

## A “We Don’t Exclude Anyone” Policy is not Enough: Inclusive Service Delivery in Public Recreation

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### **Article:**

In today’s world of an ever-increasing number of wounded veterans, aging baby boomers, and children with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities, a significantly larger number of individuals with disabilities are approaching public recreation providers for services essential for a good quality of life. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates not only that these underserved residents have access to recreation agencies, but that they have opportunities to participate alongside everybody else in the community.

### **TAKEAWAY**

This article offers a definition of inclusive recreation service delivery, challenges the “organizational will” of public recreation agencies to provide more inclusive services, identifies best practices supporting inclusive services, and provides a self-evaluation tool for administrators to rate the agencies in their jurisdictions.

### ***What Is Inclusive Recreation Service Delivery?***

Inclusive recreation service delivery is a service model based on the philosophy that programs and services should be available to all individuals equally, regardless of background, ability, or disability. The primary outcome is social inclusion where participants with and without disabilities participate together successfully, with or without supports, in their chosen activities and locations.

Inclusion requires that individuals with disabilities not only be welcomed to attend programs alongside their peers without disabilities, but also participate so that they gain benefits similar to benefits that are available to everyone else.

### ***Response to ADA in Public Recreation***

It has been more than 20 years since the ADA was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush to ensure the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. The promise of the ADA was to enable all Americans to become fully participating members of society.

That promise is being realized slowly as barriers to education, employment, independent living, and recreation opportunities are falling and perceptions are changing. Substantial progress has been made, but barriers do remain and work still needs to be done.

The most notable progress to date has taken the form of increased physical accessibility. A large number of buildings, sidewalks, parks, and other public facilities are now architecturally accessible. Unfortunately, programmatic accessibility has been lagging. People with disabilities are now able to access their local recreation and fitness centers in a physical sense, but many programs remain inaccessible to them.

Many recreation agencies have demonstrated a somewhat naive response to ADA. When asked whether they include individuals with disabilities in their programs, representatives reply, “We don’t exclude anyone!” Such a minimalist answer does not exude a spirit of welcoming and inclusive opportunities for all.

Agencies that profess to not exclude anyone may go as far as enabling individuals with disabilities to attend their programs, but might not thoughtfully and systematically include them. For successful inclusion to occur, specific accommodations and adaptations are often necessary, although they are rarely provided even if the need exists.

In many cases, the “we don’t exclude anyone” response is not a convoluted attempt to avoid responsibility for adhering to ADA, nor is it a distorted message designed to conceal outright discrimination. To the contrary, it is an example of a “barrier of omission” -that is, a failure to recognize the presence and needs of an underrepresented group. In the face of unprecedented economic pressures, it is more essential than ever for public entities to remain fully committed to the ADA and full inclusion. Two decades of moving persons with disabilities out of second-class citizenship must not be lost.

### *Best Practices in Inclusive Service Delivery*

Although the inclusion of individuals with disabilities is a mandate that warrants attention at the programmatic level, it is accomplished effectively and sustainably only when an entire recreation agency-from top to bottom-supports it. Much still needs to be learned about how to facilitate inclusion, but what is known is that it requires the support of a comprehensive set of administrative practices. Also, agency administrators and managers who prioritize and sustain recreational initiatives need to be committed to the effort.

A recent extensive search for administrative-level approaches used in public recreation agencies across the United States led to the documentation of these practices that were almost always present in agencies with inclusive services:<sup>1</sup>

- Administrative support: establishing inclusion as part of the central mission of the agency and communicating this broadly as an agency priority.
- Hiring practices: designating an inclusion facilitator (for example, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist) with strong skills in bridge-building and communication; also hiring and preparing general recreation staff who endorse the inclusive culture of the agency.
- Budgeting: providing the necessary supports, accommodations, and capital improvements for increased physical access.
- Marketing: advertising inclusive services to a broad audience, including directly to individuals from underrepresented groups.

- Evaluating: setting up a protocol for evaluating programs, supports, and the entire inclusion process.

### *How Does Your Recreation Service Measure Up?*

Based on the practices identified in our nationwide search, we developed a selfevaluation tool to help administrators and managers conduct an assessment of their agency’s use of best practices in support of inclusive service delivery. We encourage you to complete the self-rating scale (see Figure 1) to determine how your agency measures up.

