



**ALL IN!**

# Accessibility in the National Park Service

2015-2020





“National parks belong to all Americans, and the National Park Service will welcome all Americans to experience their parks.”

*NPS Management Policies 2006*

## Task Force

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The National Park Service Director created an Accessibility Task Force to recommend a more effective organizational approach to improving accessibility across the service. Consisting of a multidisciplinary team of park, regional, and servicewide leaders, the task force created this strategic plan with specific strategies on how to make parks and programs accessible to a broader range of audiences. These strategies are focused on actions needed to build momentum, augment capacity, and accelerate real improvements over the next five years (2015–2020). While the significant work needed to improve access to parks will not be complete by 2020, the task force believes these goals and strategies should spark the needed cultural shift within the National Park Service that will result in enduring change.

## Task Force Perspective

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Parks are not fully accessible. Barriers to National Park Service facilities and programs deny visitors with disabilities the opportunity to experience their parks, and our ability to share America’s stories with all visitors. While notable advancements have been made, much is needed to break down the barriers and embrace greater inclusivity. Parks, programs, and leaders across the service need more education, guidance, support, and resources to create more welcoming experiences for a broad spectrum of audiences.

## Task Force Engagement

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Prior to servicewide release of this plan and implementation, the task force solicited feedback from key stakeholders, such as the National Leadership Council; Deputy Regional Directors; Communication Council; Denver Service Center; Harper’s Ferry Center; National Council for Interpretation, Volunteers, and Education; Park Facility Management Division; Planning Leadership Group; Servicewide Accessibility Coordinating Committee; Servicewide Maintenance Advisory Committee; and Web Council.

## Acknowledgements

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The Associate Director for Interpretation and Education, Julia Washburn, and the Associate Director for Park Planning, Facilities, and Lands, Victor Knox, who lead the Accessibility Task Force, would like to thank and acknowledge those involved with the creation of this strategic plan:

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- Michele Hartley, Harpers Ferry Center
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Photo courtesy of the National Center on Accessibility.

## The Urgent Need for Change

Visitors of all levels of ability are drawn to our national parks. When they arrive, we hope they engage with the rich collection of stories and resources that reflect our national heritage and diversity. In their daily work supporting our mission, employees plan, design, build, and support facilities and programs aimed at enhancing the visitors' understanding, safety, comfort, and enjoyment of park resources. Along the way, a series of choices and trade-offs are made ranging from material, media type, and cost to aesthetics and presentation, which can impact access levels for visitors with disabilities.

Implicit in the National Park Service mission is that all members of our visiting public are afforded access to our significant sites and the stories within. Knowing that only a coordinated approach to a challenge of this magnitude would work, Director's Order 42 was released to set the National Park Service on a path of continuous improvement.

**“In 1979, the National Park Service (NPS) decided to approach the issue of accessibility in a comprehensive, organized way, rather than on a project-by-project basis...Through this coordinated effort, the NPS has been recognized as a leader in opening opportunities to people with disabilities.”**

**[Director's Order 42](#)**

While outstanding projects have been completed since, many programs, facilities, and services fall short of carrying out this goal. Why?

In general, collective awareness and organizational commitment to make significant cultural changes across the park system have drifted as additional priorities have arisen and public expectations have shifted. This lack of continued, focused attention to address and correct known accessibility problems has inhibited our progress, and remains frustrating to our visitors, staffs, and stakeholders.



Photo courtesy of the National Center on Accessibility.

## The Current State

In the more than 400 national park units across the country, there are visitor centers without accessible restrooms, water fountains, and entrances. Paths between parking lots, sidewalks, buildings, and interpretive programs are not accessible for some visitors who are mobility impaired. Many recreational assets, such as trails, beaches, and campgrounds, lack inclusive opportunities that would broaden the spectrum of visitors able to enjoy these unique experiences.

