

# **Expanding Access to Recreation and Social/Cultural Activities**

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## ■ Background

Focus group sessions with consumers and providers in Maine identified the need to improve access to recreational activities as an important component in home and community-based living initiatives. The Maine Real Choices Systems Change Grant responded to this input by including the proposal, *Expanding Access to Recreation and Social/Cultural Activities*, in the grant. The goals and activities for the project grew out of the focus group and *Olmstead* Workgroup discussions and the understanding that improvements in accessibility to the many opportunities for recreation and leisure activities in Maine communities would require a two-way approach:

- provide information to establishments to raise their awareness about the need for access and to assess the accessibility to their facilities and programs; and
- inform people with disabilities about accessible locations and activities in Maine.

### **Project Goal**

The goal of this project was to expand opportunities for integrated recreational, social and cultural activities in Maine for people with disabilities.

### **Activities Proposed**

1. Establish a resource network of recreation facilities, school, and community/municipal program administrators and consumers with disabilities who utilize facilities/programs to identify ways to expand access and utilization.
2. Develop and disseminate a web-based Universal Access and Technical Assistance Tool Kit for recreational facilities to improve access.
3. Work with Portland Connections to learn about the model and facilitate the replication of it in three communities in the state.
4. Assemble the information for marketing and distribution in coordination with a consumer-friendly website that will list accessible recreational, social and cultural facilities and activities along with resource links for facilities.

### **Approach**

The project staff used a multi-faceted approach to raise awareness and inform recreation program owners and managers to improve access and accommodation and to provide communication tools to inform consumers of accessible recreational opportunities. Staff worked to make contacts with existing activities in the state and to link and collaborate with the programs that could offer support and sustainability.

# ■ Project Activities and Outcomes

## Facility Resource/Tool Kit

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this activity was to develop a resource guide for fitness facilities that would help accommodate the needs of and expand opportunities for people with disabilities that access their programs. The goal was to utilize focus group findings to assist in the development of the guide.

The purpose of the focus group was to collect information from a representative group of Greater Portland Maine facilities regarding the utilization of fitness facilities by people with disabilities, and to determine facilities' interests in expanding disability access, their resource needs to support expansion, and the preferred methodology for staff to access resource information.

### *Process*

The focus group participants represented a very positive response from the non-profit facilities that were invited to the session. It was noted by participants that the session provided an occasion for them to be together, and that this had not happened before. It should also be noted that work was done to organize a second focus group session of private/for-profit fitness facilities. While the telephone contact identified people for a focus group session, most did not attend on the scheduled day. The one fitness business that did attend was interviewed and the results were as favorable and informative as the full group session with non-profits.

### *Outcomes*

Primary findings were that facilities have experience working with people with disabilities and all have priorities to provide services to meet the needs of a diverse membership and the public that include people with different types of disabilities, adults and seniors. Attending municipal recreation programs serve children, too, and rely on their individual staff, family members and affiliated schools to accommodate special needs. The willingness of all facilities to be responsive to individual requests and needs for accommodation coexists with limited resources (staff, time, money, equipment, space and information). This confirmed for the project staff that facilities need resources to meet current needs and to expand opportunities for people with disabilities. While resources like buildings, equipment and staffing were beyond the scope of this project, the session helped to identify what information resources and technical assistance would support facilities' current programs and staff to be responsive to requests/needs for accommodation.

The findings are organized in a summary report, *Expanding Access to Recreation in Maine for People with Disabilities: A Report of Findings from a Focus Group with Fitness Facilities*. This report is available at

[http://www.mainerealchoices.org/commliving\\_rec\\_materials/FitnessFacReport.htm](http://www.mainerealchoices.org/commliving_rec_materials/FitnessFacReport.htm).

The report was used to inform the development of the web-based *Resource Guide for Fitness Facility Managers*, which can be found at

<http://www.accessmaine.org/Toolkits/FitnessFacility/fitnessfac.htm>.

The Resource Guide for Fitness Facility Managers is organized with the following sections: Why bother to attract persons with disabilities to your Fitness Center?; Where to Begin?; Communication and Etiquette; Marketing; Financial Assistance; Equipment; Accessibility and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); and Other Useful Links.

