somers Point, NJ	8
<i>The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation</i>	7/19/23	Virtual – Zoom	5
<i>Heart of Surfing</i>	8/15/23	Virtual – Zoom	6
<i>Arc of Ocean</i>	8/25/23	Lakewood, NJ	11

Each of the four host organizations is a non-profit entity operating in New Jersey:

- *Allies in Caring* is located in Hammonton, NJ and focuses effort on supporting underserved individuals with emotional and behavioral problems. The South Jersey Deaf & Hard of Hearing Coalition is under the Allies in Caring umbrella and provides social events, workshops, training, and navigation services supporting persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- *The Christopher and Dana Reeve foundation* is located in Short Hills, NJ and focuses on advancing research and improving the quality of life for persons and families impacted by paralysis.
- *Heart of Surfing* is located in Atlantic County and offers free surfing and skateboarding lessons for families with autism or other developmental disabilities.
- *Arc of Ocean* is located in Lakewood, NJ and the mission of this Arc chapter is targeted on advocating and providing opportunities and supports for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Focus group participants either self-identified as a person with a disability, or as a family member of a person with disability, or as a staff member affiliated with one of the host organizations. In some cases, the staff that participated also identified as a person living with a disability.

All participants excluding host organization staff members were offered and given either a \$30 electronic gift card or cash to compensate them for their time and efforts. Each of the four host organizations received honorariums of \$300 to thank them for their support with session recruitment and hosting.

Three of the four focus groups were facilitated by Andrea Lubin and Josephine O’Grady, with study principal investigator Jeanne Herb also facilitating one session. A topic guide approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is part of the University’s Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) was used by the facilitators at all sessions. Each session lasted approximately 60-75 minutes, and all were digitally recorded. All participants provided their consent after the research team explained the purpose of the study and participant rights as research subjects. The facilitators also shared an overview of the topics to be discussed during the discussion.

Key Questions

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

1. Enjoying the coast – NJ coastal locales of interest and activities enjoyed at coastal recreation sites;
2. Information & awareness – resources used to learn about NJ coastal activities and inclusive recreation;
3. Site accessibility experiences – accessing NJ coastal recreation sites and accessible facilities and accommodations; and
4. Opportunities for increasing access to NJ’s coastal zone for people with disabilities.

Session Limitation

As participant recruitment was the responsibility of “host” organizations, the range of disabilities represented in the sample reflects the populations those agencies serve. However, a diversity of disabilities was represented in the sessions, as detailed below.

III. Participant Profile

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 30 adult participants (aged 18 and older) with 15 identifying as female and 15 as male.

Allies in Caring: 8 participants, 5 male, 3 female. This session was convened in-person at a restaurant in Somers Point. Each of the participants reported being deaf or hard of hearing (HoH).

Reeve Foundation: 5 participants, 3 male, 2 female. This session was convened virtually using the Zoom platform. One participant was a staff member with the Foundation and also reported a disability. Participants shared information about their respective disabilities noting spinal cord injuries including Spina Bifida, Quadriplegia, as well as Pulmonary Neurosarcoidosis disease. Some shared that they utilize a manual wheelchair or other mobility device, such as a cane or rollator walker. Some noted a more recent onset of their disability due to an injury, while others shared that they have had their disability since birth or childhood.

Heart of Surfing: 6 participants, 5 female, 1 male. This session was convened virtually using the Zoom platform. One participant was a volunteer with the organization and also reported a disability. Participant feedback represented either their child's disability and experiences with coastal resources or their own as a person with a disability. Participants reported the following disabilities experienced by either themselves or their child: Autism, ADHD, Down Syndrome, idiopathic osteoporosis, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, type 1 diabetes, seizure disorder, prosthesis, and Ehlers Danlos syndrome. Participating parents reported that their children were 22 to 28 years of age. Many participants shared that their children contend with multiple comorbidities, including mobility-related disabilities and developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Arc of Ocean: 11 participants, 6 male, 5 female. This session was convened in-person at the Arc of Ocean employment center located in Lakewood. Ten participants reported various developmental and physical disabilities that led to their participation in programming at The Arc. Additionally, one participant was a recreational support staff member employed by The Arc.

Participants of the four focus group sessions resided in one of six counties, representing 19 NJ municipalities, see Table 2.

Table 2 – Participant Residence Location

Focus Group Session	Participant County of Residence	Municipality of Residence
<i>Allies in Caring – South Jersey Deaf & Hard of Hearing Coalition</i>	Atlantic, Somerset	Galloway, Hammonton, Hillsborough
<i>The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation</i>	Cape May, Essex, Monmouth, Ocean	Stone Harbor, North Caldwell, Eatontown, Lakewood, Point Pleasant Borough
<i>Heart of Surfing</i>	Atlantic, Cape May	Estell Manor, Galloway, Mays Landing, Somers Point, Ocean City
<i>Arc of Ocean</i>	Monmouth, Ocean	Howell, Barnegat, Lacey Township, Little Egg Harbor, Long Beach Island, Point Pleasant Borough, Toms River

IV. Focus Group Findings by Topic

As detailed earlier, each focus group session focused on discussing four key topic areas related to accessing coastal recreation in New Jersey for persons with disabilities.

Each section below begins with a topic or question and then a synthesized discussion of the key themes that emerged across all four focus groups. Illustrative quotations from participants are italicized and in bold font. The Appendix for this report includes a summary of each individual focus group session where more detailed information is provided.

Topic 1—Where do you like to go in NJ to enjoy the coast?

Participants eagerly reported more than **20 coastal destinations they enjoy or have enjoyed visiting for recreation**, primarily in the southern region of New Jersey. Sites identified were primarily beaches. All are listed below, alphabetical by county:

Atlantic County

- Atlantic City beaches and boardwalk
- Double Trouble State Park, Lacey Township
- Hammonton Lake Park
- Margate
- Smithville
- Somers Point Beach (Friday night concerts noted)
- Ventnor City

Camden County

- Stratford

Cape May County

- Cape May lighthouse
- Ocean City beaches, boardwalks, back bays
- Ocean City Bayside Center (activities and education facility)
- Stone Harbor beach

- Wildwood beach and boardwalk

Cumberland County

- East Point lighthouse

Ocean County

- Barnegat Bay
- Island Beach State Park (Berkeley Township)
- Lavellette beach
- Point Pleasant beach, including Jenkinson's boardwalk
- Seaside Heights beach

Monmouth County

- Asbury Park beach and boardwalk
- Dorbrook recreation area (Colts Neck)
- Long Branch (Seven Presidents Beach)
- Manasquan beach
- Sandy Hook beach (Gateway National Recreation Area, Highlands)

Participants were also asked to share the **types of coastal activities they enjoy doing and how they typically enjoy those activities**. Participants reported a diversity of experiences with both passive (e.g., watching a sunrise, sitting on the beach) and active (e.g., surfing, kayaking, hiking, swimming) coastal recreation as follows:

- Walking/rolling on the beach and/or along or near bays
- Relaxing on the beach, *"sitting and watching the scenery"*
- Walking/rolling on beach boardwalks to access food, snacks, arcade games, etc.
- Swimming
- *"Putting my feet in the water"*
- Surfing
- Paddleboarding
- Boat passenger
- Kayaking
- Fishing
- Watching the sunrise on the beach / Watching the sunset [near the bay]
- Enjoying the overall exercise benefits of coastal activities
- Walking/rolling on coastal hiking/walking trails
- Enjoying nature
- Collecting sea glass and seashells
- Clamming and crabbing
- Beach volleyball
- Socialize
- Visiting national and state parks

Regarding the socialization aspect of partaking in coastal recreation, one parent explained that visiting coastal areas offers her child with a disability opportunities to be included with peers. For example, after learning to surf with Heart of Surfing, he joined the high school surf team and now takes weekly lessons with a high school friend. Surfing has provided an opportunity for him to be involved with neurotypical peers his own age, so the social benefits related to accessing coastal recreation are very important to him.

Another participant discussed that her child also loves the social aspect of coastal activities, particularly traveling on the boardwalk. When they go to the boardwalk together, her son benefits socially from being in the vicinity of many people without the expectation that he needs to be directly participating in the interactions. As she explained further, *"there's a social aspect to the boardwalk, but not an expectation... because you are in a crowd of strangers."*

Participants also shared feedback on how they feel when participating in the coastal-oriented activities they reported, which focuses on feelings of happiness, relaxation, and peacefulness.

Participant quotes:

- *"Outside is my happy place"*
- *"Water is freeing because you are weightless... in the water, you can be dependent on yourself"*
- *"Hearing the sounds of the water is very calming"*

Each group was also asked if they typically enjoyed coastal activities with friends/family, organized groups, or independently. The majority reported partaking in coastal recreation with friends/family and/or organized groups. For example, parent participants noted their children, including adult children, typically enjoy coastal recreation accompanied by their parent(s) or with organized groups such as Heart of Surfing. Independent visits to coastal areas are limited due to factors related to their child's disability as well as transportation needs.

Arc of Ocean participants shared that in addition to visiting coastal areas with family members, they typically access the coast with the Arc or their group home residence as a group activity. Both participants from Allies in Caring and the Reeve Foundation noted the social benefits of visiting the coast with friends and family, while others focused on issues related to their disability. As one noted, *"I can't do anything at the beach by myself."* Finally, deaf and hard of hearing participants explained that without the presence of an ASL interpreter, it is very difficult to participate in an organized coastal activity. As one participant explained, when there is no ASL interpreter, coastal areas and activities quickly become *"very overwhelming."*

Topic 2—Available coastal recreation programs and resources - accessing information

Participants shared a variety of ways they seek and acquire information about coastal recreation opportunities in New Jersey. A common sentiment expressed was that finding information on site accessibility was extremely challenging. Information resources noted focused on the following:

- Word of mouth from friends, family, group home staff – this was the most cited way that participants seek and acquire coastal recreation information. In one session, a participant stated: *"I won't go somewhere no one else I know has been."* Another agreed with this sentiment, noting that if others have successfully visited the site who also have her disability, then she feels less nervous visiting it.
- ❑ Deaf and hard of hearing participants shared that because there is a lack of specific accessibility information on websites, deaf individuals rely almost entirely on word of mouth from the broader deaf community. One participant explained that *"We [the deaf community] depend on visual language and visuals. Websites are not accessible... just pages of written information... we [the deaf community] are often overlooked."*
- ❑ Another participant noted that his "fishing buddies" share where accessible fishing sites are located and another explained that word of mouth is the best way to find out about a site's accessibility, such as availability of beach access mats.

