OPEN TO ALL

A disability inclusion guide for land trusts

Members of the Disability Network Northern Michigan make their way to the overlook at Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy's Arcadia Dunes: The C.S. Mott Nature Preserve.

Credit: Art Bukowski

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ISBN: 978-0-943915-61-6

Land Trust Alliance
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Authors:
Chrissy Beardsley Allen, Peter Doehring, Bonnie Lewkowicz, Karena Mahung, MaryKay O'Donnell and Amelia O'Hare

Editor:
Christina Soto

Design:
Stephen Tubbs, National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)

Land Trust Alliance Advisory Council on Inclusive Health and Disabilities:
Chrissy Beardsley Allen, Development Director, Blue Hill Heritage Trust (ME)
Peter Doehring, Consultant, Design and Delivery of ASD Services and Training, ASD Roadmap (PA)
Henrietta Jordan, Land Trust Consultant; former Director, Vermont Center for Independent Living (NY)
Bonnie Lewkowicz, Program Manager, Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program (CA)
Amelia O'Hare, Information Specialist, Lakeshore Foundation / National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) (AL)

Project Managers:
Karena Mahung, Indufor North America LLC
MaryKay O'Donnell, Land Trust Alliance

Content Contributor:
Ray Bloomer, National Center on Accessibility, National Park Service

Reviewers:
Sylvia Bates, Land Trust Alliance
Mary Burke, Land Trust Alliance
Melissa "echo" Greenlee, deaffriendly CONSULTING
Rachel Hampton, The Nature Conservancy

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Suggested citation: Land Trust Alliance Advisory Council on Inclusive Health and Disabilities, *Open to All: A Disability Inclusion Guide for Land Trusts* (2021).

This is a living document and we welcome feedback, comments and suggestions at disabilityguide@lta.org.

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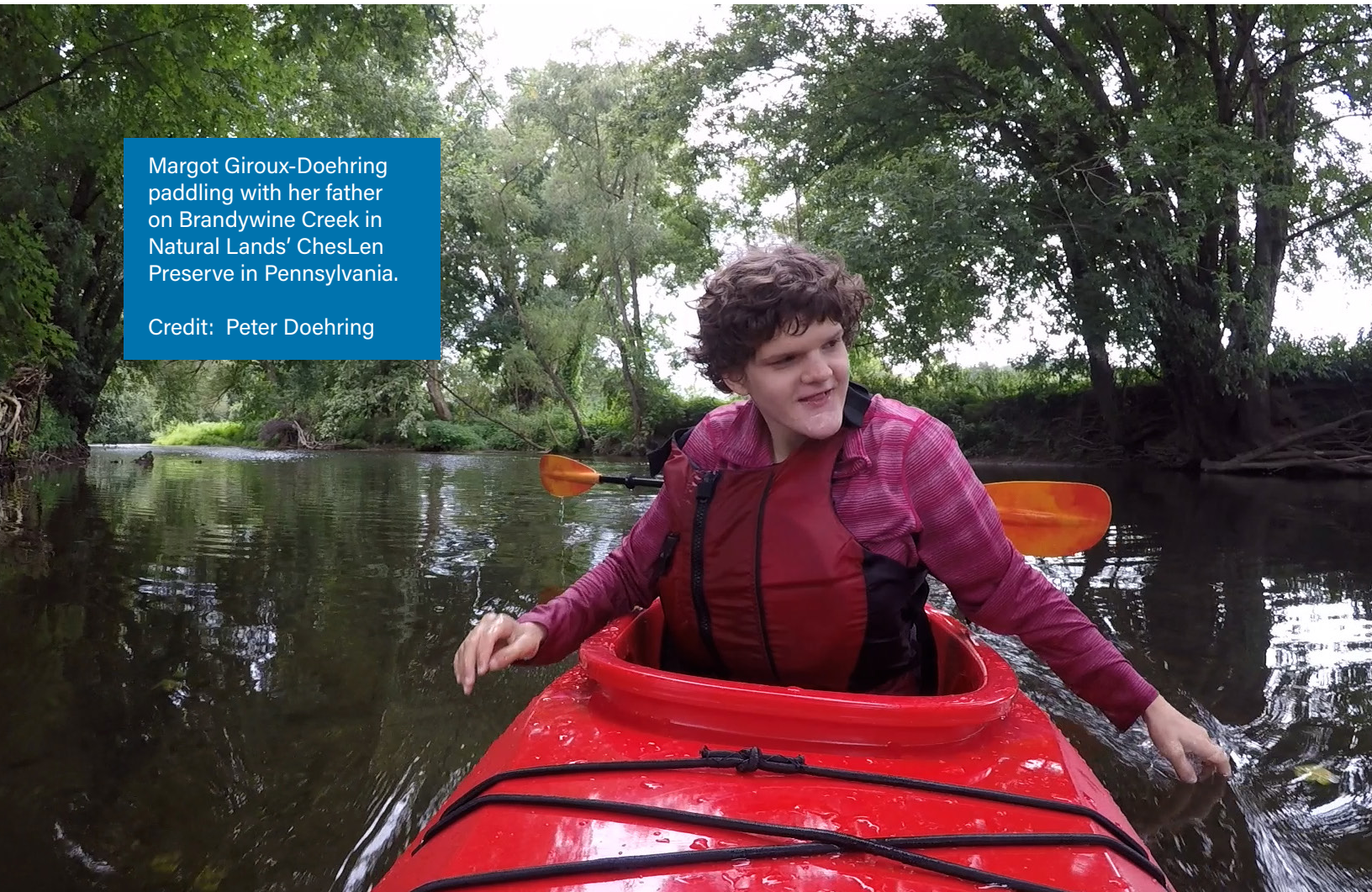
INTRODUCTION

Kathy Ambrosini, director of education at Mohonk Preserve in New York, had been running programs on the preserve for school children for some time when she got a call from a teacher: "I'm not sure if you know this, but children with disabilities are left behind in the library on field trip days." Horrified, Kathy and then-executive director Glenn Hoagland put into motion a plan to immediately address the situation by committing to provide what is now known as Universal Design access so that no one would ever be left behind again.

Land trusts around the country provide access to nature, offering a valuable service to people in the form of health and wellness benefits gained from being outdoors. These benefits are well documented, from better overall health through exercise to reducing stress levels in the calming presence of nature. But land trusts need to ask: "Who are we leaving behind?"

This guide addresses that question with regard to one group — people with disabilities — and provides practical ideas for incorporating inclusion into your land trust's programming and organizational culture.



Margot Giroux-Doehring paddling with her father on Brandywine Creek in Natural Lands' ChesLen Preserve in Pennsylvania.

Credit: Peter Doehring

We use the term **disability** throughout this guide because it is the preferred term of most people in the disability community. Disability is not a negative term. It is important to dispel the belief that having a disability is a "problem" that lies with the person with a disability. Our focus is on addressing the problem we have created as a society by too often failing to adapt our expectations, our facilities and our programs to ensure access for all people, including those with particular needs due to a disability.

It's also important to understand that the generic term **disability** can be misleading as it creates a single category that does not represent the diversity of people's experiences. The barriers to access for someone with a mobility or physical disability can be quite different from those for a person who is blind or for someone with an intellectual disability. People in the Deaf and hard of hearing communities have distinct needs to ensure they can access your programs. And we must consider the unique access barriers faced by people with mental health conditions and people who cannot care for themselves.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, disability affects approximately 1 in 4 people in the United States. If something is not accessible, the person with disabilities as well as others — family members, friends, colleagues — are collectively excluded from that program.

To the question, "Why should we include people with disabilities in our program?" Bonnie Lewkowicz, one of the authors of this guide, responds with another question: "Why wouldn't you want to include them?" People with disabilities want the same connection with nature for all the same reasons as people without disabilities. "It's much more than just getting out and enjoying nature together; it really becomes about creating a sense of community."

By the time you finish reading this guide, we hope you will understand the principles of inclusion that you can integrate personally and professionally, with the knowledge that nature is for everyone.

Please read a letter from the Advisory Council on Inclusive Health and Disabilities on the genesis, journey and hope for this guide.

The Americans with Disabilities Act defines **disability** as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or a person who has a history or record of such an impairment.

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

The ultimate goal of the Partnership for Inclusive Health — which has come together to create this guide and includes the Land Trust Alliance, the Lakeshore Foundation and the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability — is to assist land trusts in improving access to the health and wellness benefits of nature to people with disabilities, a group that has traditionally not been able to participate in, nor been equitably served by, land conservation. The advice in this guide will help your land trust address and remove the barriers that prevent inclusion of people with disabilities in your programs and on your nature preserves.

In late 2020, the Land Trust Alliance surveyed its land trust members on their experiences with people with disabilities, and on access and inclusion issues. A summary of the survey results is available upon request at disabilityguide@lta.org. Clearly, both the need and will to make programs more accessible are there. The survey asked, "When thinking about developing more inclusive programs for people with disabilities, what resources and trainings would be most helpful to your land trust?" The top two answers were "guidelines and/or best practices for inclusion" and "examples of inclusion efforts from other land trusts." This guide has both.

But first, we start with the power of words.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE — DEFINING AND TALKING ABOUT DISABILITY

Beatrice Wright explains in her book *Physical Disability — A Psychological Approach* (1960) that "studies from the field of semantics … show that language is not merely an instrument of voicing ideas but that it also plays a role in shaping ideas."