From a programmatic perspective, few parks have printed publications, such as brochures, in alternative formats. Most exhibits are in cases, behind barriers, or are graphic in nature, rather than including reproductions and tactile exhibits in the designs. Maps, whether in brochures or as exhibits, are not in a tactile medium. Often, audio elements of programs and exhibits are not accessible to people who have hearing loss or who are deaf. Frequently, content posted on National Park Service websites is not made accessible. All of these issues limit visitors with physical, sensory, learning, and intellectual disabilities.

In some cases, staff and volunteers are not properly trained on how to interact with people with disabilities, and how to provide services in an appropriate manner. As a result, they may have inappropriately denied visitors access to programs, facilities, and outdoor areas. In particular, visitors with service animals have been denied their rights to access.

National Park Service employees across all levels of the organization are in a position to effect culture change. While tangible challenges exist, huge strides could be made by training staff and leadership team members to increase their knowledge and awareness of disability issues. Breaking down organizational silos, and increasing direct conversations and training with park and program staff, will aid in addressing this knowledge gap. Voids in project management and oversight must also be addressed to ensure that all work done on behalf of the parks meets federal and servicewide regulations and standards for accessibility.

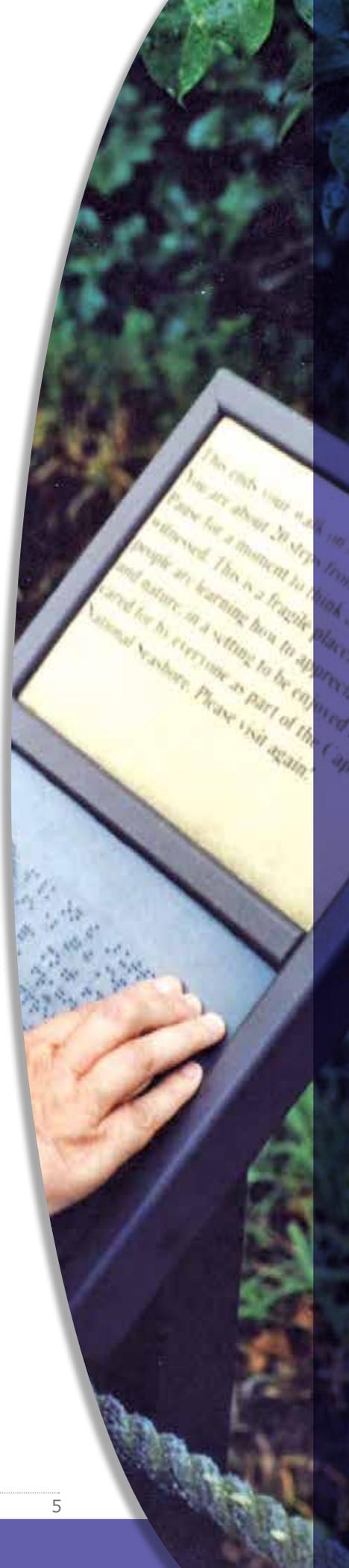
## The Challenge

Similar to the efforts to embed operational leadership as a mechanism to improve employee and visitor safety, the National Park Service must break down existing barriers and approach accessibility as a new way of doing business that is fully integrated into all operational activities and planning.

The challenge and opportunity are significant. The National Park Service estimates that the cost to address accessibility deficiencies in facilities (e.g., buildings, trails, campgrounds) greatly exceeds \$120 million (footnote 1: Assessments completed in 108 parks revealed an estimated \$120 million in deficiencies) in needed repairs, alterations, or updates. The requirements to make interpretive programs accessible, such as providing audio description and tactile experiences for exhibits, captions and audio description for videos on the web and in parks, alternate formats for printed materials, and sign language interpretation for personal services programs, have not been estimated. Combined, these two core components of accessibility—facilities and programmatic—are expected to require significant financial and human resources. This strategy will not only require the reallocation of resources, but cultural change regarding visitors with disabilities.