- Parent networks targeted to families of children with disabilities - These parent networks also intersect with networks of disability service organizations and non-profits that parents of children with disabilities frequently use to find information as “trusted resources.”
- Social media, including Facebook Groups – one shared that the Group “Faces for Autism” is a way that she gathers information on upcoming events for her child. Parents post information about events on this Facebook group. Additionally, the participant uses the Facebook groups for South Jersey Field of Dreams and Hoops for All, saying “these are two other great groups that keep our kids busy.”
- Internet research – utilizing the Google search engine with specific key words such as “ocean activities in NJ.”
 - ❑ Utilizing user review websites such as Yelp seeking reviews of NJ beaches and other coastal sites.
- Website of the coastal site of interest (if available)
- Apps for local news, municipal apps
- Shore Local newsmagazine – as one participant explained, *“it has everything.. every shore.. what’s going on.”*
- County recreation maps – one participant reported that the information these maps offer may be limited, adding *“you have to know what you’re looking for.. but it’s better than nothing.”*
- Printed flyers posted in downtown areas, storefronts

Topic 3—Accessibility experiences & thoughts

Participants discussed traveling to coastal NJ sites, accessibility concerns, and site features of importance that influence their experiences in seeking to enjoy NJ coastal recreation.

Transportation

To access coastal sites, participants reported either driving themselves, having a family member or friend drive them, or depending on staff at their group home residence or day program to transport them. Participants seeking to access coastal recreation relying on group home staff emphasized that they often cannot pursue recreational opportunities due to limited staff

coverage. Two participants discussed using the ride hailing service Uber to access coastal sites, with one explaining he is familiar with traveling by Uber for employment and other activities.

Notably, none of the participants reported utilizing public transit to access NJ's coastal recreation sites. Reasons cited for not using public transit included no or limited service near their residence or desired coastal location and other factors, such as difficulty using transit because of the number of items one needs to take and carry to the beach. Some other barriers to using the transit system to access coastal recreation include:

- System capacity & frequency of service – one noted that the popular train route for coastal areas in NJ that operates from Philadelphia to Atlantic City is not convenient because of limited frequency, operating every two hours. If this interval was reduced, she hypothesized that more people– including persons with disabilities– would take advantage of rail service.
- Trip planning & walking requirements – Several shared that significant trip planning is required to use public transit and the distance between public transportation stops and one's final destination at a coastal site can be long.
- Concern/fear of getting lost – participants noted barriers such as inability to hear stops from the conductor or bus operator. One participant who was deaf stated it would be helpful if there was an app available to announce transit stops.

One parent provided specific feedback on why she does not permit her adult child to travel using NJ TRANSIT's Access Link paratransit service, explaining:

“She was approved for Access Link, but we never really pulled the trigger on it because word on the street is that it is lengthy... so let's just postulate that she [her child with disability] gets a part-time job, the pick-up could be anywhere from 1 to 2 hours prior to the start of the shift, and the same thing [at the end of her shift]. Because she is diabetic and disabled, that really doesn't work for us... so it's easier for us to call an Uber for any independent activity.”

Determining Site Accessibility

The group discussed the importance of determining site accessibility when planning to visit or visiting any coastal recreation destination and almost all noted that accessibility varies by site/destination. As one participant stated: *“100% of people with a disability worry about accessibility... I'm fully relying on other people... as a result, I'm infringing on someone else's time.”*

A frequently cited comment among most participants was that informational resources on coastal sites that include accessibility information, such as websites and apps, are not extremely

useful because there is no universal definition for site accessibility. Thus, the information presented is not consistent or necessarily reliable. As one stated, the term accessibility is “**relative.**” To address concerns about coastal site accessibility, one participant with a child who utilizes a wheelchair explained that she and her spouse always physically drive to check out any coastal site ahead of their trip. As she explained:

“We go check things out for ourselves, we don’t even believe anyone anymore... access means many different things... there’s no way I’m bringing him somewhere and having it fail, because we’ll never be able to do it again. You get one chance to make an impression on him, and then it’s over. I have to make sure [the site] is paved and perfect, so he has a good first experience and we can go back.”

She shared some of the information that her family needs to know about a given coastal site prior to their trip, including availability of a parking garage, handicapped parking spaces, and a place for her child and his wheelchair to safely enter/exit the car. The participant shared an applied example, explaining that because of these important accessibility issues, all of Long Beach Island is inaccessible to him. She explained *“I have that sadness... he will never have first-hand experience [at Long Beach Island] because of accessibility.”*

Participants who were deaf or hard of hearing also emphasized the importance of knowing specific, detailed accessibility information in advance of visiting a coastal site, including availability of ASL interpreters at sites for tours and closed-captioned videos at park/site visitor centers. Several participants with spinal cord and other mobility-related disabilities explained that they have difficulty regulating their body temperature and thus need to ascertain in advance of visiting a coastal site if shaded areas are available, as well as opportunities to access indoor areas nearby with air-conditioning or fans.

Notably, the only participants who indicated that finding accessibility information in advance of their coastal site visit was not a challenge were those individuals who reported they only access coastal sites with organized groups or family members, the latter of whom coordinate the details of these trips.

Finally, some participants noted accessibility concerns also influence their plans to visit coastal sites such as beaches in the off-season. For example, one participant lamented that county or municipal governments often remove accessible beach mats during the off-season, making those beaches inaccessible to persons with ambulatory disabilities. A person with a mobility disability explained that in the off-season, it is also challenging to access the beach in a wheelchair due to ruts in the sand made by trucks/vehicles. Others noted that beach staff are also not present in the off-season to offer possible assistance to persons with disabilities.

Accessibility Features & Accommodations

Discussion at each session covered thoughts related to a variety of accessibility features participants discussed as important to their ability to safely access NJ coastal recreation sites, as well as recommendations/suggestions as follows:

Handicapped Parking – a common sentiment was that 1) availability of ample handicapped parking was vital to ensure access for all and that 2) the supply of handicapped parking at most NJ coastal sites was inadequate to meet demand. Regarding the limited supply, comments included:

“There are too many groups [of disabilities] for too few spots.”

“You get one or two [handicapped] parking spots in each beach, in each town ... if you're lucky.”

- Some noted that handicapped parking is not free in many New Jersey beach towns, such as Wildwood, making it costly to visit.
- A participant reported that at certain Ocean City beaches, people with bikes do not have adequate bike racks to park their bikes, and thus, often end up crowding out handicapped parking spaces on the street. This practice of blocking handicapped parking spots results in the inability of those using the handicapped spots to drive their car out of the spot at the end of the beach day.
- A staff member participant who accompanies small groups with disability to NJ coastal sites reported that often handicapped parking spaces are not large enough to be fully accessible for people in wheelchairs. If a vehicle parks in close proximity to the handicapped space, the result is that the vehicle in the handicapped space does not have adequate room to deploy the vehicle ramp to help the passenger in the wheelchair exit/enter the vehicle.

Signage & Safety Warnings – Consensus was expressed that 1) signage was vital to assist with orientation 2) signage should include accessibility information to assist with visitor engagement and navigation and 3) signage should present information as text as well as visually so that persons with diverse disabilities can understand the content and 4) video content on the site should be made available as well. Notably, several reported that they would not depend on signage in case the information was inaccurate.

- Recommendations for information to include on signage at coastal recreation sites included: general welcome information; site accessibility information including details

on accessible entrances and paths; how to reserve beach wheelchairs including beach entrance locations where they are available; location of benches and rest areas; site activities; visitor rules; water safety/general safety; and detailed parking information.

- Accessible safety warnings must be developed and implemented for deaf and hard of hearing persons to indicate lightening and rough water conditions on the beach and to notify of other safety concerns persons may encounter in state parks on trails, etc.
- Many in the group supported the recommendation that smartphone scannable Quick Response (QR) codes would be helpful to include on signage as a way to communicate information about the coastal site. Participants who were deaf or hard of hearing indicated that the QR codes should link to an app that offers videos related to the site and its accessibility features, as well as “fun facts” about the site. ASL interpretation should be included in the videos.

Path of Travel – The importance of an accessible path of travel to/from and throughout the site was emphasized by most, particularly among those with mobility disabilities or caregivers of persons with living with such disabilities. One participant emphasized that beach erosion has a significant role in determining beach accessibility.

- More sidewalks, paved walkways, and ramps are needed. One participant explained that she needs paved sidewalks and curb cuts in order to maneuver her son’s wheelchair. She discussed the specific experience of traveling on boardwalks, where the boards change directions or there are loose nails on the boards, making it very difficult to navigate with a wheelchair. *“It doesn’t take much with a wheelchair... I was trying to get over this curb and I couldn’t, so I had to go backwards to get over it. It’s kind of shocking, I think people are surprised by how little of an amount can block someone’s access.”*
- More benches, picnic areas, and other places to sit along the paths of travel are needed, especially in shaded areas. As one parent explained, *“If the terrain is very rocky with a lot of pebbles, that’s very uncomfortable for her. So, if there were more places where she could sit and rest her foot, that would be helpful.”* Another participant stated, *“There’s not enough seats... you only get 2 or 3 of them in one spot.”*
- Provide tents with fans and/or spray-misters along the path of travel.
- Ensure municipal zoning regulations do not impede pedestrian access to sidewalks and beach entrances.

Accessible Restrooms and Showers – almost all participants reported 1) the importance of having accessible bathrooms at coastal sites, including accessible portable bathroom facilities if that is what is made available to visitors. 2) a lack of bathrooms overall at coastal sites and 3) need for accessible showers. A staff participant emphasized that without accessible bathrooms, a given coastal site is made inaccessible for many persons with a disability.

- NJ should consider developing and rolling out one or more trailers with ADA accessible restroom and shower facilities that travel to different NJ beaches, alerting the public to its schedule by social media. Costa Rica has successfully implemented these trailers.
- NJ should consider utilizing the municipal funds earned from beach badge sales to fund construction of more accessible bathroom facilities at coastal recreation sites.
- The importance of ensuring accessible showers include a bench was noted, *“I can’t stand for long.. my legs give out.”*

Accessible Beach Mats – Accessible beach mats are designed to provide portable, accessible beach access walkways over sand surfaces. The benefits of accessible beach mats were noted by many, but it was widely cited that overall availability, as well as mat coverage from the beach entrance to the high tide line is too limited.