Two things are clear about language: it's fluid and words matter. What's not so clear is what words to use when we are striving to be inclusive. Part of the challenge is that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group, so what's preferred by one is not necessarily another's preference. A good practice is to ask how someone prefers to describe themselves and, if you inadvertently offend someone with your language, apologize and ask them to share with you their preferred language. There are generally two ways to approach this: **person-first** or **identity-first**. Neither is right or wrong; we should simply honor an individual's preference.

Useful Terms

Person-first language: Person-first language emphasizes the person first — their individuality, their complexity, their humanness and their equality. Advocacy groups first suggested this term over three decades ago to emphasize the person before their condition or diagnosis. The movement for person-first language stemmed from a desire to be more respectful and to avoid overt or subconscious dehumanization of people with disabilities. For people who prefer person-first language, their choice recognizes they are first and foremost a person. They may have a disability, but that disability is not the only thing that defines them.

Example: Use "a person with epilepsy" instead of "an epileptic" and "people with disabilities" instead of "the disabled".

Identity-first language: Identity-first language emphasizes that the disability plays a role in who the person is and reinforces disability as a positive cultural identifier. Some believe that person-first language is based around the idea that disabilities are somehow insulting or problematic, and that separating those characteristics from the self compounds those negative connotations, whereas identity-first language celebrates their disabled identity.

Example: Use "disabled person" instead of "person with disabilities" and "autistic person" instead of "a person with autism".

What if you don't know a person's preference? Tara Haelle, medical studies core topic leader for the Association of Health Care Journalists, advised in a 2019 article, "It's always best to confirm with the person if there's one person involved. If there isn't, then I default to what the community at large generally uses. For me, a community's preference trumps even 'official' sources, since agencies such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] do not always recommend what the community itself prefers."

Deaf and hard of hearing: Most people in the Deaf community prefer identity-first language and consider being deaf a cultural identity, not a disability. However, the community of people who cannot hear is diverse. The National Association of the Deaf explains there are variations in how and when a person became deaf, their level of hearing, communication methods and cultural identity. While some people believe the term "people with hearing loss" is inclusive and efficient, it does not include people born without hearing (they did not lose anything) nor the cultural differences and full range of identities.

According to Carol Padden and Tom Humphries in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (1988): "We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language — American Sign Language — and a culture." Members of the Deaf community "hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society." People who are hard of hearing may or may not consider themselves to be part of Deaf culture — and may or may not consider themselves to be disabled. As with language in other cases, it is best to ask the individual.

Words and Phrases to Avoid

Handicapped, wheelchair bound, retarded, crippled, overcoming one's disability, invalid, differently abled, handicapable, lame, mentally defective, suffering from or a victim of [condition], deaf and dumb, deaf-mute, hearing impaired

Disability: There are many types of disability, generally falling into the following categories: physical or mobility, sensory, developmental/ intellectual/cognitive, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and mental health conditions and mental illness. Someone can be born with a disability or acquire it later in life. It is also important to understand that not all disabilities are obvious. During a session at Rally 2020: The National Land Conservation Conference, one participant shared, "Really appreciate you mentioning hidden disabilities. I have been frequently told that my invisible disabilities 'do not count' by people in the outdoor industry!"

Each type of disability is different, as are the barriers that typically arise when we fail to anticipate and accommodate different needs. We commonly think of physical and communication barriers, but there are many others: attitudinal, social, transportation, socio-economic, programmatic, cultural and policy.

Definitions of disability can be complex and are evolving. On one hand, there are legal definitions of disabilities used when determining whether someone is eligible to receive public benefits or is in a protected class. On the other hand, there are individuals' and disability activists' definitions of disability.

> ***"The image I get of being 'wheelchair bound' is that I'm strapped into my wheelchair, but the reality is my wheelchair is very liberating."***
>
> **— Bonnie Lewkowicz Program Manager, Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program, and Guide co-author**

When using the traditional, bio-medical approach, disability is viewed as a medical or health problem that prevents or reduces a person's ability to participate fully in society. In contrast, the social approach views disability as a natural part of society where attitudes, stigma and prejudices present barriers to people with disabilities, and prevent or hinder their participation in mainstream society.

Regardless of how one defines disability, the experience of people living with disability is often one of dealing with barriers — physical obstacles, language, inaccessible media, stigma, prejudice, lowered expectations and pity — that hinder full participation in community life and the realization of one's full human potential.

We encourage you to learn more about barriers to access at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Disability and Health Overview website.

Physical disability indicates that some aspect of a person's physical functioning is affected: mobility, dexterity or stamina. Physical disabilities can be permanent or temporary (due to injury, for example).

Sensory disabilities include people who are blind or have vision loss or low vision, as well as people who are hard of hearing or are deaf.

Developmental disabilities are due to an impairment that began during the developmental stage of a person's life; they impact daily functioning and last throughout a person's lifetime. Developmental disability may be cognitive, physical or a combination. Developmental disability, which may also be referred to as intellectual or cognitive, is a term used when there are impacts on a person's ability to learn at an expected level and to function in daily life. These disabilities change a person's ability to care for themselves, live and work in the community, communicate effectively, display social and safety skills and concentrate or remember, all depending on the severity of the disability.

Autism Spectrum Disorder: While the CDC identifies ASD as a developmental disability, ASD is often described in its own category and considered to involve a spectrum. People with ASD differ in how they communicate, interact, behave and learn compared to people without ASD. Some persons with ASD may also have an intellectual disability or other learning disabilities, while others may have exceptional intellectual abilities in a number of areas, often tied to their specific interests and skills. The severity of ASD can vary widely, with some people needing a lot of help in their daily lives, others needing less, and some people functioning independently.

Mental health conditions and **mental illness**. Following guidance from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, we intentionally use the terms mental health condition and mental illness interchangeably. NAMI states that "a mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood." These conditions deeply impact day-to-day living and may also affect the ability to relate to others. According to NAMI, mental health conditions are very common:

- 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.
- 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year.
- 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.

Federal programs, such as the Social Security Administration, define the types of mental health conditions that qualify as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act. These conditions include but are not limited to: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), personality disorders, schizophrenia, severe depression, bipolar, anxiety disorders, dementia, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. In addition, if a drug or alcohol addiction substantially limits a major life activity, it is a disability.

Intersectionality: Feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the term intersectionality in 1989 to describe the experiences of Black women, who experience both racism and sexism in specific ways. This concept of multiple identities has been extended to the experiences of individuals with other identities, including those experiencing disability.

Crenshaw notes: "This theory proposes that an individual who has several oppressed identities will live completely different experiences than someone who shares only one, or some, of those oppressed identities." (Crenshaw, 1989) For example, people who identify as female and have disabilities may have a qualitatively different experience than people who identify as male and have disabilities. Applying the intersectionality lens means considering one's different identities as interacting with one another, rather than simply separate identities.

Equality versus equity: While both share the ultimate goal to achieve fairness, the approach taken can lead to dramatically different outcomes for people who are marginalized. Equality strives to achieve fairness by treating everyone the same regardless of need and circumstances, while equity achieves this through treating people differently depending on their needs and circumstances so all can enjoy the same rights, opportunities and benefits.

Figure 1: Equality versus equity

Inclusion: Inclusion ensures people feel a sense of belonging — that they are welcome and important. Inclusion means celebrating, centering and amplifying the perspectives, voices, values and needs of people who experience systemic barriers, mistreatment or disadvantages based on their identities. Where accessibility leaves the door open without obstacles in the way — inclusion actively invites people though that barrier-free doorway and makes them feel welcome and respected. Inclusive organizations strive to be welcoming to all.

Accessibility: Accessibility is the degree to which people with disabilities can independently access a device, service or environment without barriers. Accessibility is also a process, spanning the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to people with disabilities.

According to the World Health Organization, "Much of what prevents people from participating fully in the life of their communities is not the disability itself but rather the environment, or aspects of the environment, external features of society created by people."

Too often, creating accessible facilities involves checking off items on a list with the goal of achieving compliance with laws and regulations. This limited approach establishes a floor, but assumes the ceiling is out of reach. People experience barriers differently; "accessible" for some does not mean accessible for all. It is better to list the accessibility features of your programs and facilities rather than make a blanket statement that they are accessible. Given specific access information, people can decide for themselves whether they can have a barrier-free experience.

Example: Rather than identifying a trail as accessible, you could include specifics, such as, "Our trail is 2 miles long and has the following access features: braille signage, railings, is at least 36 inches wide, has a smooth surface of [identify material], no slope is greater than 2%, and benches are at 1,000-foot intervals."

Cara Liebowitz's 2015 article in the body is not an apology *online magazine illuminates this issue for us. Cara explains,*

"In a nutshell, the social model [of disability] says that though our impairments (our diagnostic, medical conditions) may limit us in some ways, it is the inaccessibility of society that actually disables us and renders us unable to function. The most basic example is wheelchair accessibility. If I am using my wheelchair and can't go to a restaurant because it doesn't have a ramp, am I disabled by my cerebral palsy or am I disabled by the inaccessibility of the restaurant?"

Inclusive health: "Inclusive health is based on two main principles: equitable access and full participation. Equitable access means ensuring people have access to the services and resources necessary to achieve their full health potential. Full participation means that [people with disabilities] are fully and meaningfully included in health programs and services." (Special Olympics)

Ableism: "Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing,' and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than' and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions and generalizations of people with disabilities." (Access Living) Other more specific terms include **audism**, based on the belief that to hear is superior, as well as **vidism** or the oppression of blind people and **distantism** based on the notion of distancia, or to stand apart, and describes discrimination of people who are deaf-blind.