Agencies should strive for a score of 50 points, indicating the full use of administrative best practices to support inclusive service delivery. A score of 40 points indicates the agency has moved beyond the “we don’t exclude anyone” policy and is actively engaged in inclusive service delivery.

The first three items on the scale are relatively easy, but it is the final seven items that set apart the agencies that possess the organizational will to make inclusive service delivery a reality. These items suggest the agency has moved beyond the “talk” and is implementing practices that require careful thought and a genuine interest in reaching underrepresented groups.

So, how did your agency stack up on items 4 through 10? A score of fewer than 25 points on these seven items raises concern; fewer than 20 is a clear indicator that your agency lacks that organizational will to satisfy the mandates of the ADA and is not meeting the needs of your community’s largest minority group.

### *What Can Administrators Do?*

Our research and field experiences have shown that inclusive services become prevalent throughout an agency only after administrators demonstrate their full support. Because

**Figure 1:** Administrative Practices to support Inclusive Recreation Services: A Self-Rating Scale

Directions: Use these ratings (Likert scale) to score your agency on each item: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Uncertain; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree	
PRACTICE	SCORE
1. Our agency’s mission statement is consistent with inclusive service delivery.	
2. Our agency has goals that support inclusive service delivery.	
3. Our agency’s facilities are architecturally accessible.	
4. Our agency’s marketing materials state that individuals with disabilities are welcome to register and participate in all of our programs.	
5. Our agency’s budget includes funds to support and accommodate individuals with disabilities in inclusive settings.	
6. Our agency employs a specific staff member responsible for inclusive service delivery.	
7. Our agency trains recreation programming staff in disability awareness.	
8. Our agency provides training to staff on best practices in inclusion and how to accommodate people with disabilities.	
9. Our agency evaluates our inclusive services.	
10. Our agency has strategies in place to ensure that inclusive service delivery will be part of long-term service delivery.	
Total score:	

administrative policies drive an organization, it is important that they designate inclusion as a priority and communicate this philosophy and program direction throughout the agency's mission and strategic plan.

Administrators need to speak about it with elected officials, staff, and community members and develop agencywide goals reflecting its importance. Administrators must also create organizational will to support inclusion. This requires the investment of time and resources that enable the agency to move beyond "we don't exclude" to actively recruit, engage, support, and socially include people of varying abilities.

A few small, immediate, and visible victories and successes could go a long way toward building systemic and sustainable change in a community's inclusive recreation programming. Results are important; encouragement is rarely enough.

If your agency has the organizational will to begin and sustain inclusion, there are several early actions (and early victories) that could kick-start the process. And this begins with administration. After you present inclusive service delivery as a high priority and integral part of your agency's mission and strategic plan, staff members will likely accept training to learn how to modify environments and programs to serve a broader range of participants. With empathy, understanding, and confidence, the agency can market its services to underrepresented groups. More individuals and families will connect with your agency and ask for access, and this will lead to additional staff training and support.

Although no inclusive program will run smoothly all of the time-there will be times when a participant's skill level doesn't match the activity or the necessary modifications are not available-even small successes will build levels of confidence among staff and participants. This is how success begins: with a will to listen to people who have not previously accessed your agency and then manage the agency to serve them.

### *10 Tips for Effective, Inclusive Service Delivery*

1. Learn what the laws say about including people with disabilities, and incorporate inclusive service delivery into the agency's mission and goals.
2. Market programs to a broad range of community members.
3. Hire a staff member with expertise in accommodating people of varying abilities.
4. Prepare all agency staff to welcome and include people from underserved groups.
5. Be willing and prepared to change the way programs and services are provided.
6. Designate an adequate budget to provide necessary accommodations for participants when needed.
7. Communicate in an ongoing manner with family members of participants with disabilities.
8. Carry out continuous evaluation of inclusive services and the inclusion process.
9. Incorporate strategies to sustain inclusion efforts.
10. "Walk the walk!"

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> S. J. Schleien, K. D. Miller, and M. Shea, "Search for Best Practices in Inclusive Recreation: Preliminary Findings." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 27, no. 1 (2009): 17-34.

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