- Location specific details on accessible beach mat availability in NJ should be widely publicized.
- Accessible beach mats should be available on every NJ beach.
- Accessible beach mat coverage should extend from the beach entrance to the high tide water line. As one participant explained, *“Most beach mats only go to the edge of the dune.. after the mat ends, you’re basically in the Sahara Desert.”* One described that it is *“really aggravating”* to watch everyone else having fun from a distance due to limited beach mat coverage. Another reported, *“When the mat stops, so does your independence.”*

Beach and Adaptive Wheelchairs – Typical beach wheelchairs are equipped with large, wide wheels which can roll across the sand without sinking. Adaptive or amphibious beach wheelchairs can be used on land and in water. Many participants discussed the importance of beach wheelchair availability and issues related to their availability at NJ coastal sites.

- Overall, beach wheelchair availability is too limited in NJ and adaptive/amphibious beach wheelchairs for public usage are extremely rare. One participant opined that the more readily available these mobility devices are, the more persons with disabilities will consider utilizing them to access coastal recreation.

- It is difficult to ascertain which coastal sites in NJ have these devices available.
- The process of reserving a beach wheelchair differs among beach communities and is often confusing. A simple, uniform protocol for reserving these devices needs to be established statewide.
 - ❑ One participant recommended a dedicated phone line be established to reserve beach wheelchairs that offers live operator assistance. The operator should also serve as an emergency point of contact should the person reserving the device need assistance once on the beach.
 - ❑ Another participant shared the difficulties of needing to reserve a beach wheelchair in advance, as she explained her family typically plans coastal trips the day of, based on how her son with an intellectual disability is feeling that day. As she explained, *“sometimes [the process] is just we’re having a good day, let’s go to the beach today.”* However, that may be impossible to do if beach wheelchairs are not available to reserve the day of their desired visit.
- One participant reported that many beaches in Greece utilize a remote-operated chair called Seatrac that helps people with mobility issues access the sea by transferring from their wheelchair to the Seatrac chair which travels by ramp to/from the water.

Site Staff – Participants explained that overall lack of site staff can hinder access to coastal resources for persons with disability.

- Additional staff is needed at most coastal recreation sites to address visitor concerns and questions related to site accessibility and to aid with wheelchair navigation on the sand if needed. Several suggested creation of an accessibility ambassador position to meet this need, with one noting the ambassador could also help with targeted outreach to the disability community to inform them of accessible recreational opportunities at coastal sites.
 - ❑ One participant suggested that more NJ municipalities should utilize utility vehicles such a Gator, to pick up/return persons with mobility issues at the dunes and taken them to their beach blanket. She shared that communities including Surf City, Brant Beach, and Beach Haven are offering this service to help their older adult residents enjoy the beach.
 - ❑ Lifeguards can and often do provide help to persons with disabilities visiting the beach, such as helping navigate a beach wheelchair. However, they have other responsibilities so cannot be depended upon for assistance if needed.

- Municipalities need to better inform the public of the time frame beaches have lifeguard coverage (e.g., 9:00am-6:00pm) and when coverage ends for the season.

Trails – Although not widely discussed across sessions, several participants shared thoughts and recommendations related to accessible coastal trails, noting its' importance from a safety perspective for all users.

- More paved runs/walkways are needed at coastal sites. Examples of coastal runs/walkways participants have successfully utilized include locations on Island State Beach Park and Sandy Hook. A participant explained that the Edwin Forsythe Wildlife Refuge in Surf City has gravel pathways only, making it impossible for many persons with disabilities to visit and enjoy this coastal site.
- Some trails are too narrow for multiple deaf individuals to walk alongside one another so that they can clearly see one another for communication purposes.
- Trails should include guardrails to help prevent falls.
- Consistent trail maintenance should be prioritized. Uneven, rough, and/or overgrown trails make sites inaccessible to many.
- Trail information needs to be communicated visually so that deaf, hard of hearing, and other persons with similar disabilities can understand what is being communicated. Color-coding is useful (e.g., blue trail – easy, green trail – intermediate)
- Accessible NJ coastal trail information is not readily available.
- Adaptive equipment should be made available to rent on NJ coastal trails.

Accessible Kayaks and Canoes – Similarly, this topic was not widely discussed across sessions, but several participants noted they enjoyed kayaking and stressed the value of constructing more accessible kayak launches, such as the one located at Ship Bottom Bay Beach in Long Beach Island.

Positive & Challenging NJ Coastal Accessibility Experiences

Participants at most of the sessions were given the opportunity to share a positive and/or challenging or missed experience related to accessing a coastal recreation site. Some of those illustrative encounters are described below, others can be found in the individual focus group session summary reports (See Appendix).

Positive Encounters:

- Fishing and exploring the Seaside Heights boardwalk with family and friends.
- Enjoying the 21 Down's Beach Day event in Wildwood. The event includes a day of beach events and activities hosted by the 21 Down non-profit and the Wildwood Beach Patrol. It is very accessible, with beach taxis transporting visitors to and from the beach from the parking area and ample beach mat coverage. She explained, *"it is the highlight of our summer."*
- Enjoying beach programs hosted by the Voorhees Pediatric Facility, which has facility staff and community volunteers bringing patients to the beach in Ocean City for a day of activities, including swimming and fishing. Her son attended summer camp at the facility and he enjoyed it so much. She explained, *"it was the first experience my son had doing things other kids got to do."*
- One participant discussed a summer camp experience at the Diller Vacation Home for the Blind. While her child does not attend this camp, she lives in Avalon and sees the positive impact of these programs on the children attending.
- Disneyworld in Florida has short, closed-captioned videos available that explain the features and experience of each ride. Additionally, Disney provides a plethora of ASL interpreters and pre-recorded videos with ASL interpreters providing visitor information.

Challenging or Missed Encounters:

- Visiting a NJ beach community with limited handicapped parking. As a result, this participant and her friends had to park far from the beach, which led to her becoming overheated due to her spinal injury. As she explained, *"By the time I got to where the sand was, which poses a whole other challenge ... it was already going downhill."*
- Visiting a beach that does not have adequate staff to answer questions.
- Limited availability of adaptive coastal recreation activities such as surfing, boating, rowing, and sailing.
- Going to the beach with a poorly fitted life jacket and almost drowning. As a result, the participant said that having proper equipment is important for enjoying and feeling included in a coastal activity.
- Trying to access one of the water boats at Fells Point. She needed to remove her son from his wheelchair because it was too heavy to bring on the boat. However, this action upset him, and it was not a good experience. She was upset that this was not a good experience for him and she wished she could take him on one of the whale watching boats in Atlantic City but they are not accessible.

Topic 4—Opportunities & recommendations for increasing access to NJ’s coastal zone for people with disabilities

The strategies presented below for increasing access to NJ’s coastal recreation sites for persons with a diversity of disabilities were developed based on feedback from focus group participants. Other specific suggestions are found under the Topic 3 “Accessibility Features & Accommodations” section above.

⌘ Develop and disseminate more detailed information on accessible NJ coastal recreation resources and opportunities

Limited information on coastal recreation sites, including site accessibility information, acts as a barrier to visiting and enjoying these destinations for persons with disability. In the absence of a universal definition of site accessibility, participants stressed that more detailed information about accessibility features and amenities is required to help make informed decisions when planning to visit a NJ coastal recreation destination.

Specifically, participants seek detailed information on overall site accessibility to ensure physical access to these sites, including parking information (handicapped and general parking) and path of travel information (e.g., availability of seating, paved vs. gravel paths). Availability of ASL interpreters on site should be noted as should information on food establishments and emergency services. Specific information requested about beaches included detail on lifeguard and other staff coverage hours; availability and locations of accessible beach mats; availability of beach wheelchairs or adaptive beach wheelchairs and the process for reserving these mobility devices; and availability and location of restrooms and shower facilities (both accessible and non-accessible).

Many participants also requested readily available information on site features of interest, as well as safety information. Presenting information with both text and visuals was emphasized to help facilitate communication with persons living with a diversity of physical, cognitive, developmental, and/or sensory disabilities.

While transportation information was not requested amongst these focus group participants, it would be beneficial if more information was made available on public and community transit options available to access NJ’s coastal sites, especially because all NJ TRANSIT buses are accessible as are many NJ TRANSIT rail stations.

⌘ Create a one-stop statewide or regional information resource on accessible NJ coastal recreation sites

Participants emphasized that locating the information they need to feel safe and comfortable planning a trip to many NJ coastal recreation sites is extremely challenging. One strategy to consider for addressing this issue is to develop and publicize a statewide or regional information resource on accessible NJ coastal sites. The resource should focus on providing information that facilitates persons with disabilities, families, and caregivers in their advance planning and research for visits to NJ coastal recreation resources.

This resource should be made available online with the ability to query by municipality. Persons should also be able to access via QR code. Localized print versions of the guide should be made available on display at coastal sites for those who did not have the opportunity to seek information prior to their visit. Finally, a phone line should be made available with operators trained and knowledgeable about both the coastal resources and accessibility features so they can field diverse inquiries.

Throughout the process of developing this one-stop resource, feedback must be sought through focus groups or key informant interviews with a selection of NJ stakeholders living with a diversity of disabilities to ensure the resource is accessible for all.

Multi-modal communication (e.g., text, visuals such as videos) should be employed on the website resource to reach the broadest audience. Videos posted on NJ coastal resources should include embedded recordings of ASL interpreters and closed captioning. Videos should also be organized on this one-stop resource in an easily searchable manner.

Presenting accessibility information for each of the coastal sites included in a uniform manner must be prioritized to aid visitors in their queries. For this resource to become a trusted tool, a site update policy must be established and adhered to so that information presented is current and accurate as it relates to maintenance issues, environmental conditions, and other factors that may impact site access. Dedicated staff time and resources to maintain this one-stop information resource must be identified. As such, responsibility could be shared by recruiting a designated county lead from each county charged with maintaining the data presented for their respective county.

It is vital to determine user-friendly strategies to widely communicate the information presented on the one-stop resource across disability groups statewide, who often rely on word of mouth when seeking to plan a trip to a coastal recreation site. Social media should be utilized to promote the resource. Engaging non-profit organizations, such as NJ's 12 Centers for Independent Living to assist with promotion would also be extremely helpful. Centers for Independent Living are trusted community resources that offer information and support to

persons with disabilities and their families. Opportunities to engage the NJ Division of Travel and Tourism and their [visitnj.org](https://www.visitnj.org) website should also be explored.