Case Study
Grassroots Gardens of Western New York
Healing the mind through gardening

Long-time gardener Gerldine Wilson is passionate about the new initiatives of Grassroots Gardens WNY to provide accessibility and opportunities for healing through gardening. "I am personally invested in making sure we knock down as many barriers to gardening as we can. Therapeutic gardening is a 'save your life skill,' which has been very underestimated."

Time and time again, Grassroots Gardens has heard stories of how its community gardens provide nourishment, feeding the gardeners not only physically, but emotionally and mentally, too. "Plants and gardening have forever been a force of healing for humanity, offering connection and beauty in times of crisis, from natural disaster to personal loss," says Executive Director Jeanette Koncikowski.

Grassroots Gardens' "Gardening for All" accessibility task force was formed in spring 2019 in response to the needs of local gardeners living with disabilities and in recognition that all people should have access to the garden network, now and in the future. Through the support of the New York State Conservation Partnership Program and the Land Trust Alliance, the task force, under the leadership of Gerldine, spent a year evaluating the community and school garden network to determine what needed to change to make the gardens accessible.

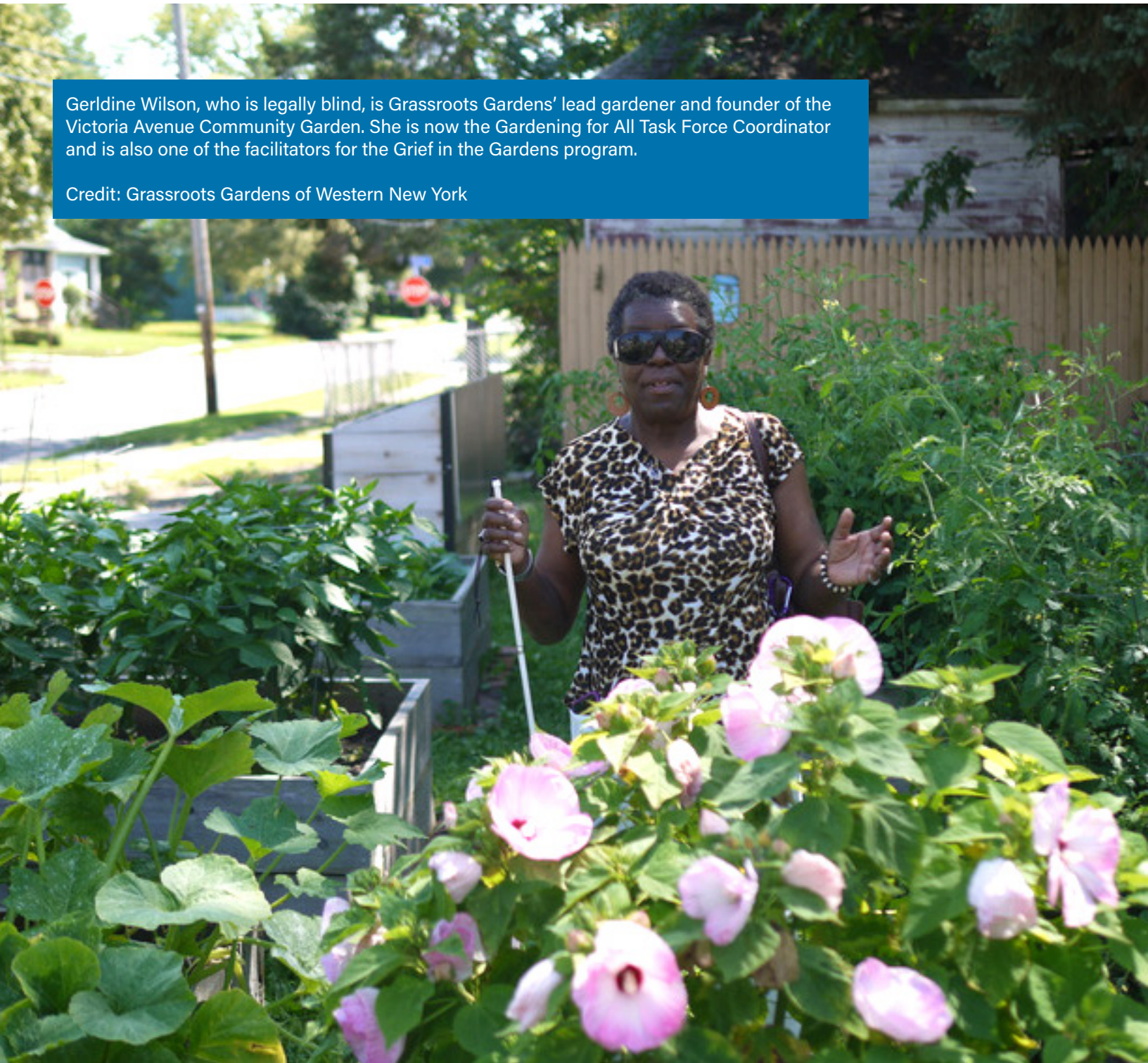
With input from several gardeners, local organizations such as Deaf Access Services, Western New York Independent Living, Olmsted Center for Sight/VIA, and Buffalo Public Schools, as well as more broadly from a community survey, Gerldine identified seven gardens for immediate improvement with a long-term plan of modifying every garden for universal access. Recommendations for improvement include (but are not limited to) the addition of accessible pathways, braille signage and trail markers and beds of varying heights. Grassroots Gardens is also thinking about accessible programming. Its lead gardener at the Mulberry Garden on Buffalo's west side, Yann Spindler, is a Deaf person and has led both hearing and Deaf gardeners through a Gardening 101 training in American Sign Language (see photo at right; Yann is wearing a cap).

Credit: Grassroots Gardens of Western New York

Grassroots Gardens also runs the Therapeutic Community Gardens Initiative, promoting healing through gardening, also launched in spring 2019. The task force has grown to include gardeners from Buffalo and Niagara Falls, as well as representatives from Jewish Family Services, RAHAMA, FeedMore WNY, Erie County, the University at Buffalo, Homespace Corporation, Community Missions, Wilson Support Center, Journey's End Refugee Services and others.

The initiative's work centers around increasing education and access to therapeutic gardening in communities, including constantly expanding partnerships with local gardeners and organizations in the mental health and wellness fields.

Learn about how to make your garden more accessible by reading Grassroots Gardens' Community Garden Accessibility Guide.



Gerldine Wilson, who is legally blind, is Grassroots Gardens' lead gardener and founder of the Victoria Avenue Community Garden. She is now the Gardening for All Task Force Coordinator and is also one of the facilitators for the Grief in the Gardens program.

Credit: Grassroots Gardens of Western New York

UNDERSTANDING HOW DISABILITY IMPACTS HEALTH

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 61 million adults in the United States live with a disability (see Figure 2), or as we mentioned before, 1 in every 4 people in communities across the country.

"Individuals with disability are at a greater risk of experiencing health disparities than any other demographic group in the country," according to the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. (NCHPAD) In fact, adults with disabilities are three times more likely to have heart disease, stroke, diabetes or cancer than adults without disabilities. (CDC)

When examining the causes behind these health disparities, beyond any health issues directly related to the disability itself, the reasons are varied. Contributing factors include difficulty in accessing health care facilities and equipment, lower rates of screening, lack of knowledge among health professionals about specific differences between people with disabilities and people without disabilities, and transportation issues, as described by the CDC. Many of the health-related issues are due to secondary and often preventable conditions.