The development and design was done in conjunction with the Information Access Project, an associated grant project at the Muskie School, which provides links to a comprehensive array of resources for disability information and services. The name of the site is AccessMaine.org and can be found at <http://www.accessmaine.org>. To ensure ease of use, and respond to the request for printed materials, the website and links can be downloaded and/or printed.

## **Calendar**

### ***Purpose***

A model program, Portland Connections, demonstrated the use of an event calendar with features that met the objectives of the project to inform people with disabilities about accessible locations and activities in Maine. The weekly calendar listed events that were accessible in cost (less than \$5), located in the Portland area and covered a range of interests. The calendar, developed and operated by a peer support and consumer advocate and funded through local foundation and provider support, is distributed from a website with e-mail reminders sent to a broad mailing list of providers and individuals. The following project activities were proposed and completed:

- create a guide for developing and operating a local calendar of low-cost and accessible activities in your community, modeled after Portland Connections; and
- replicate Portland Connections, a low-cost, high-labor effort that produces a monthly calendar of low-cost recreational events in Greater Portland, Maine. Create similar services in at least one new community per year for three years.

### ***Process***

A work group that included the primary staff for the Portland Connections model program was formed. The information collected by the group was helpful for documenting and acknowledging the Portland Connections' accomplishments and building a base for the replication work. Input from the Technical Advisory Group encouraged project staff to expand the calendar through links to a wide variety of recreational and leisure information. Subsequent contract work with the Maine Parent Foundation and their web-based resource, LinkMaine, supported the development of a community calendar based on the Portland Connections work that was mutually beneficial to the site and to the project. The Recreation Station (<http://www.linkmaine.org/MRSwebsite/index.html>) was started in seven regions, exceeding the expectation for three sites. Information on physical access was added to the calendar.

### ***Outcomes***

The primary objective, to replicate the Portland Connections calendar in three communities, was met, and exceeded. The Maine Parent Federation has been operating the calendars for the past year and continues to update events and access information for seven communities/regions, covering the entire state.

The publication, *Making Connections: A Manual for Developing and Operating an Electronic Calendar of Accessible Events and Activities in Your Community*, was developed with the information compiled by the work group. The manual can be found at [http://www.mainerealchoices.org/commliving\\_rec.htm](http://www.mainerealchoices.org/commliving_rec.htm). A print copy with accompanying disks of calendar templates is available to anyone interested in replicating this project by contacting either Mark Richards at [markr@usm.maine.edu](mailto:markr@usm.maine.edu) or (207) 780-4527 or Elise Scala at [scala@usm.maine.edu](mailto:scala@usm.maine.edu) or (207) 228-8423.

## **Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts, and Recreation in Maine**

### ***Background***

Project staff made contact with and participated in the Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine and participated as active members throughout the grant period. This Committee included representatives from Alpha One, Husson College, Maine State Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the Maine Tourism Association, Maine Office of Tourism, VSA Arts of Maine, and the Muskie School. The Committee existed prior to and after the termination of the Expanding Access to Recreation and Social/Cultural Activities Project. (See Appendix A.)

### ***Purpose***

The main goals and objectives of the Committee include:

- developing and distributing a self-assessment survey tool to evaluate access;
- expanding opportunities for recreation, arts, cultural and leisure activities in Maine for people with disabilities;
- establishing a resource network of recreation, social and cultural program representatives who advocate for universal access and can work with the group to identify and expand accessible public and private programs;
- developing and overseeing the State of Maine website, *Guide to Accessible Recreation, Arts & Leisure* (<http://www.maine.gov/portal/visiting/accessrec/>); and
- compiling general resource information and procedures for facilities and establishments to find information and resources to improve access.

### ***Process***

The Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine met on a regular basis. The Committee's major focus during this project period was to complete the development of the Self Assessment Survey for Accessibility, field test the survey, market the survey and make it available for use. Committee members recruited business owners/managers to test the final survey draft and provide feedback. The survey was also tested by Muskie School graduate assistant, Jennifer Snyder, at three additional venues. Modifications were made based on the feedback and experiences from the tests. VSA arts of Maine, under a contract with the Quality Choices Project, marketed the Self Assessment Survey for Accessibility and posted it on their website for distribution and use. VSA arts of Maine promoted the use of the survey at the Governor's Creative Economy Conference, at opening receptions of VSA art exhibits in South Portland, Augusta, and Bangor, and at a workshop called "Low Cost Solutions to Accessibility," conducted at Husson College Family Business Center. The survey is available for use and can be found on the VSA arts of Maine website at <http://www.vsartsmaine.org/accme.htm>.