In addition, a coastal ambassador program could be developed in coordination with a partner such as the NJ Division of Travel and Tourism to assist with promoting the one-stop resource and conducting outreach to disability-focused organizations and entities statewide on coastal site accessibility. The program should be sure to engage ambassador representatives with disabilities, as well as those without.

⌘ **Draft a uniform coastal accessibility primer for local government**

In the absence of state or federal regulations regarding mandated coastal accessibility features, New Jersey coastal communities could benefit from the development of a coastal accessibility primer to assist in their efforts to make the coastal recreation sites located in their communities as accessible and attractive to persons with disabilities as possible. For example, communicating information related to how to make these coastal sites more accessible through entrances, parking, paths of travel, restrooms, showers, accessible beach mats, and beach wheelchairs would serve as an invaluable guidance resource for local government.

Related to this recommendation and as suggested in the 2023 report *Focus Group Synthesis for Increasing Access to Nature for People with Disabilities*, the state could explore developing a uniform system for determining 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.”¹

⌘ **Investigate opportunities to enhance staffing levels and staff accessibility awareness at NJ coastal sites**

Need for more staff at coastal recreation sites to provide accessible site information as well as to assist visitors with disabilities navigate these facilities was shared by many participants. It was acknowledged that while lifeguards often informally seek to aid visitors with disabilities by providing information and/or assistance with mobility devices such as beach wheelchairs, their primary charge is to prevent drowning and injuries.

Staffing needs related to helping visitors with disabilities navigate circulation at coastal sites was often discussed, including for those utilizing beach wheelchairs, as these devices are heavy and challenging to navigate over uneven terrain such as sand. A popular suggestion noted was for more NJ coastal sites to utilize vehicles such as golf carts/Gator to pick up/return persons

¹ Alexander, Karen. “Focus Group Synthesis for Increasing Access to Nature for People with Disabilities.” June 21, 2023, New Jersey State Policy Lab.

with mobility issues at their vehicles if needed or at the dunes and then take them to their destination on the sand. Several New Jersey coastal areas including Surf City, Brant Beach, and Beach Haven are offering this service.

Sites that are staffed must also offer accessibility education and awareness training so personnel are informed of how to help address the often diverse needs of visitors with disability and so they can incorporate inclusion in site programming and service delivery. This training should be available for front-line staff and for site managers/officials that make policy for these coastal recreation sites.

⌘ Research and identify model practices and funding to support in-demand coastal recreation site accessibility features, including accessible restroom and shower facilities

Availability of accessible features, including adequate handicapped parking and accessible restrooms and showers, were discussed as priority needs. Best practices and models implemented by coastal recreation sites nationwide and beyond the U.S. should be sought. For example, Costa Rica has funded a trailer with ADA accessible facilities, including a bathroom, sink, and shower that travels to different beaches on the island, alerting the public to its schedule by social media. The vehicle is accessed by ramp, further enhancing accessibility.

Recognizing that cost is a factor in planning and construction of accessibility features, outreach should be undertaken to inform coastal communities about public and private funding opportunities to enhance outdoor recreation accessibility. For example, a statewide symposium on this topic hosted by NJDEP or another entity could be organized and promoted among coastal communities.

⌘ Increase availability and promotion of adaptive devices/equipment to enhance coastal site accessibility for recreational interests

Utilizing the oft-cited quotation “if you build it, they will come,” applies to adaptive devices and equipment designed to enhance coastal recreational access, such as beach wheelchairs and adaptive wheelchairs. As one participant offered, the more readily available these mobility devices are, the more persons with disabilities will consider using them. One participant who uses a beach wheelchair explained that without that device, he is afforded no independence on the beach.

While most participants indicated awareness that beach wheelchairs are available at some NJ beaches, they were largely unaware which specific beaches had these devices and how to reserve them. Regarding adaptive wheelchairs that can navigate both sand and water, most

acknowledged that availability of these devices is rare in the state. However, persons with mobility disabilities could benefit greatly by having these devices available so they can access coastal waters.

Adaptive equipment extends beyond beach wheelchairs to surfing, boating, rowing, kayaking, sailing, navigating coastal trails and also includes motorized off-road attachments for manual wheelchairs. NJ should investigate best practices for investing and promoting adaptive coastal recreation opportunities. Replicable examples include the NJ Pinelands adaptive outdoor adventure program; Shark River’s adaptive diving lessons; the accessible kayak launch at Ship Bottom Bay Beach in Long Beach Island; and The National Ability Center outdoor adaptive recreation initiative located in Park City, Utah. The state should explore opportunities to purchase adaptive coastal recreation equipment and pilot an initiative whereby the equipment is made available on a well-publicized, rotating basis regionally to coastal sites statewide.



APPENDIX

Focus Group Summary Reports

1. Allies in Caring Focus Group Report, July 8, 2023
2. The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation Focus Group Report, July 19, 2023
3. Heart of Surfing Focus Group Report, August 15, 2023
4. Arc of Ocean Focus Group Report, August 25, 2023

Group #1: Allies in Caring, July 8, 2023

Introduction

A total of eight people participated in this focus group session. They reported living in the following locales in NJ: Hammonton (Atlantic County), Galloway (Atlantic County), and Hillsborough (Somerset County). Each of the participants discussed the associated challenges of accessing the outdoors when you are deaf/hard of hearing (HoH).

Topic—Enjoying the Coast

Q – Where do you like to go in NJ to enjoy the coast?

- Ocean City
- Wildwood
- Galloway
- Hammonton Lake Park
- Gateway National Recreation Area (Sandy Hook, NJ)
- Atlantic City
- Stratford
- Margate
- Smithville
- Asbury Park

Q – What types of coastal activities do you enjoy doing, and how do they make you feel?

- Going to the beach
- Exploring coastal hiking/walking trails
- Fishing
 - ❑ Several participants specifically discussed enjoying fishing at Hammonton Lake Park, but can no longer enjoy it because there is not enough parking, trails are overgrown, and the lake is now heavily polluted.
- Visiting national and state parks
- Learning new things through the park or reserve’s visitor center

Q – Do you typically enjoy coastal activities with friends/family, organized groups, or on your own?

- Most participants discussed going with friends and family, primarily for social factors.
- Participants collectively agreed that if deaf individuals know there's an ASL interpreter on an organized activity, they will go. If this information is not readily available, it becomes very difficult to participate in an organized coastal activity.

As one participant explained, when there is no ASL interpreter, coastal areas and activities quickly become *“very overwhelming.”* This is why it is important to have as many ASL interpreters as possible.

- Multiple participants also discussed that even if the event checks off all the accessibility boxes, you need to give the event time to spread out in the deaf/HoH community. Since deaf individuals rely so much on each other to find out about activities, it will take time for word of mouth to help with outreach to this community.

Topic—Information and Awareness

Q – How do you find out about coastal activities and recreation opportunities?

- Participants discussed that because there is a lack of specific accessibility information on websites, deaf individuals rely almost entirely on word of mouth from the broader deaf community. Even where there is specific information available, it is not presented in a way that is accessible to the deaf community. One participant explained that *“We [the deaf community] depend on visual language and visuals. Websites are not accessible ... just pages of written information ... we [the deaf community] are often overlooked.”*
- One participant discussed that visuals are especially important in the context of emergency situations. For example, if there is lightning on the beach and lifeguards are whistling everyone to leave the beach, there is no medium for emergency communication in the form of visual information. For these situations, it would be helpful to have a tutorial with safety videos pertaining to the coastal site/area. This would provide opportunities for deaf/HoH individuals to be involved in water sports.

Topic—Getting There and Site Accessibility

Q – How does transportation fit into coastal accessibility? How do you get to coastal recreation sites?

- All the participants drive or otherwise have access to cars, so transportation is not that much of a barrier.
- Participants try to avoid using public transportation altogether due to barriers in the transit system, including:
 - ❑ The popular train route for coastal areas in NJ– running from Philadelphia to Atlantic City– is not convenient because it only runs every 2 hours. If this interval was shorter, more people– including people with disabilities– would take advantage of it.
 - ❑ Too much planning in terms of long walking/biking routes between different public transportation stops to get where you want to go.
 - ❑ Concern or fear of getting lost because of barriers (can't hear the stops from the conductor, other people/movements, etc.) makes it impossible to take public transportation alone. One participant says it would be helpful if there were an app to announce the stops and when they are coming.

Q – When trying to decide if visiting a specific NJ coastal site is right for you, are you concerned if the facilities will be accessible for persons with disabilities? Is that important to you? How do you find out if the site is accessible?

- Multiple participants emphasized the importance of knowing specific, detailed accessibility information in advance of the event.
- Participants discussed several challenges that make coastal recreation feel socially isolating for them. These include:
 - ❑ **No Closed Captions-** several participants discussed that visitor centers at parks/ reserves do not usually have closed-caption videos, which makes it difficult to learn more about the park.
 - ❑ **No ASL Interpreters-** on the topic of organized access, parks that offer guided tours either do not have ASL interpreters or do not have information available on whether ASL accommodation could be provided.

Q – Let’s discuss several types of facilities and accommodations. Please tell us if these facilities are important to your ability to access NJ’s coastal sites and what you would like to be available:

Websites

- Participants discussed information that is important to know about a coastal site but is not often available on websites. These include:
 - ❑ It would be helpful to have more “fun facts” type of information available, in which visitors scan a QR code and bring up an app with videos that contain all of this information. The participant offered an example from a California park that offers an app. The app contains 4 little boxes, each box presenting a picture and visitors can click on the picture and the app opens up a small window on-screen with an ASL interpreter discussing a fun fact about the park.
 - ❑ In response, another participant explained that while physical signage is helpful, the benefit of interactive videos with an interpreter is that translating written English into ASL can be challenging.
 - ❑ It would be helpful if there was a standard place for keeping all of these videos—perhaps a “log” of videos that are maintained by the state parks system for easy access in one place.

Accessibility staff

- Several participants discussed the importance of having accessibility staff, such as an accessibility ambassador. Participants appear to collectively agree that this is important.
 - ❑ One participant enthusiastically expanded on this: *“Many of us are isolated... many of us need more interaction.”*
 - ❑ One participant said this would be helpful because the ambassador could increase targeted outreach, explaining *“if enough deaf individuals are not informed, the event won’t spread within the deaf community.”*

Signage

- It is instrumental to have a flyer that can be shared on social media and through various clubs, organizations, and community centers. More broadly, participants discussed the importance of having visual information, as opposed to blocks of written information, to explain features of the park.