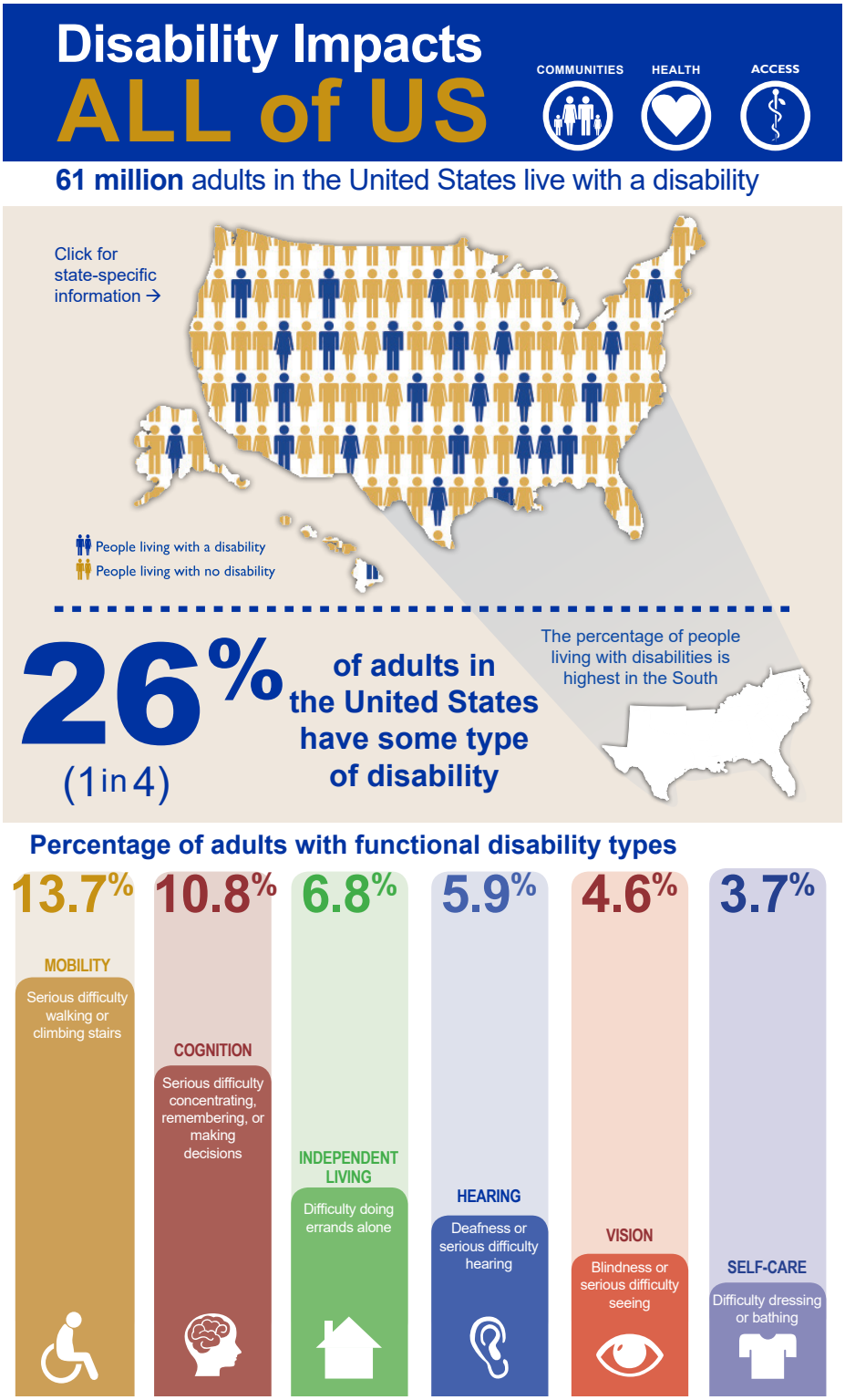
In addition, some of the differences can be explained by a lack of access to and knowledge of healthy lifestyle choices, such as exercise and outdoor recreation. When considering inclusivity, land trusts might look at how they can help people with disabilities to have healthy choices for physical and mental health. "Healthy, inclusive communities are ones that make the healthiest choices the easiest and most accessible ones by removing barriers and providing needed assistance and resources to all community members at all levels," says NCHPAD. Land trusts can have a role in positively impacting the health and well-being of people with disabilities through providing accessible outdoor spaces for recreation and through partnering with community-based organizations that provide disability services.

Several national surveys collect data on disabilities. The U.S. Census no longer includes disability questions, however, the Census Bureau collects annual data on disabilities in its American Community Survey, as well as other surveys. The surveys ask about six disability types: difficulties with hearing, vision, cognition, ambulatory ability, self-care and independent living. The CDC's annual Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System includes these six disability questions and provides state-specific searchable information. You can also access data profiles for the nation or your state, county, city or town from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

Adult clients from the Cortez, Colorado, office of Community Connections visited Fozzie's Farm and helped build, paint, and install several nesting boxes for Western bluebirds. Fozzie's Farm, donated to Montezuma Land Conservancy in 2016, has become the hub for MLC's community conservation work, including school field trips, a summer ag program for high school students, farm interns and landowner/farmer workshops.

Credit: Jay Loschert, Montezuma Land Conservancy

Figure 2: Disability Impacts All of Us



Credit: CDC

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html

ACCESS TO NATURE: COMMUNITY-CENTERED CONSERVATION

Research shows the benefits of being in nature are multilayered, varied and undeniable. Nature improves not just our physical health but so many other aspects of our well-being, including our mental health.

Laura Szwak, former director of education and outreach for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, writes: "There is growing evidence indicating green spaces are a necessary part of the health infrastructure of a community. Trees send oxygen into the air, allowing people with asthma to breathe easier. Places to play encourage activity and exercise, helping people avoid obesity and heart disease. People seek green spaces to relax and unwind after a tough day at work, helping them resist depression and other mental illness. ... Parks need to become a larger part of the discussion when it comes to health and healthy communities." (New Jersey Health Initiatives)

> ***The ultimate goal of inclusion is to provide people with disabilities the same opportunities not just to access nature, but to experience its power to inspire, to excite, to educate, to soothe and to heal.***

In fact, when the global pandemic began in early 2020, it brought people outdoors to recreate in numbers never seen before. Many people discovered land trust nature preserves for the first time, as public parks became overcrowded. Land trusts have a great opportunity to further their community-centered conservation goals to provide greater access to nature — for all members of their community, including people living with disability.

While people with disabilities may have more difficulty **doing** specific things, they do not necessarily have the same difficulty **experiencing** things, though they might experience them differently.

It is important that we look not only to the individual person living with a disability, but to the immediate communities of direct support that surround that person, and to ask for help from disability rights and service organizations, such as centers for independent living, advocacy groups and direct service providers.

Andrea Foster, former community programs manager at Little Forks Conservancy in Midland, Michigan, has suffered from anxiety and depression all her life. She has found that spending time outdoors helps tremendously, and has applied what she has learned to a Nature/Nurture program for students at alternative high schools who are struggling with various issues. "My hope for these students is that they learn to use the outdoors as a resource for healing."

Credit: Alyssa Walters

Case Study

Blue Hill Heritage Trust (ME)

Making volunteering possible for those who want to

In 2017, Blue Hill Heritage Trust Executive Director Hans Carlson received an intriguing opportunity from Whit Whitney at the Maine Land Trust Network. Would BHHT like to participate in a pilot program connecting land trusts to the state of Maine's advocacy group run by and for adults living with developmental disabilities, SUFU of Maine (Speaking Up For Us)? In fact, BHHT had long discussed the need for adding trails with more accessible features, not just for those with disabilities, but also for the entire community. This pilot program with SUFU seemed like a great way to engage with a segment of the population that was both wildly underserved, as well as wild about nature.

BHHT Development and Outreach Director Chrissy Allen took the lead on what turned into a multiyear relationship with SUFU, and later led to broader relationships with the land trust's community. Collaborative programming between the two organizations was a big success, including a public blueberry picking event where members of local SUFU chapters, BHHT members and other community volunteers picked an admirable haul of wild organic Maine blueberries, which was then donated to the local food pantry. Everyone had a role in planning and, on the day of the event, everyone was included as an important member of the team. Another highlight of the pilot program was opportunities for volunteering, which SUFU helped BHHT organize, based on the land trust's needs and each volunteer's interest. From building bog bridges, to monitoring trail conditions or accessibility features, to collecting plant phenology data on one of the land trust's trails for a statewide climate change citizen science project, SUFU volunteers provided BHHT with invaluable assistance.

Chris DuPont, a Speaking Up for Us chapter member, and Laurie Bernier, formerly with SUFU, collect phenology data for a climate change citizen science project on Blue Hill Heritage Trust's Carter Nature Preserve in Maine. SUFU is run by and for adults who live with developmental disabilities, helping to show them "how to have more control of our lives and use our voices to 'Speak Up' for issues that are important to us and all people with disabilities."

Credit: Blue Hill Heritage Trust

One such volunteer is SUFU member Chris DuPont, who tracked the growth and development of several plants on the land trust's properties. Chris was also part of the grounds crew and a volunteer for the Downeast Coastal Conservancy. Chris traveled to Rally 2018 in Pittsburgh with BHHT staff to present a workshop on their partnership. About his time at the land trust, Chris says, "Being able to work outside and get exercise at the same time is a dream come true."

In the years since the pilot program, BHHT has worked steadily to address the needs of its entire community through its programming and trails. It recently completed a new trail suitable for all-terrain wheelchairs and strollers. The land trust has even more in the works, including creating programming around BHHT's community garden with NatureLinks, a new local organization that provides nature-based education and experiences for young adults living with both developmental and physical disabilities. The land trust has also worked to make other programming more accessible for those not always comfortable traveling on a rough footpath into the woods. BHHT's popular webinar series led by experts who virtually take you out in the field offers closed captioning and is free to anyone who wishes to participate or watch later on YouTube. BHHT has also found eager funding support from its donor base for special accessibility projects and grant-writing collaborations with its local chamber of commerce and healthy aging organizations.

Inspired by BHHT's story? A good starting point is to reach out to your local disability service organization. Find yours on Independent Living Research Utilization's website.