Growth prospects for the United States and global economies are currently subdued, and government spending is likely to remain constrained. Thus, to maintain momentum, the National Park Service must identify and implement actions over the next several years that can be accomplished within a limited budget, and employed in the midst of many other competing issues and needs. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the fact that addressing accessibility barriers to, and deficiencies of, National Park Service facilities, programs, services, and media is a significant obstacle facing parks, and will remain a relevant issue for park managers for some time. The combination of limited resources and strong need within the service requires that we work smarter and more efficiently, prioritizing some actions over others, while keeping our overall mission and long-term responsibilities in mind. It is important that accessibility knowledge is embedded at every level of the National Park Service, and that we work within our funding and staffing limitations to achieve results.

In short, the National Park Service is underserving people with varying abilities and their traveling partners. Without accessible parks, the National Park Service loses an opportunity to reach the widest possible audience and share a spectrum of experiences. This lost opportunity is a direct failure to carry out our mission. Both long- and short-term solutions are needed to build momentum and advance the program.





## The Opportunity

National parks that seek continued public relevance and success into the 21st century must swiftly improve institutional capacity to prioritize accessibility and expand access to parks. At a very fundamental level for parks, this means all people are entitled to the same rights and services.

It cannot be emphasized enough that while the National Park Service can and must learn from past practices, now is the time to invest in, test, and refine new approaches and technologies to provide universal accessibility while adhering to existing laws and regulations. In addition to the legal requirements of, and organizational commitment to, accessibility, expanding access to parks makes good business sense.

In 2012, the National Park Service estimated that 282 million people visited a national park unit, and 110 million visited the nps.gov website. The estimated number of Americans with a disability is one in five. Worldwide, estimates of those with a disability range from 10% to 15% of the total population. Because the National Park Service draws from a global visitor base, we can conservatively estimate that a minimum of 28 million visitors with disabilities visit national parks annually (282 million multiplied by 10%). Studies conclude that an average expenditure of \$129 per day per person within the park and gateway communities is typical (footnote 2: 2012 National Park Visitor Spending Effects Economic Contributions to Local Communities, States and the Nation, Natural Resource Report, NPS/NRSS/EQD/NRR—2014/765, table 1, page 9). This money is spent on a range of goods, services, and activities, including entrance fees, food, lodging, special programs, and transportation. Thus, lack of access for visitors with disabilities could result in \$3.6 billion annually (28 million visitors multiplied by \$129/day) in lost revenue to parks, partners, concessioners, and gateway communities.

These calculations do not account for the number of potential visitors with disabilities and their family and friends who do not visit parks, or who spend less when they do because facilities and programs are not accessible. The National Park Service understands that people largely experience parks in small groups comprising friends and family. Therefore, a disabled person's positive or negative experience creates a ripple effect for many more people. In addition to this potential loss of revenue, the National Park Service risks continued exposure to lawsuits from a lack of compliance with accessibility laws, which has the potential for a huge financial impact on parks.

In sum, accessibility makes good business sense, and is simply the right thing to do. In embracing this business, legal, and ethical model, the service's ability to reach out and attract a broader audience is further strengthened.

Photo courtesy of the  
National Center on Accessibility.

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## The Strategy

With reinvigorated effort, the National Park Service launches this five-year accessibility strategy aimed at welcoming all visitors and staff, creating a culture of inclusion, and making critical improvements to both new and existing programs, facilities, and services. This five-year strategy articulates a challenge to move forward, reclaim our leadership, and fulfill our mission to which so many have passionately committed. Through the conscious choices we make, we can create and build momentum toward a more accessible, inclusive future.

With the current state and business case in mind, the task force identified three overarching strategic goals for addressing accessibility servicewide. These goals and the associated strategies form the foundation of the five-year strategy.



**Goal 1** Create a welcoming environment by increasing the ability of the National Park Service to serve visitors and staff with disabilities.