Trails

- One participant gave the example of when the South Jersey Deaf and Hard of Hearing Coalition organized a walk in a Galloway Park; however, it was not good for people with mobility issues because the trails were uneven, rough, and overgrown.
- It is important to have clear visual distinctions to explain important trail information. For example, color-coding is very useful (ex: take the blue trail for the easy route, green trail for the intermediate route, red for hard route, etc.)
- Multiple participants circled back to emergency services– it is most important to have accessible warnings for deaf/HoH individuals for lightning and rough water.
- In response, one participant said this is important for state parks as well, where there is often no signal if you need help and you cannot hear when there is trouble.
- Multiple participants said it is nice to know which trails are paved or not suitable for the following reasons:
 - ❑ Some of them are older and have mobility issues (or have friends that are)
 - ❑ Some trails are too narrow for multiple deaf individuals to sign to each other and be able to clearly see what the other person is saying.
 - ❑ With the added issue of rough terrain, some trails are too bumpy, rough, or uneven to take a walk with friends. It is difficult to sign to your friends while looking at the trail in front of you. Multiple participants shared stories of bad falls or friends that had bad falls on walking trails.
 - ❑ In response to this issue, one participant said it's important for trails to have guardrails to catch yourself when you're falling.

Topic—Inclusion

Q - What is one positive experience doing a coastal activity where you felt completely included and welcome?

- One participant discussed that Disneyworld in Florida has short videos explaining what the features and experience of each ride is going to be like, and these videos are close-captioned. Additionally, Disney provides a plethora of ASL interpreters and pre-recorded videos with ASL interpreters providing visitor information.

Topic—Opportunities & Challenges for Increasing Access to NJ’s Coastal Zone for People with Disabilities

- One participant said having accurate accessibility information is “most important.” This will get more deaf individuals to attend organized coastal trips and activities.
- One participant said the state should have more deaf community centers and more deaf professionals in general to meet the needs of the deaf community in NJ.
- Multiple participants discussed the idea of bringing back monthly newsletters about activities happening throughout the state; this project was previously funded by DHS (in partnership with the Deaf-hearing Communication Center in NJ- DHCC) before the division lost its contract to continue newsletter circulation. Without these monthly newsletters, there is no equivalent website or medium to access this information for the deaf/HoH community.
- One participant discussed the idea of having all state parks submit their accessibility information to the DHS, so DHS could easily disburse the information and maximize targeted outreach for the deaf/HoH community.
- Participants collectively discussed the best way to find information about accessible events is through social media and word of mouth.
- One participant discussed that they love birdwatching. However, they cannot find as many birds as other individuals that can hear the bird calls/sounds and use that to guide where to look for birds. As a result, one idea for making deaf/HoH individuals more included is to create an app that recognizes bird calls and signals to the user what type of bird made the call based on its sound.
- One participant discussed that in Puerto Rico, people with disabilities receive a discounted rate to visit state parks, which increases usage among persons with disabilities.

Closing

The following implementation strategies should be used in NJ to increase coastal accessibility among deaf/HoH individuals:

- Communicate accessibility accommodations in the form of websites and social media, with a phone number and accessibility staff to contact with questions. Information should include information about ASL interpreters, closed-caption videos, bathrooms, food establishments, transportation, and emergency services.
- Collaborate with organizations that represent the deaf/HoH community, such as the South Jersey Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHOH) Coalition. This approach recognizes that the DHOH community is small, close-knit, and socially isolated and are more likely to attend events with organizations that they know, trust, and use for other resources.
- Have interpretive materials that are readily available and accommodating to the DHOH community, including embedded recordings of ASL interpreters, closed-caption videos, and visuals that accompany written information.
- Release a monthly newsletter in partnership with a DHOH organization to share information about coastal accessibility and accessible coastal recreation programs.
- In recognition of the historically socially isolated lives of the DHOH community, consult people with disabilities on a regular basis to improve and maintain existing coastal accessibility initiatives and provide this community with a discounted rate of attendance.

Regarding coastal recreation, the deaf community is often isolated because of a consistent lack of accessibility accommodations that allow deaf/HoH individuals to participate in coastal recreation activities. The types of accessibility accommodations that are important for the deaf community, yet sparsely available at coastal recreation sites, include closed-caption videos, inclusive signage, accessible, interactive websites, and the availability of ASL interpreters. These types of accommodations are essential not only so deaf/HoH individuals can enjoy coastal recreation sites, but also to help prevent physical injuries and social isolation in outdoor spaces.

Group #2 – The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, July 19, 2023

Introduction

A total of five persons participated in this session. They reported residing in the following locales: North Caldwell (Essex County), Lakewood (Ocean County), Eatontown (Monmouth County), Point Pleasant Beach (Ocean County), and Philadelphia, PA. The person residing in PA spends his summers in Stone Harbor, NJ (Cape May County) and the person from Eatontown recently moved to Texas.

Participants shared information about their respective disabilities noting spinal cord injuries including Spina Bifida, Quadriplegia, as well as Pulmonary Neurosarcoidosis disease. Some shared that they utilize a manual wheelchair or other mobility device, such as a cane or rollator walker. Some noted a more recent onset of their disability due to an injury, while others shared that they have had their disability since birth or childhood.

Topic—Enjoying the Coast

Q – Where do you like to go in NJ to enjoy the coast?

- Asbury Park
- Long Branch (Seven Presidents Beach)
- Stone Harbor
- Lavallette
- Dorbrook recreation area, Colts Neck (two-mile accessible paved trail)
- Atlantic City
- Manasquan
- Island Beach State Park
- Barnegat Bay
- Sandy Hook

Q – What types of coastal activities do you enjoy doing, and how do they make you feel?

- Hiking and walking/rolling on trails, along or near bays and oceans
- Walking/rolling on beach boardwalks to access food, snacks, games, etc.
- Relaxing on the beach, *“sitting and watching the scenery”*
- Swimming
- *“Putting my feet in the water”*
- Fishing at the Manasquan Inlet
- Watch the sunrise on the beach

Several participants shared how they feel when they get to enjoy coastal recreation:

- *“Outside is my happy place”*
- *“Water is freeing because you are weightless ... in the water, you can be dependent on yourself”*
- *“Hearing the sounds of the water is very calming”*

Q – Do you typically enjoy coastal activities with friends/family, organized groups, or on your own?

- Most discussed enjoying coastal activities with friends and family for both social factors and reasons related to their disability. Regarding the latter, one participant explained, *“I can’t do anything at the beach by myself.”* Another agreed, stating, *“[The beach is] freeing and relaxing ... but also super frustrating.”* She elaborated, noting that the accessible beach mats (often referred to by participants by the brand name “Mobi-mats”) do not go close enough to the water and not all the avenues with beach access in coastal towns have Mobi-mats (for example, Asbury Park and Ocean Grove). Additionally, there is usually a step between the end of the mobi-mat and the beginning of the beach. The participant expressed frustration about this, saying *“when [the Mobi-mat] stops ... you are in the desert.”*
- One participant noted she enjoyed visiting coastal sites, including Asbury Park, with her organized church group.

Topic—Information and Awareness

Q – How do you find out about coastal activities and recreation opportunities?

- Word of mouth is the most common way that participants find out about activities to enjoy at NJ's coastal areas. One noted that his "fishing buddies" share where accessible fishing sites are located and another explained that word of mouth is the best way to find out about a site's accessibility, such as availability of beach access mats.
- One participant stated: *"I won't go somewhere no one else I know has been."* Another agreed with this sentiment, noting that if others have successfully visited the site who also have her disability, then she feels less nervous visiting it.

Topic—Getting There & Site Accessibility

Q – How does transportation fit in to coastal accessibility? How do you get to coastal recreation sites?

- Participants collectively shared that they drive themselves to coastal recreation sites or have a friend or family member drive them. None reporting using public transportation. One explained that taking public transit would be difficult because of the number of items she needs to take and carry with her to the beach.

Q – When trying to decide if visiting a specific NJ coastal site is right for you, are you concerned if the facilities will be accessible for persons with disabilities? Is that important to you? How do you find out if the site is accessible?

- Participants discussed that site accessibility is a significant concern and all agreed that accessibility varies by site/destination. One noted that *"100% of people with a disability worry about accessibility... I'm fully relying on other people... as a result, I'm infringing on someone else's time."*
- Several shared that because of their disability, they have difficulty regulating their body temperature and thus cannot remain in the sun for long periods of time and need shade to enjoy coastal recreation. One participant explained that due to the quadriplegic nature of his injury, the heat makes it difficult to stay at the beach for long. For these

participants, determining if adequate shading will be available at a given coastal site, as well as opportunities to go indoors to access air conditioning are important components of their trip planning.

- A participant explained that websites and apps with accessibility information on coastal and other sites are not very useful because there is no universal definition for site accessibility, so the information communicated is not consistent or reliable. Several agreed, with one explaining that the term accessibility *“is relative.”*
- One reported that some NJ counties offer recreation maps; however, *“you have to know what you’re looking for ... but it’s better than nothing.”*
 - ❑ Additionally, the same participant mentioned that an Ocean County-based organization called Beach Access for All used to use Facebook to post information on coastal recreation resources and events for people with disabilities, specifically tracking the beaches where Mobi-mats are available. However, he does not believe that the organization remains active.
- The topic of seasonal access to coastal sites was discussed and the group confirmed that beach access often fluctuates based on the season. One participant lamented that even when beaches have accessible beach mats, the county or municipal government often removes them during the off-season, making those beaches inaccessible to persons with ambulatory disabilities.
 - ❑ Another participant explained that when she and her church group tried to visit the beach off-season, they would encounter difficulties because often beaches block off sections with a rope, which is difficult to impossible to traverse. This person has experienced occasions when she would climb on a friend’s shoulders to traverse the rope to access the beach, leaving their wheelchair behind to do so.
 - ❑ In the off-season, beach staff are not present to provide possible assistance to people with disabilities.