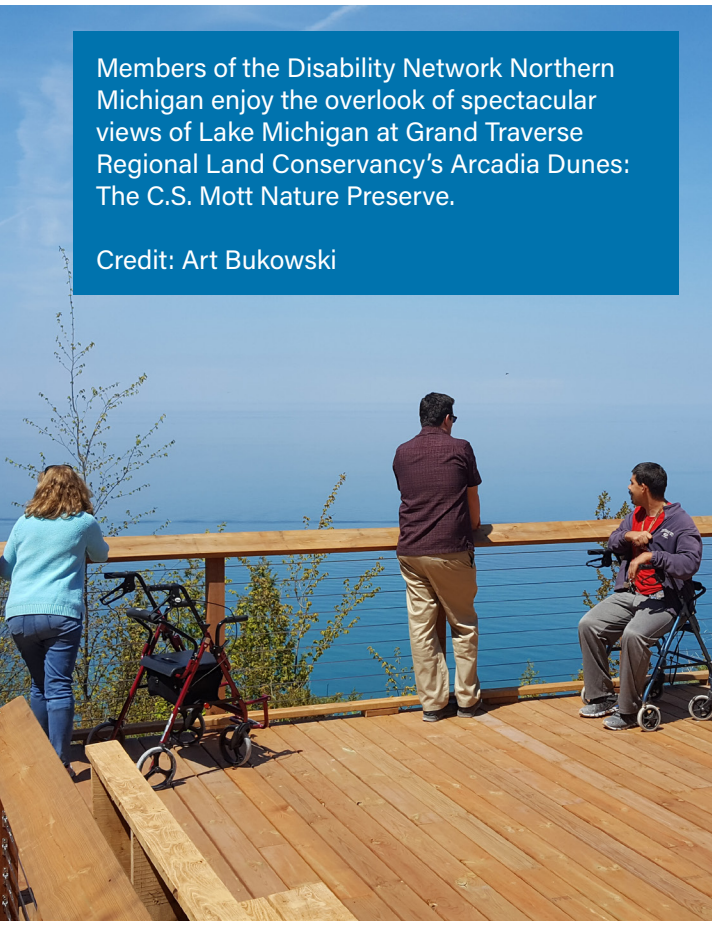
Nature Links educator Maddy Johnson and Gabe Millay, a community member with blindness, help Blue Hill Heritage Trust harvest potatoes on conserved land in Sedgwick, Maine for the local food pantry.

Credit: Blue Hill Heritage Trust

UNDERSTANDING YOUR LAND TRUST'S RESPONSIBILITIES

FEDERAL LEGISLATION

Before we begin an overview of federal civil rights laws, we first note that land trusts are encouraged to go far beyond this minimum bar to reach for better inclusion and more equitable access for people living with disabilities. While ensuring they follow the law, land trusts should also employ the tenets of Universal Design to ensure experiences provided by their organizations are rewarding for everyone.



Members of the Disability Network Northern Michigan enjoy the overlook of spectacular views of Lake Michigan at Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy's Arcadia Dunes: The C.S. Mott Nature Preserve.

Credit: Art Bukowski

Land trusts often ask whether their organizations are subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act. In most cases, the answer is "yes." The ADA imposes requirements on both local and state governmental entities (Title II of the ADA) and private entities that provide places of public accommodation, such as parks and other places of recreation (Title III of the ADA). The regulations are complex, so please consult with your attorney for more information on how the ADA applies to your specific situation.

Congress passed the **Architectural Barriers Act in 1968**, which essentially requires that anything built, designed, constructed or altered — on federal land or using federal dollars — must follow the ABA design standards. Construction of or improvements to buildings or outdoor areas must be accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. Congress amended the ABA in 2013 to add specific design standards for "outdoor developed areas," known as the *Outdoor Developed Areas Accessibility Guidelines*. While ODAAG allows for certain exceptions due to constraints of the outdoor environment, it requires compliance to the extent practicable.

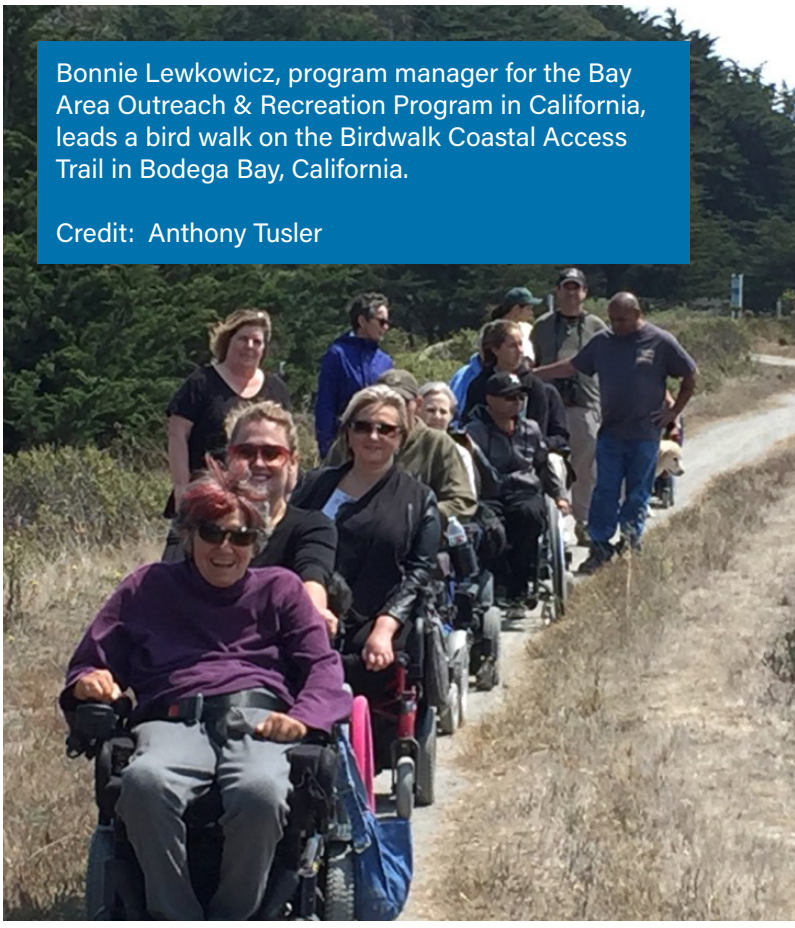
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, moves forward efforts to ensure that no individual with a disability shall be denied benefits of or participation in activities conducted by the federal government and any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance.

The **Americans with Disabilities Act** was signed into law on July 26, 1990. The ADA is one of America's most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in mainstream American life — to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs and services. Acknowledging that society tended to isolate and segregate people with disabilities, Congress modeled the ADA after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

To be protected by the ADA, one must have a disability, which is defined by the ADA as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

Title III of the ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of an individual's disability by persons or entities providing public accommodations or commercial facilities. That is, businesses and nonprofit organizations that provide services, including "places of public accommodation," such as parks, must ensure these areas are designed, constructed and altered in compliance with established accessibility standards (currently the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design).

While standards under the ADA for outdoor developed areas do not yet exist, there is a general obligation under the ADA to remove barriers to accessibility, which sometimes means looking beyond the ADA standards to best available standards under other laws, such as the ODAAG standards. In addition, the ODAAG standards will likely be incorporated into the ADA in the future. Many land trusts are learning about ODAAG and designing their trails and outdoor spaces to these established guidelines, but these are minimum standards and, especially where new construction is involved, land trusts should strive for optimal accessibility.



Bonnie Lewkowicz, program manager for the Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program in California, leads a bird walk on the Birdwalk Coastal Access Trail in Bodega Bay, California.

Credit: Anthony Tusler

UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND UNIVERSAL ACCESS TRAILS

Universal Design is a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication and policy to be usable by the widest range of people operating in the widest range of situations without special or separate design. Most simply, Universal Design is human-centered design of

everything with everyone in mind. The word "universal" doesn't mean "one size fits all." Such a goal is impossible. Even in a single person's lifetime, one's status, ability and desires change. Importantly, universal design is not a synonym for compliance with accessible design standards. It is much more than that.

The "7 Principles of Universal Design" include concepts of:

1. **Equitable use**
2. **Flexibility to accommodate a wide range of individuals**
3. **Simplicity and intuitive use**
4. **Perceptible and effective communication**
5. **Tolerance for error in use**
6. **Low physical effort**
7. **Appropriate size and space for use**

You can find more detail on the principles, first developed by multiple authors at North Carolina State University College of Design, on the National Disability Authority's site. Another source for information on Universal Design is the Institute for Human Centered Design.

Although accessible programming covers a wide range of activities, land trusts are often interested in making their properties, including trails, more accessible through Universal Design. One great resource when designing accessible trails is the Universal Access Trails and Shared Use Paths: Design, Management, Ethical, and Legal Considerations book. Co-authors Larry Knutson and Debra Wolf Goldstein note:

> Designing and building trails that are accessible requires adherence to specific design parameters; so too does designing and building for sustainability. For example, geological conditions such as steep slopes or habitat conditions such as wetlands present as much a challenge to planning and building a sustainable trail as they do in planning and creating a trail that is universally accessible.
>
> Not surprisingly, **principles of Universal Design also encourage sustainable practices**, [for example]:
>
> - **Paths that traverse along the side slope** - Trails should traverse side slopes instead of travelling down the fall line. The result is far less susceptibility to erosion and a more accessible path of travel.
> - **Sustainable grades** - Reducing running (linear) grades of trails decreases erosion as well as creating greater access for a broader range of users.
> - **Erosion resistance** - Firm and stable trail tread surfaces (as opposed to loose granular or soft soil surfaces) offer more sustainability as well as greater range of access for users.

Case Study

Mohonk Preserve (NY)
Inclusive outdoor programs ensure nobody gets left behind

Mohonk Preserve in New York has an active environmental education program for local K-6 students who look forward to their annual trip to the Preserve for field studies. The program was built on the knowledge that bringing students back to the Preserve every year will help them form lifelong connections to the land. But one day, Kathy Ambrosini, director of education, received a call from a special education teacher who let Kathy know children with disabilities were being left behind at school on these field days. Shocked, Kathy wondered how it was possible that they had been administering this program for years and didn't realize they were missing hundreds of special education students. She immediately set out to correct the inequity.