**Goal 1  
Vision**

From facilities to programs, people with varying abilities and their families and friends will be seamlessly included in all the ways that visitors access park information and experience parks before, during, and after visits. All staff, volunteers, partners, and concessioners will be skilled at reaching out to, and communicating with, diverse populations and will be proponents of accessibility.

**Goal 1  
Strategies**

The following strategies will help the National Park Service achieve Goal 1:

- A.** Develop an external communication plan to improve information presented to the public about accessible experiences in the National Park Service. Highlight these accessible experiences to encourage visitation. Reach out to members of the disability community to create a dialogue about accessibility needs, priorities, and accomplishments.
- B.** Develop a multipronged training plan aimed at sparking organizational culture change (akin to operational leadership) and increasing the understanding and capacity of National Park Service staff to meet the legal obligations, as well as identify opportunities for advocacy on accessibility. Create new course offerings to fill training gaps, such as programmatic accessibility. Use existing courses, such as NPS Fundamentals and the Superintendents Academy, to increase accessibility understanding, and develop a quick reference guide to incorporate accessibility topics within existing courses. Topics may range from cultural sensitivity to complying with legal requirements. Ensure that all training courses are provided in accessible formats.



- C.** Bolster the National Park Service organizational structure to focus on implementation of this strategy and to track results.
  - » Restructure the Servicewide Accessibility Coordinating Committee to ensure leadership positions within the organization are represented to influence and serve as champions of change. Use the restructured committee to help direct the implementation of this plan.
  - » Strengthen the National Accessibility Branch within the Park Facility Management Division by hiring a knowledgeable and passionate leader for accessibility to drive change, and by including a specialist on physical and a specialist on programmatic accessibility.
  - » Create accessibility teams within each region to support implementation of this plan and to provide parks broader support for all aspects of accessibility.
- D.** Engage park partners and concessioners to make them an integral part of the implementation of this accessibility strategy. Support their efforts to make facilities, services, and programs accessible. Collaborate with them to share successes and challenges so that we can learn from and encourage each other.
- E.** Complete a theme study on the history of the disability rights movement that highlights key sites, individuals, and occurrences of major events in disability rights history across the United States.
- F.** Engage all National Park Service offices, programs, regions, and parks to improve web accessibility and the accessibility of electronic documents. Provide training to ensure employees understand the requirements of section 508 and other accessibility requirements and standards.
- G.** Use the National Accessibility Branch, the Servicewide Accessibility Coordinating Committee, and regional accessibility teams to track annual accomplishments in implementation of this strategy. Provide an annual report to National Park Service leadership on implementation progress. Nurture and reward innovative projects and programs, and outline the benefits to all visitors achieved by meeting the guidelines. Create a forum for sharing successful projects.



Photo courtesy of the National Center on Accessibility.

**Goal 2** Ensure that new facilities and programs are inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities.

**Goal 2  
Vision**

The National Park Service will embrace and incorporate accessible and universal design principles when developing all new facilities and programs, so that all completed facilities and programs will be seamlessly inclusive and accessible regardless of fund source or project sponsor.

**Goal 2  
Strategies**

The following strategies will help the National Park Service achieve Goal 2:

- A.** Define roles and opportunities for when and how accessibility technical assistance and resources, such as the National Accessibility Branch, Denver Service Center, and Harpers Ferry Center, provide assistance to parks during planning for new facilities or programs. Ensure the criteria and available resources are known to parks and programs, and encourage their use during project planning and review processes.
- B.** Build park and regional capacity to create, review, and budget for facility and program project plans to ensure barriers are not created. Engage specialists, as needed, to support project scope and budget development, planning, and design processes to ensure both programmatic and physical accessibility needs are properly addressed. Create knowledgeable regional teams to review projects prior to regional and national Development Advisory Board reviews.