Q – Lets discuss several types of facilities and accommodations. Please tell us if these facilities are important to your ability to access NJ’s coastal sites and what you would like to be available:

Handicapped parking

- The group discussed the importance of having ample handicapped parking available at coastal recreation sites to help ensure access for all and shared experiences where lack of handicapped parking impeded or limited their ability to access sites. One participant recalled a trip to Belmar beach with her friends, explaining there is not enough handicapped parking on the avenues near Belmar beaches. Although there is some handicapped designated parking, there are *“too many groups [of disabilities] for too few spots.”* As a result, they had to park very far and by the time they got to the beach, she was overheating due to her spinal injury. *“By the time I got to where the sand was, which poses a whole other challenge .. it was already going downhill.”*

Signage

- There was consensus that signage was vital to help with orientation, with several noting signs at coastal areas need to include specific information about site accessibility issues. For example, “this entrance has one step.”
- Another participant shared a specific example where clearer signage would have been helpful to his visit. The participant drove to Sandy Hook, NJ to fish, only to find that he could not access the beach with a wheelchair, saying *“the ocean was only 20 yards away, but I couldn’t get there because of the cliff.”*
- It would be helpful to use signage to explain how to reserve beach wheelchairs and other relevant information about wheelchair accessibility at the coastal site.
- It would be helpful if signage pointed out where benches or other places to sit were located, as this information is vital.
- It would be helpful if visitors could scan a QR code on coastal recreation site signs that would offer information on the site’s ADA features and overall accessibility. Perhaps users could also rate the site’s accessibility/leave a review via the QR code.

Path of travel to & at the site

- Install more benches along paths of travel and at the site. Ensure some of these benches offer shading so that persons who have difficulty regulating their body temperature can rest.

- Provide tents with fans and/or spray-misters along the path of travel so people with disabilities can keep cool for a longer time.
- Recognize that beach erosion plays a huge role in how accessible a beach is, as well as whether it is high or low tide. Based on these factors, the beach can have a huge drop off that makes it difficult to navigate the site in a wheelchair.
- In the off-season, it is challenging to get on the beach with wheelchairs due to ruts in the sand made by trucks.

Beach and adaptive wheelchairs

- Adaptive wheelchairs that can go into the water should be made more widely available at NJ beaches, such as the ones provided in the “Access Asbury” initiative in Asbury Park, as well as beach wheelchairs that traverse the sand. One participant remarked that the more readily available these mobility devices are, the more persons with disabilities will consider using them.
 - ❑ One person shared that while he typically uses his own adaptive wheelchair to travel on the sand and access the water, he had a flat tire on one occasion so needed to instead use a beach wheelchair provided by lifeguard staff. However, after bringing the participant onto the beach with the wheelchair, they *“took away the chair... and took away my independence.”* He shared that more chairs need to be made available.
- An easy way to reserve a beach wheelchair (pick up/drop off) needs to be established in NJ. One participant recommended a dedicated phone line be established for that purpose. She added that the phone line should have live operator assistance so persons who reserve the chairs have a contact to call to prevent them being stranded at the site.
 - ❑ One participant shared that on one visit to the beach, a lifeguard brought him to the sand using the lifeguard beach buggy, but never returned to take him off the beach. As a result, the participant’s father had to leave the person alone while they were experiencing overheating in order to locate a lifeguard who could help bring the person safely back to the boardwalk.
 - ❑ One participant shared that many beaches in Greece utilize a remote-operated chair called Seatrac that helps people with mobility issues access the sea by transferring from their wheelchair to the Seatrac chair which travels by ramp to/ from the water.

Accessible beach mats

- Participants discussed the benefits of accessible beach mats but lamented that many beaches only have limited mat coverage at certain entrances. In addition, often the mats do not traverse to the shoreline, which limits their ability to enjoy the water. One described that it is *“really aggravating”* to watch everyone else having fun from a distance. Another reported, *“When the mat stops, so does your independence.”*

Site staff

- The group shared that overall lack of site staff can hinder their access to coastal resources. They explained that while lifeguards can be helpful at times with beach wheelchairs, they have other responsibilities so cannot be depended upon to help return beach chairs, etc.

ADA accessible kayaks and canoes

- One participant noted that he was interested in increased availability of accessible kayaking, which would necessitate construction of accessible launches.

Trails

- Trail accessibility is important from a safety perspective for all users.
- Island State Beach Park and Sandy Hook have paved runs that are accessible.
- Adaptive equipment should be available to rent on coastal trails.

Accessible restrooms

- Costa Rica has funded a trailer with ADA accessible facilities, including a bathroom, sink, and shower that travels to different beaches on the island, alerting the public to its schedule by social media. One participant had experience using the trailer on his vacation and explained how helpful it was, noting the trailer was accessible by a ramp and all the facilities were located on a single level. NJ should pursue a similar model.

Topic—Inclusion

Q - Are there activities you would like to do independently when you visit NJ's coastal sites, but you don't?

- A desire to access the shoreline hindered by lack of accessible beach mats that reach the shoreline was reiterated by several participants.
- One participant shared a desire to participate in a variety of adaptive coastal recreation activities independently if possible, including surfing, boating, rowing, and sailing.

Topic—Opportunities & Challenges for Increasing Access to NJ's Coastal Zone for People with Disabilities

- Participants shared a variety of experiences throughout the session as previously noted that make it challenging to access NJ's coastal zone for people with disabilities, which and adaptive equipment like beach chairs.
- Participants shared feedback on a variety of opportunities and suggestions to increase access to NJ's coastal zone for persons with disabilities. Some not previously mentioned include:
 - ❑ Have vendors available at coastal sites that can deliver food and drinks directly on the beach instead of the boardwalk, making it more convenient for persons with disabilities who have difficulty navigating to the boardwalk from the beach.
 - ❑ The idea of a one-stop statewide information resource on accessible beaches or other coastal sites was discussed. There was interest in the idea, but several voiced concerns as well. One participant expressed concern over site management, and another mentioned that accessibility needs vary by individual and location. One suggested each county should be charged with creating and maintaining this resource for their jurisdiction. The group acknowledged it would take time and resources to maintain such a resource.
 - Participants shared that if a one-stop resource was made available, that it should have a web presence that includes videos showing site accessibility features. A phone line should also be included with operators trained and knowledgeable about accessibility issues.
 - ❑ Develop a list of uniform guidelines for coastal sites to implement accessibility measures, such as: "10 Common Things you Need to Know..."

- ❑ NJ should offer adaptive charter boat fishing, which would require the boat have an accessible restroom and other accessibility features, such as accessible pathways on/off the boat and lower guardrails to accommodate wheelchair users.
- ❑ Coastal recreation sites should install concrete platforms near the beaches so that persons using wheelchairs could play beach games like horseshoes at those sites.
- ❑ NJ should invest in buying adaptive equipment such as off-road wheelchairs, motorized off-road attachments for manual wheelchairs, and beach chairs and make them available on a rotating basis at different sites regionally.
- NJ should look statewide and nationwide for best practices on how to invest in and promote adaptive coastal recreation opportunities. For example, the Pinelands offers an adaptive outdoor adventure program. Shark River offers adaptive diving lessons that could be replicated in other NJ coastal communities. The National Ability Center outdoor adaptive recreation initiative is located in Park City, Utah.

Closing

The participants of this session reported a variety of mobility-related disabilities and were eager to share their experiences and recommendations for enhancing access for persons with disabilities to coastal recreation sites in NJ. All expressed interest in accessing NJ's coastal sites and many do so regularly, typically accompanied by family and/or friends.

A key theme communicated is that accessibility is relative and varies greatly among the population with disabilities. As one participant explained, *"what is ok for me, may not be ok for someone else."*

Several communicated feelings of dependence on others to ensure their safety when visiting NJ's coastal resources due to factors including reduced or no ability to safely traverse the sand when beach mats are not available or limited in their coverage, lack of beach wheelchairs, shaded rest areas, etc. Participants emphasized that efforts to increase overall coastal recreation site accessibility and making adaptive equipment more readily available would promote increased usage of these facilities among persons with disabilities.

Group #3: Heart of Surfing, August 15, 2023

Introduction

A total of six people participated in this focus group session. They reported living in the following locales in NJ: Ocean City (Cape May County), Somers Point (Atlantic County), Galloway Township (Atlantic County), Mays Landing (Atlantic County), and Estell Manor (Atlantic County). Participant feedback represented either their child's disability and experiences with coastal resources or their own. Participants reported the following disabilities experienced by either themselves or their child: Autism, ADHD, Down Syndrome, idiopathic osteoporosis, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, type 1 diabetes, seizure disorder, prosthesis, and Ehlers Danlos syndrome. Participating parents had children between the ages of 22 to 28. Many participants had children contending with multiple comorbidities, including mobility-related disabilities and developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Topic—Enjoying the Coast

Q – Where do you like to go in NJ to enjoy the coast?

- Ocean City beaches and boardwalks and back bays.
- The Bayside Center (activities and education facility) in Ocean City.
- Beaches and boardwalks in Atlantic City, Ventnor City, and Wildwood.
- Friday night concerts in Somers Point (held at the municipal beach). The beach has an accessible mat that covers the beach entrance to a quarter of the way down the beach.
- The Cape May Lighthouse (Cape May County) and East Point Lighthouse (Cumberland County)

Q – What types of coastal activities do you enjoy doing, and how do they make you feel?

- One participant visits a variety of coastal sites to sit and relax: *“any place I can get fresh air.”*
- Enjoying the exercise benefits of coastal activities.
- Enjoying nature.
- Collecting sea glass.
- Watching the sunset.

- Surfing.
- Paddleboarding.
- Passenger on a boat.
- Socialization - visiting coastal areas makes one participant's child feel more included with peers. For example, after learning to surf with Heart of Surfing, he joined the high school surf team and now takes lessons once a week with a high school friend. Surfing has provided a great opportunity for him to be involved with neurotypical peers his own age, so the social benefits related to accessing coastal recreation are very important to him.
- Another participant discussed that her child also really loves the social aspect of coastal activities, particularly traveling on the boardwalk. When they go to the boardwalk together, her son benefits socially from being in the vicinity of many people without the expectation that he needs to be directly participating in the interactions. As she explained further, *"there's a social aspect to the boardwalk, but not an expectation... because you are in a crowd of strangers."*

Q – Do you typically enjoy coastal activities with friends/family, organized groups, or on your own?

- Some discussed that the Heart of Surfing programs require that a parent be present with each participant as a safety requirement for this organized activity.
- One participant discussed that she and/or her spouse accompany her child with a disability to the beach to surf or paddleboard or take a day trip on a family member's boat. So, her child participates in coastal activities either with her family or an organized group, such as Heart of Surfing.
- One participant reported that because her child has a physical disability and utilizes a wheelchair, he needs to be brought to/from activities. As a result, he always enjoys coastal activities with at least one other person.

Topic—Information and Awareness

Q – How do you find out about coastal activities and recreation opportunities?

- Multiple participants discussed using Shore Local newsmagazine (operated by the Heart of Surfing founder) to find out about coastal activities. As one participant explained, *"it*

has everything .. every shore .. what's going on."