> *"I think it's really exciting when someone can go to a recreational opportunity or experience without having to think about their disability because inclusion was considered and Universal Design was utilized. The trail or outdoor area was designed for the concept of equity to allow everyone to participate and enjoy an inclusive experience, whether it's a highly energetic activity or a sedentary activity. If whoever is doing it can do it without necessarily having to identify themselves as having a disability, and the disability is not a factor in participating in that activity, then it is truly inclusive."*
>
> **— Ray Bloomer, Director of Education and Technical Assistance**
> **National Center on Accessibility, National Park Service**

Mohonk Preserve formed a team of people from its local resource center for accessibility and also included teachers; physical, speech and occupational therapists; social workers; parents and outdoor educators to guide the development of accessible programming. Together, the team examined each program site and visited every trail. Mohonk Preserve addressed both physical and programmatic access issues for schools and community members alike. Today, when grade schoolers come to do their field studies program, every child is there and enjoys the same experience as their peers.

The team quickly realized that, instead of making things accessible one by one, it needed to have a more comprehensive approach. The team came to embrace Universal Design, proactively assuring the inclusion and learning needs of all visitors are addressed, with the goal that visitors with disabilities have the same opportunities as visitors without disabilities.

There were many hurdles to overcome: a challenging physical environment (the Preserve sits on a ridgeline), training staff and volunteers, funding accessible equipment and improvements and dispelling myths and stereotypes about the desire of people with disabilities to enjoy the outdoors. The list of partners and supporters who have helped is long and includes the State University of New York-Cortland, private and public funding programs, local schools and various community resource centers.

Today, Mohonk Preserve has an award-winning accessibility program. Anyone in the community planning to visit the Preserve will find information on accessibility on the website and a direct link to

contact Kathy. Kathy and her staff can arrange use of the all-terrain wheelchairs, provide an American Sign Language interpreter or preferred seating at events, and provide detailed information about the features on their 30 miles of carriage roads, 1.5 mile of trails specifically designed with accessibility features and the visitor center that has an elevator and ADA bathrooms and parking. They also can recommend authorized guide services to lead adaptive rock-climbing programs for those using wheelchairs or who have other mobility issues.

Through this journey to make the Preserve inclusive and accessible for the entire community, the staff have learned that health, wellness and fitness form a critical component of everyone's life. Kathy advises that we cannot presume, nor accept, that people with disabilities have other places to go to be in and learn about nature. "If your land is open to the public, you must work to serve a diverse public; this programming does not happen by accident."

See Mohonk Preserve's accessibility webpage, including information on how to order the publication, "Making Outdoor Programs Accessible".

Campers go on a rock scrambling adventure at an inclusive Mohonk Preserve summer day camp. One of the points Mohonk stresses in its trainings on accessibility is that the majority of disabilities are not readily apparent — most are "hidden," such as autism, ADHD, learning disabilities and some sensory impairments.

Credit: Kate Johnson

DISABILITY INCLUSION IN LAND TRUSTS: TODAY AND TOMORROW

LAND TRUST DISABILITY INCLUSION SURVEY

In late 2020, the Land Trust Alliance conducted a survey of its member land trusts to determine the extent to which they have implemented disability inclusion into their programming. The results show there is interest in disability inclusion, a willingness to implement better practices and lots of room for improvement. For example, disability is often left out of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) statements, which may also address access and social justice. The survey found while more than 50% of land trusts had or were developing statements, only 32% of those statements mentioned disability. As your land trust is developing or refining an organizational statement on diversity, inclusion, equity, justice and/or access, it is important to specifically consider people with disabilities.

The survey also shows that an overwhelming majority of land trusts believe that better inclusion aligns with their values, and nearly half have committed to changes to support inclusion. However, land trusts are worried about their ability to implement those changes, and they understand that issues of capacity, expertise, funding, tools and culture change will need to be addressed to fully include people with disabilities. We believe our land trust community is up to the challenge!

ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND CULTURE

Inclusion Must Be Built In

A key precursor to true organizational culture change, including inclusion efforts at land trusts, is active support from leaders who serve as sponsors of change and model the behaviors they expect to see from others. A commitment and clearly articulated shared understanding of inclusion of how this principle is applied in the context of your organization are important first steps.

Some places to start:

- Recruit people with disabilities and Deaf people to serve as board members.
- Hold a board and staff retreat to learn about and discuss DEI issues and garner committed leadership support.

- Recruit and hire people with disabilities and Deaf people on your staff — at all levels.
- Write a diversity, equity and inclusion statement that includes people with disabilities and people from the Deaf community. Post it on your website.
- Meet with local disability rights organizations or service organizations to listen to what people in your community want and need.
- Create a disability and access advisory board to assist with program planning and oversight. Such an advisory group should be made up of people who live with disability and/or who are knowledgeable about disability issues. These advisors will provide valuable, new perspectives to your strategic planning efforts and feedback on their experiences will be important when you are planning and assessing your programs.
- Commit to training for your board and staff on equity, inclusion and diversity that also includes a focus on disability, and define the organization's desired outcomes from these trainings.
- Conduct an accessibility audit of all of your current programs, website and facilities, and create a feasible plan for minimizing or eliminating barriers to participation.
- And then … just start!

As you are incorporating organizational culture changes in your organization, consider how to increase the diversity of people working for your land trust. As employers you can connect with agencies and companies designed to match people with disabilities to companies and organizations dedicated to hiring people with disabilities. While we do not endorse any one group, we encourage checking out organizations such as inclusively and ability JOBS, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment, which heads up an effort to increase disability employment called What Can YOU Do? In addition, every state has a vocational rehabilitation program supported by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, a federal agency.

PROGRAM DESIGN: FOR AND BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

"Nothing About Us Without Us" became the rallying cry of the civil rights movement of the disability community in the 1990s. While its reference was to policymaking and suggested that "no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy," it is also a good approach to take when creating inclusive programs. To help ensure success, engage local people who are disabled as well as disability service organizations. Listening to the people who experience barriers to inclusion in the outdoors is a wise and necessary part of the process. This is also a great way to engage your disability and access advisory board.

> ***"Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures which exist in our societies; it is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone. Inclusion is about creating a better world for everyone."***
>
> **– Diane Richler**
> **Past President, Inclusion International**

Commit to Inclusion is a global campaign to end the exclusion of people with disabilities from physical activity and associated areas. The campaign supports the implementation of guidelines and

programming to empower people with disabilities to lead healthy and active lifestyles. A detailed implementation manual on the campaign's 9 Guidelines for Disability Inclusion can be downloaded from its website.

When designing a more inclusive program for people with disabilities, think opportunities, not limitations. Strategies to help your land trust get started (in no particular order) include:

- **Assess community needs:** Find out who makes up your community and what they want. If you have a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital nearby, think about programs for veterans or, if there is a large senior population, find out about their needs and interests. Be sure to take into account culture, lifestyle and socioeconomic factors when assessing your communities.

- **Partner with local organizations:** Establish partnerships with programs and organizations that serve Deaf, hard of hearing and disabled communities. After getting input from these organizations, you'll come away with ideas for a holistic accessibility program that includes both short-term and long-term plans. You may learn that some adjustments to your current programming would enable more equitable participation. Something as simple as changing the start time/duration of a guided hike or changing the location to an area serviced by public transportation and accessible pathways can make a difference.

- **Look to staff, board and volunteer expertise:** Check with your immediate land trust community as to whether anyone has skills relating to accessibility. Maybe someone on staff or on your board knows American Sign Language or has a family member with autism and knows about utilizing social stories to help reduce anxiety.

- **Draft objectives to include people with disabilities:** Program objectives should explicitly and unambiguously state that the target population includes people with a range of different disabilities (cognitive, intellectual and other developmental disabilities, mobility, visual, hearing and mental health conditions and mental illness).

- **Conduct programmatic and physical accessibility assessments and create an accessibility plan:** Take an inventory of the programs you currently offer, determine what accessibility elements are already built in and identify barriers to access. Think about specific disabilities and whether someone with those disabilities would be able to participate if they wanted to. If not, are there things you could change or add? Considerations may include:

    - Conducting an audit of existing facilities and their accessibility (including trails and outdoor spaces) if your site has land or buildings open to the public. Something that is often overlooked is whether your accessible trail has an accessible path from the parking area to the trailhead. To conduct your own inventory, start with this checklist from the New England ADA Center
    - Enabling people to sign up for a program in a variety of ways
    - Ensuring that your marketing materials clearly include how to request access accommodations
    - Minimizing or eliminating any physical barriers
    - Using multiple modalities in your program (e.g., if you are doing a talk about the flora and fauna, offering things to see, smell, hear, touch or experience)

The next step is to develop an accessibility plan to address barriers and improvements to both programs and physical features, such as trails. While about two-thirds of the respondents to our 2020 survey reported having some accessible programming, less than one-half had an accessibility plan. Depending on complexity and a number of other factors, developing an accessibility plan may require the services of experienced consultants and will likely include short-term, mid-range and long-term goals and projects. Your local Center for Independent Living may be able to help you conduct an accessibility audit and develop your plan.

- **Apply Universal Design Principles:** Become familiar with principles that help you think about designing programs that will be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

  Example: When you build a new trail, consider the substrate, grade and width of the trail. Universally designed trails are enjoyable for everyone: parents with strollers, friends that like to walk side by side, families with multiple generations exercising together, trail runners, people with disabilities and many others. Think about installing guide wire that can expand the ability of a person with low sight, for example, to independently experience the trail.

  Example: When arranging and promoting stewardship workdays, think about how you can design the activities with varying skill levels and time commitments, which could allow anyone to participate. If you provide a port-a-potty for the day, making it an accessible one means everyone can use it.

- **Plan for cost considerations and feasibility:** Programs should address potential resource implications of inclusion (including staffing, training, equipment, accessibility accommodations and other resources needed to promote inclusion).

- **Create accessible materials:** Make sure all materials, trainings and surveys are in an accessible format. Use an ASL interpreter, caption your videos, provide transcripts and image descriptions and ensure documents are screen-reader friendly.

- **Conduct a test run:** Enlist your disability and access advisory board or members of the community to conduct a trial run of your program to work out any potential problems.

- **Ensure affordability:** Programs should be affordable to people with disabilities and their families, personal assistants and caregivers.

- **Demonstrate equity, respect, partnership:** When you are utilizing people from the community to assist you, such as bringing on a person with a disability as an expert or to provide feedback about your programming in regard to accessibility, make sure you are compensating them for their time.

- **Promotion and communication:** During program design phase, consider how you will promote your facilities, activities and programs to ensure the accessibility features are publicly and widely known. Often people with disabilities must assume programs are not accessible unless they are informed otherwise.

- **Conduct disability awareness staff trainings:** In addition to the initial and broad DEI training suggested as part of culture change, continue disability-specific training, especially for those staff involved in designing and implementing programs and creating and caring for physical facilities, such as buildings, trails and outdoor spaces. Goals of expanded training include giving staff tools and knowledge to feel more confident when interacting with people with disabilities, educating staff about policies and procedures for accessibility accommodations, and building overall capacity to manage inclusive programming and nature preserves. Ideally these trainings would be conducted by people with a range of disabilities who address a wide scope of topics that may include disability justice, respectful language and disability history. Consider using some of the material provided in this guide as a starting point. The Blue Hill Heritage Trust received training from the Cromwell Center for Disabilities Awareness — check out this Maine-based organization for inspiration and ideas.

- **Identify a point person within the organization who can field inquiries about accessibility and accommodations:** This could be a staff person or volunteer who might be able to answer questions directly or take responsibility for tracking down the information needed. Only one-quarter of the respondents to our 2020 survey believe that someone seeking information on accommodations to visit a site or attend a program at their land trust would know where to look or who to contact at the organization.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

Land trusts are going to need help. That's where community-centered conservation comes in, leveraging the unique expertise of land trusts to work together with community groups to find conservation-based solutions to community issues. To have the greatest impact on disability inclusion, land trusts should form partnerships with different types of community organizations and agencies. These partnerships are especially important because they offer the immediate potential to reach a new set of users who may never have otherwise considered using land trust facilities and participating in programs, especially those living with a disability, who already face multiple barriers to access programs and services.

The Purposes of Partnership

There is a broad continuum of what a partnership is or could be — from informal conversations to the creation and funding of joint programs. Good partnerships define their purpose up front and articulate the shared benefits of working together.

A side-by-side tandem bike and other adaptive bikes ensure no student is left behind when the Top of Michigan Trails Council holds day-long bicycling experiences for 4th graders in a cooperative program with local schools.

Credit: Cindy Okerlund, Top of Michigan Trails Council

Not every partnership will have the same level of effort and commitment — it will vary based on a number of factors, including purpose.

Start by exploring if there might be synergy for joint work with local disability advocacy or service organizations. Even if nothing is immediate, you can begin to explore opportunities for future collaboration. This can be the first step in bringing people living with disability to a land trust's facilities and programs. One immediate benefit of starting these partnership conversations is to inform these groups about the land trust's programs and to learn about their programs in return.

An equally important partnership goal is learning how the land trust can improve its inclusion and accessibility. You might engage the partner and its clients in adapting existing facilities and programs to better meet their needs. This requires the land trust to deepen its understanding of some of the barriers and be prepared to make changes. Such changes may be minor and immediate, while other more substantive changes require more intensive planning and ongoing communication with partners.

Finding Partners

Potential partners can be found in every town across the country. Agencies or organizations that offer services and support to groups of people with varying disabilities are especially valuable. Consider prioritizing those serving clients struggling with more significant levels of disability, as these people are more likely to face significant isolation or other barriers to getting outdoors.

Here are ideas for potential partners:

- **Schools:** One advantage of a partnership with schools, and with special education programs in particular, is that for activities occurring within the school day, the students will be accompanied by staff who remain responsible for the safety and well-being of the students.

- **National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities** and **Centers for Independent Living:** Every state and U.S. territory has a Council on Developmental Disabilities that is a federally funded, self-governing organization charged with identifying the most pressing needs of people with developmental disabilities. These organizations serve a critical function by bringing those living with disability together to connect with others and learn about local resources. Centers for Independent Living provide independent living services for people with disabilities of all types and are designed and operated by individuals with disabilities. They are formed on the belief that all people can live with dignity, make their own choices and participate fully in society.

- **Long-term care providers:** Senior living centers and programs providing long-term and residential care to those with intellectual/developmental disabilities and related conditions can be found in many communities across the country. In addition to residential facilities, consider a partnership with a senior center. A walk outdoors or an opportunity to volunteer or participate in an educational program can be important to the health and well-being of these residents who are too often isolated from their communities. For one example on the benefits of such partnerships, watch how the Santa Fe Conservation Trust (NM) helped create opportunities to connect people to the outdoors.

- **Advocacy groups:** Search for nonprofit advocacy or service organizations in your community as well as branches of state or national agencies charged with providing service to people with disabilities. Check your city or county government for an office on disability. Your local community mental health agencies may be able to provide a list of local organizations. Arranging a group walk in a local preserve could be a great place to start building relationships.

- **Veterans organizations:** There are nonprofit organizations specifically serving the needs of veterans with disabilities. Also consider your local VFW chapter, Veterans Affairs Office or hospital, or start with someone you know. For an example of how one land trust addressed the need for local veterans to have access to the outdoors, watch this video from the Prickly Pear Land Trust (MT).

- **Rehabilitation programs:** Most regions also have behavioral or mental health services that provide individualized support to a wide range of clients, from children with emotional, cognitive or behavioral difficulties to individuals recovering from addiction or mental health crises. Natural settings can provide a relatively safe environment for individuals whose anxiety or behaviors can be triggered by crowds, noise or other stimuli. Of course, not everyone is comfortable in nature and some see the outdoors as a place of danger; mental health professionals are trained to honor these feelings. When land trusts provide access to nearby natural spaces, it gives people and their service providers options.

- **Vocational agencies:** Agencies that are tasked with providing part-time training or internships in real-life settings may find that land trusts offer ideal opportunities to learn new skills. Over time, the agencies can become excellent partners in identifying the kind of work their clients might enjoy while ensuring the work is meaningful to the land trust.

- **Universities and colleges:** Most schools have an office for students with disabilities, typically with the mission to deliver appropriate academic support and accommodations to provide full and equal access to all students. Connecting here could provide a richness and diversity of resources to your efforts.

Case Study
Solano Land Trust (CA) and Access Adventure
Designing access with and for the community

"We have these beautiful lands and incredible infrastructure, but a whole segment of the community was not being served," says Nicole Braddock, executive director of the Solano Land Trust. "We are looking at this as a longevity thing; we must strive for access for all if we will indeed protect these places forever."

Nicole joined forces with like-minded visionary Mike Muir, caretaker for the land trust's Rush Ranch property and founder of Access Adventure. Mike, a wheelchair user himself, had a long history of helping people with disabilities to experience the freedom and joy of nature using his exceptionally well-trained horses.

Nicole was not only inspired by Mike's work, she also wanted to see the land trust increase accessibility on Rush Ranch and its other properties. At a Land Trust Alliance Rally workshop on disability and inclusion, Nicole learned the only way to successfully achieve this goal was to invite community members living with disability to join her at the "design table." With Mike's help, she pulled together an accessibility advisory team of community members with multiple ability levels, a variety of disabilities and differing experiences in nature to advise the land trust on improving recreation facilities with the goal of making everyone feel comfortable accessing all that the land trust properties had to offer.

Solano Land Trust looked at all its upcoming projects to see where it could adjust plans to complete accessibility projects. On site visits, the advisory team pointed out features where accessibility could mean independence. At Rush Ranch, the land trust incorporated the advisory team's suggestions to bring an accessible trail through the picnic area and create an accessible picnic site that doubles as a campsite. Phase 2 planned improvements include a water fountain with foot pedals, picnic tables with the wheelchair cutout in the middle instead of on the end, rope-guided trails for visitors who are blind and a shaded amphitheater. The team members also helped test new surface materials to make trails easier to use with a wheelchair.

The land trust also completed a community input project to learn what the community knew about the organization and what would draw more people to the land. Participants highlighted the need for more accessible features on trails, including shaded resting areas, more benches for people who need breaks and short trails that reach interesting destinations. They learned that some people who had not grown up in nature do not always feel safe out on the ranch, while others are nature veterans but don't have the same stamina or abilities they once did. The land trust worked to create various levels of nature immersion with the goal that all people feel safe, comfortable and independent at the nature preserves.