- C.** Partner with national advocacy groups and disability organizations to assure new projects are universally designed and accessible to people with disabilities. Identify formal and informal ways to include the input of people with disabilities into the planning and design stages and evaluate implementation of projects. Explore cutting-edge technologies that would increase “virtual” accessibility when more traditional solutions are not possible.
- D.** Use internal controls to ensure new projects are accessible, and accessibility is incorporated into project formulation. Ensure that the Development Advisory Board checklist focuses on accessibility, and that the projects are reviewed by knowledgeable staff on both the programmatic and physical sides. Require revisions to projects that do not meet the guidelines (applies to both Goals 2 and 3). Create a targeted, short-term working group of subject matter experts from each region to study projects completed in the recent past that do not meet accessibility guidelines, to identify the root causes of those failures, and recommend steps that should be taken to prevent future problems.
- E.** Develop a strategy and document potential resources to build capacity within the National Park Service to more broadly support programmatic accessibility. This would include identifying current staff with programmatic accessibility expertise, identifying offices that lack sufficient programmatic capacity, prioritizing training needs, and delivering targeted training to build broad understanding and expertise in programmatic accessibility across the Service.



**Goal 3** Upgrade existing facilities, programs, and services to be accessible to people with disabilities.

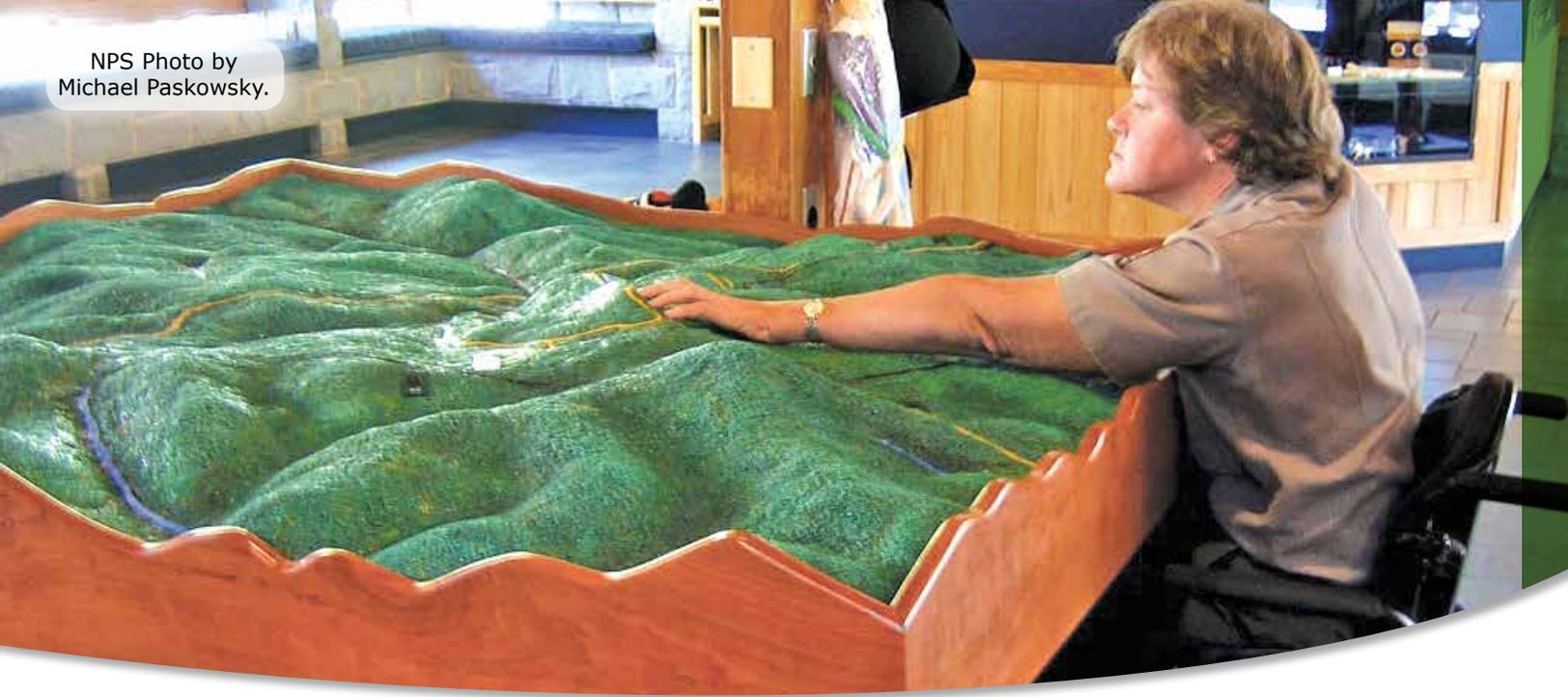
**Goal 3  
Vision**

Strategically upgrade existing facilities, programs, and services for accessibility by focusing investments on key visitor experiences throughout the National Park Service.

**Goal 3  
Strategies**

The following strategies will help the National Park Service achieve Goal 2:

- A.** Develop a process for parks to analyze and prioritize key park visitor experiences to set priorities for accessibility improvements. This process should make use of existing planning tools, such as park asset management plans, foundation documents, long-range interpretive plans, and the Asset Priority Index. Involve the disability community in the prioritization process. In addition to the key experiences, also prioritize locations where those experiences are offered within the park based on levels of use, resource sensitivity, feasibility of providing accessibility, and other factors.
- B.** Create a process for parks to self-assess at a high level the accessibility of key park visitor experiences. This high-level assessment would identify the general state of accessibility to develop park prioritization of accessibility needs and a strategy to address those needs.



- C.** Use detailed accessibility assessments to scope accessibility improvement projects for priority park accessibility needs. Target assessment funds to high visitation parks and those parks willing to match central funding.
- D.** Through PMIS review processes at the park, region, and Washington offices, ensure proposed rehabilitation, upgrade, and expansion projects address all existing accessibility issues with the facilities or programs being updated. All major program and facility improvements should be designed to make those programs and facilities fully accessible. Work through existing regional support networks—program managers, chiefs of maintenance, interpretation, etc.—to continue to educate parks on how to scope, estimate, and integrate accessible components into projects.
- E.** Focus flexible park base funds in addition to recreation fees and concession franchise fees to target high-potential, high-impact, pure (to the degree possible) accessibility projects at high visitation areas for key park visitor experiences. Leverage available fund sources to correct priority accessibility deficiencies when a comprehensive rehabilitation or upgrade of that park facility or program is not scheduled in the near future.



## Next Steps

Accessibility is both a significant challenge and opportunity for the National Park Service. The National Park Service should adopt accessibility as both a core value and strategic national initiative. Leaders across the National Park Service, including park superintendents, regional leadership, and program managers, must participate in making this strategy successful. Leadership on this issue must be visible and felt.

A community of change will be needed to foster, spearhead, oversee, and motivate others. Therefore, the Servicewide Accessibility Coordinating Committee, National Accessibility Branch, Regional Directors, and Associate Directors, will serve as key facilitators in the implementation of this plan. The following steps have been identified to launch the changes necessary to further this strategic plan:

- Communicate and roll out the strategy servicewide.
- Develop an action plan to implement this strategy.
- Develop methods and metrics to track progress against the plan.
- Create an annual progress report on implementation of this strategy.

The action plan will indicate roles for parks, regions, and the Washington Office to move this strategy forward. It will indicate ways to share successes so that National Park Service employees and partners can learn from and support each other.

In *A Call to Action*, the National Park Service identified “Connecting People to Parks” as one of four major goals for our second century of stewardship and engagement. *A Call to Action* says that we must “welcome and engage diverse communities through culturally relevant stories that are accessible to all.” This strategy lays out a path to recommit the National Park Service to making our parks and programs truly accessible to all. With the commitment of all National Park Service employees, we can transform our parks and programs into models of inclusion for people with disabilities.