- Several discussed that for organized activities, such as fishing, surfing, and beach days—they rely on parent networks targeted to families of children with disabilities. These parent networks also intersect with networks of disability service organizations and non-profits that parents of children with disabilities frequently use to find information. Additionally, one parent living in Ocean City follows Facebook groups and a news app specific to that municipality.
- One participant expanded on the idea of networking, explaining that the Facebook Group "Faces for Autism" is a way that she gathers information on upcoming events for her child. Parents post information about events on this Facebook group. Additionally, the participant uses the Facebook groups for South Jersey Field of Dreams and Hoops for All, saying "these are two other great groups that keep our kids busy."
- One participant discussed walking around in downtown areas in South Jersey and looking at event flyers in storefront windows to get information about upcoming events.

Topic—Getting There and Site Accessibility

Q - How does transportation fit into coastal accessibility? How do you get to coastal recreation sites?

- Consensus among the group was that everyone drives to access coastal resources – no one utilizes public transportation.
- One participant elaborated on her reason for driving everywhere. She explained:

"She was approved for Access Link, but we never really pulled the trigger on it because word on the street is that it is lengthy .. so let's just postulate that she [her child with disability] gets a part-time job, the pick-up could be anywhere from 1 to 2 hours prior to the start of the shift, and the same thing [at the end of her shift]. Because she is diabetic and disabled, that really doesn't work for us .. so it's easier for us to call an Uber for any independent activity."

Q – When trying to decide if visiting a specific NJ coastal site is right for you, are you concerned if the facilities will be accessible for persons with disabilities? Is that important to you? How do you find out if the site is accessible?

- One participant with a child who utilizes a wheelchair explained that she and her spouse always physically drive to check out any coastal site for themselves ahead of time. As she explained:

“We go check things out for ourselves, we don’t even believe anyone anymore... access means many different things... there’s no way I’m bringing him somewhere and having it fail, because we’ll never be able to do it again. You get one chance to make an impression on him, and then it’s over. I have to make sure [the site] is paved and perfect, so he has a good first experience and we can go back.”

She discussed the different things that she needs to know about a given site, including availability of a parking garage, handicapped parking spaces, and a place for her child and his wheelchair to safely enter/exit the car. The participant shared an applied example, explaining that because of these important accessibility issues, all of Long Beach Island is inaccessible to him. She explained “I have that sadness...he will never have first-hand experience [at Long Beach Island] because of accessibility.”

Q – Let’s discuss several types of facilities and accommodations. Please tell us if these facilities are important to your ability to access NJ’s coastal sites and what you would like to be available:

Bathrooms

- Agreement that overall lack of bathrooms at coastal recreation sites – whether accessible or not – is a “real issue.” One explained that persons with disabilities have to select a certain beach based on awareness if bathrooms are available on-site for public use. She suggested using the municipal funds from beach tag charges to fund building more accessible bathrooms and several agreed with this recommendation.
- One participant discussed a need for more accessible showers, explaining that she needs to bring water to the beach in order to wash her son’s feet since he doesn’t like the sand.

Parking

- Overall, participants discussed that there is very limited handicapped parking at coastal sites, with one person explaining *“You get one or two [handicapped] parking spots in each beach, in each town... if you’re lucky.”*
- One participant discussed that handicapped parking is not free in many New Jersey beach towns, such as Wildwood, making it costly to visit.
- A participant reported that at certain Ocean City beaches, people with bikes do not have adequate bike racks to park their bikes, and thus, often end up crowding out handicapped parking spaces on the street as well. This practice of blocking handicapped parking spots results in people using the handicapped spots being unable to drive their car out of the spot at the end of the beach day.

Signage

- One participant discussed that signage would be helpful to explain information about reserving beach wheelchairs, including which beach entrances have beach wheelchairs available. Currently, she has to do that research ahead of time, explaining that her family has memorized which beach entrances and blocks offer the beach wheelchairs and how many are available.
- Several noted that while enhanced signage would be helpful, they would not depend on that signage in case the information was not accurate.
- There was general consensus among the group that smartphone scannable QR codes would be helpful to explain different features of a coastal site.

Beach wheelchairs

- Comments focused on limited availability, knowledge of which beaches have beach wheelchairs available, and the process of reserving the chairs. One participant explained that reserving beach wheelchairs ahead of time is difficult because it requires you to plan your beach trip in advance. For her, this is difficult because they often plan coastal activities day of, based on how her son with an intellectual disability is feeling that day. As she explained, *“sometimes [the process] is just we’re having a good day, let’s go to the beach today.”* However, that may be impossible to do if beach wheelchairs are not available to reserve the day of their desired visit.

Accessible beach mats

- Limited beach mat coverage and being unaware of where beach mats are available was noted by most. One participant discussed that certain beaches in Ocean City have accessible mats that cover further down the beach and “parking” areas for wheelchairs on the beach. However, at this beach, residents without disabilities often utilize the wheelchair parking area for their bikes, which means that area becomes unavailable for people with disabilities who need the space for their wheelchairs.

Path of travel

- Path of travel was noted as vital among parents with children with a mobility-related disability. One participant explained that she needs paved sidewalk areas and curb cuts in order to maneuver her son’s wheelchair. She discussed the specific experience of traveling on boardwalks, where the boards change directions or there are loose nails on the boards, making it very difficult to navigate with a wheelchair. *“It doesn’t take much with a wheelchair... I was trying to get over this curb and I couldn’t, so I had to go backwards to get over it. It’s kind of shocking, I think people are surprised by how little of an amount can block someone’s access.”*
- More benches would be helpful at beaches, including along the path of travel to and from beaches. It was noted that Ocean City has many benches which is beneficial. One explained that more seating would be helpful because her daughter tires very easily, especially with challenges of navigating the beach related to her daughter’s prosthetic foot. She explained, *“If the terrain is very rocky with a lot of pebbles, that’s very uncomfortable for her. So, if there were more places where she could sit and rest her foot, that would be helpful.”*
- One participant shared that in the past, lifeguards in Ventnor have been available to help her navigate her child to and from the beach using the beach wheelchair, and then even helped her son into the ocean.
 - ❑ One participant expanded on this comment, saying that municipalities need to make it clear which beaches have lifeguards. Another participant agreed and noted it is difficult particularly as Labor Day approaches, knowing which beaches have lifeguards present and for how many weeks they are staffed in the summer.
- One participant discussed that the way they zone houses in Ocean City results in oceanfront property owners parking their cars in a way that blocks the sidewalk and beach entrances, making the path of travel to the beach impossible for some persons with disability.

- One participant discussed trying to access one of the water boats at Fells Point. She needed to remove her son from his wheelchair because it was too heavy to bring on the boat. However, this action upset him, and it was not a good experience. She was upset that this was not a good experience for him, and she wished she could take him on one of the whale watching boats in Atlantic City. Accessible boats would be great.

Topic—Inclusion

Q - What is one positive experience doing a coastal activity where you felt completely included and welcome?

- One participant discussed the 21 Down's Beach Day event in Wildwood. The event includes a day of beach events and activities hosted by the 21 Down non-profit and the Wildwood Beach Patrol. It is very accessible she notes, with beach taxis transporting visitors to and from the beach from the parking area and ample beach mat coverage. She explained, *"it is the highlight of our summer."*
- One participant discussed beach programs hosted by the Voorhees Pediatric Facility, which has facility staff and community volunteers bringing patients to the beach in Ocean City for a day of activities, including swimming and fishing. Her son did summer camp at the facility as a child with the patients, and he enjoyed it so much. She explained, *"it was the first experience my son had doing things other kids got to do."*
- One participant discussed a similar summer camp experience at the Diller Vacation Home for the Blind. While her child does not attend this camp, she lives in Avalon and sees the positive impact of these programs on the children attending.

Topic—Opportunities & Challenges for Increasing Access to NJ's Coastal Zone for People with Disabilities

- There was general consensus among the group that having a one-stop information resource with accessible guides and information about coastal activities in New Jersey would be helpful. It should be made available online with the ability to query by municipality. Persons should also be able to access via QR code.
 - ❑ The site must be maintained to ensure the information presented is accurate and current.

- ❑ Municipalities must inform residents which beaches are accessible in their town, including information about beach wheelchairs, accessible mats, lifeguard coverage, and handicapped parking.
- ❑ Centers for Independent Living are underutilized resources, and their websites should be revamped to be this “one-stop” resource on coastal activities for people with disabilities.
- Many shops along beach boardwalks are not accessible to people in wheelchairs– the entrances and the inside structure of the store are too small for wheelchairs.
- Multiple participants agree that having uniform guidelines across NJ municipalities for coastal accessibility would be helpful so that people can know whether their accessibility needs would be met at a given coastal site. However, one participant emphasized that staff must be available to consistently check and make sure these accessibility guidelines continue to be implemented.

Closing

Many disabilities, experiences, and accessibility needs were represented in this focus group, primarily composed of parents of children with disability. The children had accessibility needs that included physical needs such as availability of handicapped parking and accessible beach mats as well as needs related to a desire for social interaction and socialization experiences for their child.

Participants explained that municipalities are not doing enough to communicate information about which beaches have accessible parking, beach wheelchair accessibility, accessible beach mats, and lifeguard staff. Additionally, beaches that have these some or all of these features often still do not have adequate supply to meet demand (e.g., need more handicapped parking spaces). Consequently, participants do not rely on municipalities directly for information about coastal accessibility – instead, they rely primarily on their networks of parents and caregivers of children with disabilities and various non-profit organizations to acquire information about coastal events and activities. Participants stated that to improve coastal recreation accessibility, better communication at the municipal level is needed about beach accessibility, and funding needs to be directed to creating more paved sidewalks, improving boardwalk and beach entrance accessibility, and offering more beach wheelchairs and signage explaining how to access these vital resources. In addition, more benches/sitting areas and accessible parking are needed.

Group #4: Arc of Ocean, August 25, 2023

Introduction

A total of 11 people participated in this focus group session. Participants reported residing in the following Ocean County locations: Toms River, Barnegat, Little Egg Harbor, Point Pleasant Borough, Long Beach Island, and Lacey Township. One person resided in Howell (Monmouth County). Ten participants reported various developmental and physical disabilities that led to their participation in programming at The Arc. Additionally, one participant was a recreational support staffer working for The Arc.

Topic—Enjoying the coast

Q - Where do you like to go in NJ to enjoy the coast?