Ms. Snyder also reviewed Maine's Accessible Recreation, Arts and Leisure webpage and provided the Committee with written recommendations for improvements/modifications. Additionally, Ms. Snyder worked with the Maine Philanthropy Center and developed an inventory of 46 potential funding sources that the Committee can approach to secure funds necessary to continue its work.

### ***Outcomes***

- The grant provided the staff support needed by the Committee to complete work on its objective and contributed to its sustainability.
- The Assessment Survey for Accessibility developed by the Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine is available at:  
<http://www.vsartsmaine.org/accme.htm>.
- Contributed to the publication of a series of monthly articles on accessibility for the Maine Tourism Association monthly newsletter over 2 years of the grant.
- Written recommendations for improvements and modifications of Maine's Accessible Recreation, Arts and Leisure webpage.
- Inventory of potential funding sources for the Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine Committee.

## **Lessons Learned**

### ***What worked?***

- *Establishing links with others.* Early efforts to identify existing initiatives in the state related to accessible recreation were both timely and rewarding.
- *Building on others' work.* The activity to replicate the Portland Connections and initiatives with the Committee and the Maine Parent Federation grew from the links, and resulted in relationship building and program activities that were made possible with the grant funds.
- *Key members were added.* The outreach to the Maine Tourism Association resulted in a significant addition of staff and support to the Committee. The director supported the publication of a regular column on accessibility in their widely distributed newsletter. The Committee's decision to lead the effort with a positive message that access is good for business rather than a warning about compliance was important to gaining the support of this key member.
- *Strategy for contribution rather than duplication.* Grant staff made investments of time to secure the existence and to contribute to the operations and outcomes of the statewide Committee.
- *Stay focused on the proposal activities.* The limited time for this project necessitated clear objectives and the selected activities achieved them.

### ***What didn't work?***

- *The need was greater than the proposal.* The project did not plan, or budget for, support for the operation of Portland Connections. This was criticized by the agency operating the calendar. Sustaining operation is a costly commitment. Recommendations for marketing the calendars were added to the Guide. The replication would benefit from technical assistance for sustainability planning.
- *Leadership was needed.* The statewide Committee needed leadership and development that fell outside of the scope of this project and the staff commitment to it.
- *Covering all groups/programs was not feasible.* The project objectives to address access to municipal and youth recreational programs was not developed as a primary focus of the project work but was instead generalized within the focus group session for the fitness facility resource and the general work of the Committee.
- *Consistent participation by consumers.* We were not able to keep the strong consumer involvement in the Committee through the completion of the project. A shift in priorities and limited resources within the Statewide Independent Living Council reduced their commitment to the Committee and the project objectives. This was a significant loss given their past leadership for the legislation, More Outdoor Recreation for Everyone (MORE).

### ***How do the outcomes inform future planning?***

- *Making Connections: A Manual for Developing and Operating an Electronic Calendar of Accessible Events and Activities in Your Community* will serve as a guide to any group, in any state, that wants to replicate a web-based or e-mail source calendar of low-cost, accessible events.
- While there was/is a lack of support in the State to sustain the Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts & Recreation, it is now positioned and more focused in its efforts. The development of the self-assessment tool is an outcome that could be built on, and with adequate support and leadership could be an excellent planning and systems change tool for increasing accessibility in a broad range of facilities and programs. The lack of State support and coordination for this effort will have an impact on the future of the Committee, the sustainability of the assessment tool and the quality of the website.
- *The Fitness Facility Resource Tool Kit* will continue to be available on the website and could be marketed for private and public programs to improve the access to their facilities and programs. These programs offer an important choice for consumers to be involved in a self-directed fitness program in an integrated setting. Facility managers can use this site, along with the self-assessment survey tool, to plan and implement improvements and expand access.
- The project provided a focus on the importance of recreation and leisure activities for consumers at a time when limited budgets have contracted the list of priorities to housing and employment. The outcomes of the project, together with the continuing discussion on the value of recreation to the recovery and quality of life for consumers will inform those who are listening and can provide leadership in the effort to ensure and expand accessibility to recreational programs in Maine.
- Marketing is essential. The tools and information need to be marketed.

### ***What were the unexpected challenges?***

- *Limited involvement by the primary consumer group.* The Statewide Independent Living Council has an important history of leadership in this area and their decision to shift away from this priority and to not engage in the opportunities made available through this project and the Committee was a disappointment and loss.
- *Criticism and lack of interest.* The criticism and lack of interest for collaboration by the operators of the Portland Connections model calendar limited the support and potential for collaborative sustainability planning.
- *Sustaining support and interest.* Once the course was set to work with the Committee it became apparent that the members had limited time, resources and support to invest in the project activities. This occurred with the consumer representatives, too.

### ***What challenges were expected? How were they managed and with what results?***

- *Limited resources.* The project staff identified the limitations of the project to take on the greater need for attention and resources to the lack of accessibility. Building relationships with the Committee was an important step to reconcile this.
- *Gaining support and acceptance from the business community.* Our choice to advise business that accessibility is required by law versus a message that accessibility is good for business was an important challenge. The Committee and project staff elected to start with the positive message and build their interest and provide them resources to make improvements.
- *Gaining the attention of state policymakers.* In times of budget shortfalls, the priority for recreation declines. This project, and the functional status of the Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts & Recreation, helped raise awareness of the value of recreation and leisure activities in the daily lives of consumers living in home and community settings. It also raised questions about what the State's commitment should be to this effort. There is a strong history of legislation that supported expansion of outdoor recreation for people with disabilities in Maine that has been idle. The project staff's involvement with the Committee helped to raise questions so this history can be reviewed and efforts re-invigorated.

### ***Should the project be replicated? If so, what are the recommendations?***

The component activities of this project should be replicated:

- *Calendar of Accessible Activities.* This can be a low-cost method for collecting and disseminating information to consumers that can add important and valuable activities to their daily lives and will also raise the awareness of the facility and program managers and the general public regarding disability and accessibility. Every community should either have one of these calendars or advocates should ask existing calendars to include information on physical and sensory accessibility and contact information for making inquiries about access.
- *The Fitness Facility Resource/Tool Kit.* This is a good template for others to use to spread the word, to raise awareness and provide good resource information to assist facilities to increase accessibility. Marketing is necessary to reach facilities and to inform consumers.

### ***What were the impacts of the project activities and outcomes?***

Notation: Members of the Access Technical Advisory Group for the Access group were asked to respond to this e-mail request of September 9, 2004:

*Dear Access TAG Members,*

*Today's discussion of the Access to Recreation project, as in past meetings and for all the projects, was both an opportunity for us to present activity updates and to hear from you. Mark and I would like to thank you for serving as an advisory and resource group to this project and to us. Your input helped to shape the project.*

*We have one more request as we prepare our final report on the project process and products. The attached document is a copy of the final report outline that was in your TAG meeting notes today. Please review the project description and outcomes list and answer these questions:*

- 1. What do you think were the contributions and the impact of this project and the project outcomes?*
- 2. Which of the project outcomes would you like extended or supported by the State? By future grants?*
- 3. What did the project miss that would have helped reach the goals?*

TAG member Linda Meyer, PhD, CPRP, Chairperson and Associate Professor at the Recreation and Leisure Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine (USM) had some final thoughts about project accomplishments:

#### **I. Calendar Work**

*Feedback:* Expanding the Portland connections calendar was an excellent accomplishment in the social recreation area. Finding low cost, accessible, things to do is a problem for many families who have a disabled member (as well as for individuals with disabilities). Portland Connections type calendars deal mostly with special events and arts related activities rather than other aspects of recreation such as outdoor adventure, aquatics, and sports, etc. Currently, this information can be found at other places such as USM's Recreation and Assistive Technology Exchange (RATE).

*Recommendation:* Possibly in the future, Connections could be expanded to cover other aspects of recreation especially if doing so was supported by a future grant.

#### **II. Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation**

*Feedback:* The self assessment survey will probably help business owners begin to look at access (a good first step). The Committee on Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine has done some great work. The problem is, as you stated in the last meeting, sustain ability. Sustain ability is a problem because the Committee does not have authority (great intentions but no power). The only way to get authority is to align with organizations, especially governmental, professional &/or nonprofit that have recognized

recreation related missions. This is a weak area for Maine state government (what is available at present seems very fragmented). There is, however, the Maine Recreation and Parks Association (MRPA). Its members provide recreation services to Maine citizens via municipal programs. I'm not sure how the Committee can get connected or if it needs to; but, knowing what is being done throughout Maine by MRPA is easy by becoming a supporting member and receiving their newsletter, MRPA Today. There are also a number of nonprofit organizations that provide recreational opportunities. I'm not sure everyone needs to be together in one committee (most of the organizations have clear missions), but, I do think that all should be aware of the "niches" of the others. Liaisons will then develop as needed. Hopefully, AccessMaine and RATE will provide some of the connections here.

*Recommendations:* The recreation and parks field is huge. No one organization or committee can cover all aspects of it. Awareness of who is doing what and where is important. Currently there is a push by state government (or at least Governor Baldacci) towards tourism, especially nature tourism. Future grants may want to look at outdoor access and helping find/develop some areas that can be used by disabled Mainers and tourists alike (I often use the accessible fishing areas as an example because New Hampshire has done a good job here compared to Maine). Massachusetts received a grant to expand availability of assistive devices such as hand cycles in state parks. A similar model could be used in Maine; or, a grant that increases cycle access by working with towns that have established bike trails may be something to look into. If there were one thing that I'd change in the work done so far, it would be to have a RECREATION/LEISURE tab on the AccessMaine web site. Recreation and leisure, as Josie, so eloquently related to us, is something that is important to quality of life for all persons (including those with disabilities). We humans often develop and/or maintain our social support networks via participation in leisure & recreation activities. We also use recreation as a stress reducer and a change of pace from work. Most importantly, we use recreation as continuing education, as a way to master something (and thus boost self esteem), and as stimulation (both physical and mental). An important addition to AccessMaine would be a self assessment of leisure lifestyle. Free time will make up a huge amount of our lifetimes (even more for persons with disabilities who may not be able to work full time). Few people ever reflect on leisure or what it can do for their quality of life. Some know that they want to do more than work but don't know how to change. Others know that they are bored and that there should be more to life. The self assessment (something recreation therapists often do with clients) might help people better direct themselves. The key to recreating isn't simply doing things, it is finding things that are enjoyable and that meet ones needs while enhancing quality of life.

# ■ Appendices

## Appendix A: Comparison of Projects



# Appendix A: Comparison of Projects

<b>Muskie School Project: Expanding Access to Recreation and Social/Cultural Activities</b>	<b>Committee for Accessible Leisure, Arts and Recreation in Maine</b>
<p><b>Goal:</b> To expand opportunities for integrated recreational, social and cultural activities in Maine for people with disabilities.</p>	<p><b>Goal:</b> To provide a comprehensive list of accessible recreation and cultural activities and lodging facilities.</p>
<p><b>Activities:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish a resource network of recreation facilities, school, and community /municipal program administrators and consumers with disabilities who utilize facilities/programs to identify ways to expand access and utilization.</li> <li>2. Develop and disseminate a web-based Universal Access and Technical Assistance Tool Kit for recreational facilities to improve access. <i>Prototype 1/3, Final 9/3</i></li> <li>3. Work with Portland Connections to learn about the model and facilitate the replication of it in three communities in the State. <i>11/02, 7/03, 5/04</i></li> <li>4. Assemble the information for marketing and distribution in coordination with a consumer-friendly web site that will list accessible recreational, social and cultural facilities and activities along with resource links for facilities. See #2 above. <i>Final 9/04</i></li> </ol>	<p><b>Activities:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish Maine Web page connection to “Guide to Accessible Recreation, Arts &amp; Leisure”. <a href="http://www.state.me.us/living/accessrec/index.html">http://www.state.me.us/living/accessrec/index.html</a></li> <li>2. Review categories of activities, identify other resource sites and establish links.</li> <li>3. Develop a self-assessment survey instrument and protocols for measuring accessibility and ranking Guide sites listed on the web.</li> <li>4. Complete and post the self-assessment survey instrument.</li> <li>5. Collect survey results and evaluate access information.</li> <li>6. Provide technical assistance for survey completion.</li> <li>7. Develop access ranking process/procedures and post results with site information to the web site.</li> <li>8. Expand the categories of recreation, arts and leisure sites and provide access information.</li> <li>9. Oversee and manage the site information.</li> </ol>