Solano Land Trust and Access Adventure credit each other with their success in providing accessible programs, as well as the larger collaboration involving many other partners, including community support and funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (through the San Francisco State National Estuarine Research Reserve), individual donors, grant funds from the Solano County Orderly Growth Committee and an in-kind planning grant from the National Park Service.

Today on a visit to Rush Ranch you might revel in a horse-drawn wagon ride using the solar-powered wheelchair lift. Whether you want to fly a kite, learn how to drive horses, get out on a trail or just enjoy the view, Solano Land Trust believes its lands are there for all people.

An Access Adventure student drives an accessible horse carriage.

Credit: Tom Muehleisen

COMMUNICATIONS AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN ENSURING INCLUSIVITY

Inclusion goes far beyond physical accessibility. This section highlights how to be more inclusive in what, how and with whom you communicate.

Marketing Communication

The old adage "build it and they will come" is not necessarily true for people living with disability. First of all, a person would have to know you built it. Then, they would have to know it is accessible to them. Then, they would have to know enough about it to evaluate if they want to come, that is, do they think it would be enjoyable, does it meet their interests? People won't just magically show up. You need to communicate to people in the disability and Deaf communities that they are welcome.

> *"Information is critical. And when information is accurate, it means that people with disabilities are able to make better decisions in terms of how they go about participating within a particular environment."*
>
> **— Ray Bloomer, Director of Education and Technical Assistance**
> **National Center on Accessibility, National Park Service**

In addition to ensuring people with disabilities are included in the project planning and development, here are some ways to communicate with accessibility in mind.

- **Website accessibility:** Your website is essentially the front door to your land trust. It's where you communicate with the public about your mission and programs. Naturally, you want people to linger on the website and see and experience all of the great work you are doing, and you want to excite visitors to the point of getting them involved as a participant, volunteer or donor.

  For some people with disabilities, this won't be possible unless your website meets W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. These guidelines ensure a website is usable by people who have the following types of disabilities: visual, auditory, cognitive, physical, neurological and speech. While technically these guidelines only apply to federal agencies and their contractors, following them will ensure your website is accessible to everyone. Learn more about website accessibility from W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative. And consider designating on your website who is the point of contact for visitors who need more information regarding accessibility.

- **Mention accessibility in media coverage:** In addition to including accessibility information when you create your own media content, you should also mention it in your interviews with outside media sources. Advise the media that the content they present should also be accessible, such as through captions, transcripts, alt text and video descriptions. While your intentions to get the word out about accessibility may be good, if the distributor doesn't make the content accessible, it might reflect badly on your organization and most certainly won't get to those you want to reach. Share with them the Disability Language Style Guide from the National Center on Disability and Journalism.

- **Leverage your community partners:** One of the best ways to help publicize your inclusive programs and facilities is to reach out to your established community partners. They already communicate with the audience that you're trying to reach.

- **Include photos of people from the Deaf community and participants who are disabled in your marketing materials:** A good way to demonstrate inclusion is through imagery. If you're unable to find such photos in your land trust files, there are a few stock photo resources that are specific to people with disabilities on our resources list. For images on your website and social media be sure to use alt text (alternative text for images) to describe the photos.

Communicating about Access to Programs

People who have vision or speech disabilities and people who are deaf or hard of hearing may use different ways to communicate. In order for all people to participate in your programs, you may need to alter your communication strategies. The ADA requires Title III entities (businesses and nonprofit organizations that serve the public) to communicate effectively with people who have communication disabilities. Land trusts are required to provide aids and services unless doing so would result in an "undue burden." For some accommodations you can require advance notice be given, but in-the-moment requests should be accommodated to the degree possible. Read more about effective communication from the U.S. Department of Justice.

- **Accessibility content:** It is important to include accessibility information on your website and in your social media. This information should be easy to find and include who to contact and how to do so. Useful content may include how to request an access or communications accommodation, how to report an accessibility issue, and your organization's access and inclusion (or DEI) statement. It may also be helpful to provide information about accessible public and private transportation that serves your land trust properties. Common access accommodations include:

    - **Qualified sign language interpreters :** When individual(s) make requests, it is important to hire certified American Sign Language interpreters to participate in your programs (check the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf). Hiring an interpreter generally requires advance planning, and, for this reason, have on hand a list of interpreters who provide ASL services. Ask the individual requesting the interpreter if they have a preferred interpreter and try your best to honor their request. Some individuals may have and request preferences based on a certain interpreter's sign skill and style. In addition, train staff and volunteers how to effectively work with an interpreter. If an event or program is longer than one hour, two interpreters might be necessary.

    - **Material in alternative formats:** People who are blind or have low vision may be excluded from enjoying interpretive displays and printed educational material if your land trust does not make or offer alternative communication avenues. Consider providing handouts in large print and braille, including braille on interpretive signs, or offering audio recordings. When designing new educational exhibits and experiences, consider including different senses and modalities — sight, sound, touch and experiential.

- **Audio tours:** These can be useful tools to introduce the sights, sounds and history of your land trust, but you will also want to have a printed script of the narration for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

- **Captioned videos/films:** Uploading pre-recorded videos or presentations about your land trust to your website or to sites like Vimeo and YouTube is a great way to reach a broader audience. However, make sure the videos have captions, that the captions are accurate (do not rely on speech recognition technology alone) and that the captions are uploaded at the same time that you release your video/film to the public. When presenting online virtual workshops, consider both captioning and an ASL interpreter. Companies that license virtual event platforms are recognizing the need to provide accessible formats for people with various types of disabilities. So shop around, make your preferences known before settling on a provider and ask for a demonstration.

- **Identify access features on maps and trailhead kiosks:** Include accessibility features on online, print and wayfinding maps, such as the location of accessible bathrooms, parking, picnic tables and benches. You can indicate which trails meet the Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines or the Outdoor Developed Areas Accessibility Guidelines, or better yet, describe the trail grade, distance, surface and width for all trails. Providing detailed information about the physical features of your facilities and trails helps the visitor to decide for themselves whether their access needs can likely be met. To make wayfinding maps more accessible to blind individuals, consider using tactile markings.

  The Access Recreation Project offers guidance on information to include for trail descriptions.

Brenden Dalin, a recreation management graduate from the University of Montana, directed construction of an all-access gravel trail during an internship with Five Valleys Land Trust.

Credit: Olga Helmy

PATH TO A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE

Thank you to the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, an organization dedicated to making conservation more inclusive, supportive and meaningful for all communities they serve. With their permission we have adapted this diagram from one they share to address racial equity within their own culture and practice.

WHERE TO BEGIN CHECKLIST

Diversity, inclusion, equity and access — none of these ideals can be achieved quickly or with a "one and done" mindset. It is a process and commitment, a way to live, and you will be constantly improving. The most important thing is to start. What follows is not an exhaustive list, but simply a place to begin.

1. Executive and board leadership
    a. Hold a retreat or series of meetings to help educate on disability issues and the need for inclusion.
    b. Garner committed support from leadership before proceeding.
    c. Talk about language around disability so leaders are speaking with respect.
2. Statement on diversity, equity, inclusion
    a. Create a definition of these terms to establish a shared organizational understanding.
    b. At a minimum, include diversity, equity, inclusion and consider adding social justice, access and any other terms meaningful to your organization.
    c. Include people with disabilities and the Deaf and hard of hearing communities in your DEI statement.
    d. Post your statement on your website.
3. Capacity building
    a. Bring on expertise internally — both board and staff.
        i. Invite community members who have the lived experience of having a disability to your board and recruit people with disability for your staff.
        ii. Establish an advisory council on disability inclusion.
    b. Hire experts to guide organizational change.
    c. Include the advisory council and board and staff members with disability expertise in your annual planning, budgeting and fundraising processes.
4. Training
    a. Establish DEI trainings for all board and staff; ensure disability is part of the training.
    b. Consider holding separate disability awareness trainings led by people with disabilities.
5. Program review
    a. Review current programs for disability inclusion.
    b. Discuss changes that can be made quickly and design a plan, including funding and other resource needs, for longer-term changes.
6. Community relations
    a. Reach out to disability organizations in your area.
    b. Determine how you can begin a dialogue and partnership.
    c. Meet people where they are; do not expect people to know about land trusts or to come to you.
7. Communications
    a. Review your website, social media, print materials and videos for accessibility.
    b. Make easy changes immediately, such as showing people with disabilities in nature.
    c. Determine a plan for more expensive or more extensive communications changes.

CONCLUSION AND RESOURCES

At the Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, Facundo Chavez Penillas, with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said, "The barriers are no longer on the person; the barriers for participation are actually in the environment, in the attitudes and how the system is designed."

Those of us who created this guide would like it to be "barrier free." We invite feedback from readers, including stories of successful endeavors in becoming more inclusive; we also encourage and learn from well-told stories of failure.

We have started the conversation and look forward to others joining in. We will learn together. Please send your suggestions and stories to disabilityguide@lta.org.

Follow this link to the Resources List for this guide.

This Guide/Project was supported in part by the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) Grant/Cooperative Agreement Number NU27DD001157 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC.

Members of the Disability Network Northern Michigan enjoy the overlook of spectacular views of Lake Michigan at Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy's Arcadia Dunes: The C.S. Mott Nature Preserve.

Credit: Art Bukowski