- Wildwood
- Seaside Heights
- Point Pleasant
- Jenkinson's Boardwalk in Point Pleasant
- Manasquan Beach
- Double Trouble State Park in Lacey Township

In addition to these beaches and coastal sites, several participants noted they had not been to the beach in a while. For some, this reality is due to limited staffing in their group home or residential facility available to take residents on recreation trips. Others expressed preference for visiting pools instead of the beach because of issues including difficulty walking on the sand associated with mobility challenges.

Q - What types of coastal activities do you enjoy doing, and how do they make you feel?

- Swimming
- Kayaking
- Boating
- Clamming and crabbing
- Fishing
- Collecting seashells and sea glass

- Beach volleyball
- Walking on the beach and boardwalk for exercise
- Playing games/visiting arcades along the boardwalk

Participants discussed that going to the coast and enjoying coastal activities makes them feel peaceful, relaxed, and happy.

Q – Do you typically enjoy coastal activities with friends/family, organized groups, or on your own?

- One participant enjoys going to Wildwood with his girlfriend.
- Two participants discussed going to coastal sites with their fathers.
- Several shared that they frequent coastal sites with the Arc as a group outing. The staff participant shared that coastal sites they have visited as a group include Jenkinson’s boardwalk, John C. Bartlett Park in Bayville, the Splash Park in Asbury Park, the Henry Hudson trail, Mount Mitchell site, and the Twin Lights and the Barnegat lighthouses.
 - ❑ One participant discussed that when she lived in Pennsylvania, she would go to Twin Lakes Park with organized groups.

Topic—Information and Awareness

Q – How do you find out about coastal activities and recreation opportunities?

- Participants reported utilizing general internet searches as well as seeking word of mouth guidance. Regarding the former, one participant discussed conducting Google searches on his phone, such as “ocean activities in NJ.” Similarly, another participant discussed going on Yelp seeking reviews of NJ beaches and other coastal sites. Regarding the latter, multiple participants discussed seeking information from group home staff, Arc staff, or Center for Independent Living staff on coastal activities and sites.
- The staff participant explained that as part of programming at the Arc, she undertakes recreation planning research with participants to teach them resources for trying new things and exploring new places. As the participant explained, *“The goal is to get them out of Ocean County”* so they can experience new NJ destinations.

Topic—Getting There and Site Accessibility

Q – How does transportation fit into coastal accessibility? How do you get to coastal recreation sites?

- The majority reported relying on family or staff at the Arc or their congregate residence location to access coastal sites. Those relying on group home staff reiterated that they often cannot pursue recreational opportunities due to limited staff coverage.
- One participant discussed using Uber to get to coastal sites because he is familiar with how to use Uber for his transportation to jobs and other activities.
- No participant takes public transportation to get to coastal sites because public transportation is not available in their area of residence to the best of their knowledge.

Q – When trying to decide if visiting a specific NJ coastal site is right for you, are you concerned if the facilities will be accessible for persons with disabilities? Is that important to you? How do you find out if the site is accessible?

- Consensus among the group was that finding accessibility information in advance of their visit to a coastal site is not a barrier– this is because typically, they go to coastal sites with organized groups or family members who have coordinated the details of the activity.
- One participant discussed accessing the website of a park/coastal site he is interested in visiting to learn more about accessibility accommodations.

Q – Let’s discuss several types of facilities and accommodations. Please tell us if these facilities are important to your ability to access NJ’s coastal sites and what you would like to be available:

Bathrooms

- All participants expressed the importance of having accessible bathrooms at a coastal site, including accessible portable bathroom facilities if that is all that is available.
- The staff participant discussed that many coastal sites do not even have portable bathrooms, which makes those sites inaccessible. For example, she would like to take Arc participants to the new Edwin Forsythe Wildlife Refuge in Surf City, Long Beach Island but there are no bathrooms on-site.
- Multiple participants said it is important to have an accessible shower. One participant explained that it is particularly important to him to have a shower with a bench. As the participant explained, *“I can’t stand for long... my legs give out.”*

Parking

- Multiple participants said that accessible parking is important. There was consensus among the participants that there is not only inadequate accessible parking available at coastal sites, but also general parking at these sites is also too limited.
- The staff participant explained that The Arc does not have handicapped parking permits, which can be challenging when Arc employees are trying to bring multiple people with disabilities to a coastal site as an organized group. As she explained, *“they just assume [because we are an organization], we can figure it out.”* However, she emphasized that even for people who have a handicapped parking permit, the parking spaces are not large enough to be truly accessible for people in wheelchairs. She explained that if someone parks too close to the handicapped spots, the vehicle in the handicapped space does not have enough space to open the ramp outside the vehicle to help the person in the wheelchair exit and enter the vehicle.

Signage

- Most participants said that more signage would be helpful at beaches and other coastal sites. Participants said signage would help both for engagement and navigation purposes. People discussed the benefits of having the following types of signage:
 - Welcome signs
 - Signs that explain the different types of facilities and activities to do at the coastal site, including accessibility

- ❑ Signs with a smartphone barcode to learn more about the site
- ❑ Signs with a list of visitor rules and regulations (i.e., the types of activities that people can do, if the site has a carry in-carry out policy, and visitor hours)
- ❑ Signs with information about water safety/general safety of the site
- ❑ Signs with information about accessible entrances
- ❑ Signs with information about whether, where, and how to pay for parking

Accessible beach mats

- Several participants discussed the importance of accessible beach mats that go all the way to the high-water line. As one participant explained, *“Most beach mats only go to the edge of the dune... after the mat ends, you’re basically in the Sahara Desert.”* Another participant said that while accessible mats are helpful, many dunes are much higher than they used to be before beach replenishments took place. As a result, it is very difficult to push wheelchairs over the dunes, even with the accessible mats. To address this issue, it would be helpful to have dunes that are “hard packed” with an aggregate mix instead of having loose, dry sand that is heavy to push through.
 - ❑ Several shared that accessible beach mats should be available in every beach community.

Path of travel

- Multiple participants expressed that coastal sites need more sidewalks and paved walkways. This makes it possible for people in wheelchairs or people with other mobility issues that use walking canes to navigate the coastal site to visit these destinations. Using a specific example, the staff participant explained that the new Edwin Forsythe Wildlife Refuge in Surf City has only gravel pathways, which makes it impossible for many Arc participants with mobility issues to visit.
- There was enthusiastic consensus among the group that there should be more benches, picnic areas, and other places to sit at coastal sites. As one participant explained, *“There’s not enough seats... you only get 2 or 3 of them in one spot.”* Additionally, the staff participant explained that there should be more places to sit specifically in the shade.
- One participant noted that it is important to have ramps at sites because his cane can’t navigate steps very easily.
- A few participants enjoy kayaking and said that having accessible kayak launches are important to them. The staff participant explained that at Ship Bottom Bay Beach in Long

Beach Island there is an accessible kayak launch with guard rails at the pier, which they have brought Arc participants to enjoy for a coastal activity.

Staff

- Some participants said that there should be more staff on-site to ask accessibility questions and address general visitor concerns, as well as to provide assistance with wheelchair navigation on the sand.
- One participant said that lifeguards should be more accessible – unless they are walking around the beach, it is difficult to ask questions if they stay in a central location watching the water. This participant explained a specific time when they stepped on a fishing hook because the fisherman did not properly remove their equipment from the beach after fishing, and it would have been helpful if the lifeguards had been available to assist her.

Topic—Inclusion

Q - What is one positive experience engaging in a coastal activity where you felt included and welcome?

- One participant discussed collecting seashells with friends and family at Myrtle Beach and going to the arcade/boardwalk afterwards.
- One participant discussed going fishing and exploring the Seaside Heights boardwalk with friends and family.
- Additionally, participants discussed some negative experiences related to visiting or trying to visit coastal sites:
 - ❑ Multiple participants discussed the challenge of staffing issues at The Arc and group home residences. Simply, when staff are not available to coordinate organized group trips, Arc and other participants residing in group homes can only visit coastal sites rarely, contributing to feelings of isolation.
 - ❑ One participant discussed going to the beach once with a poorly fitted life jacket and he almost drowned. As a result, the participant said that having proper equipment is important for enjoying and feeling included in a coastal activity.
 - ❑ One participant discussed that when there are not enough staff at the site to answer questions, they feel excluded and isolated.

Topic—Opportunities & Challenges for Increasing Access to NJ’s Coastal Zone for People with Disabilities

- There was consensus that a one-stop information center/site about coastal site accessibility would be helpful. Participants said it would be best to have this information resource available online, but also smaller accessibility guides specific to a coastal site should also be made in print for visitors. Lastly, having the guide available on a display board at the coastal site would help reinforce important information about the site to visitors that did not access the information online prior to their visit.
- Multiple participants said that due to the challenges of actually navigating the beach by wheelchair due to issues including uneven sand and dunes, there should be more staff at NJ coastal sites to help visitors push their devices.
 - ❑ One participant suggested that more NJ municipalities should utilize utility vehicles such a Gator, to pick up/return persons with mobility issues at the dunes and take them to their beach blanket. She shared that communities including Surf City, Brant Beach, and Beach Haven are offering this service to help their older adult residents enjoy the beach.
- Some participants said that it would be helpful to make available publicly accessible adaptive wheelchairs at the beach that can go in the water.
 - ❑ Additionally, one participant suggested having a wheelchair lift- similarly to the ones available at many community pools- to help persons with mobility disabilities to access the ocean.
- A few participants said it would be helpful to have a rope guide in the ocean to help swimmers feel how deep the water is and stay where they can stand. Ship Bottom Bay Beach has a fence in the water to help with this issue.
- The group noted that the creation of more uniform guidelines related to accessibility would be helpful.

Closing

Discussion at this focus group included the viewpoints of persons with a variety of intellectual, developmental, and/or physical disabilities. Participants voiced many barriers to accessing the coast, including lack of or limited accessible bathrooms, parking, walkways, and beach mat coverage. Beyond these barriers, a fundamental coastal access barrier that this group discussed relates to limited residential staffing to take them to the coast. However, participants discussed many strategies to enhance coastal recreational access, including usage of interactive signage, development of a one-stop information resource on NJ coastal sites with accessibility features noted, improved and additional handicapped parking spaces, and hiring of additional coastal site staff to assist with accessibility responsibilities.





RUTGERS

Edward J. Bloustein School
of Planning and Public Policy

Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
33 Livingston Avenue
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901

p. 848-932-2725

eac@ejb.rutgers.edu
cupr.rutgers.edu/eac/

© 2023, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey