

Statement by Gary M. Robb, Executive Director, Indiana University's National Center on Accessibility, before the Subcommittee on National Parks, House Committee on Resources, regarding the status of Accessibility for people with disabilities in the National Park Service

May 11, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss accessibility for people with disabilities in the National Park Service.

The National Center on Accessibility-National Park Service Partnership

The National Center on Accessibility (NCA) is a Center of Indiana University's Department of Recreation and Park Administration in the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. The Center was created in 1992 under a Cooperative Agreement with the Accessibility Management Program of the National Park Service (NPS). The funding provided by NPS under the Cooperative Agreement, currently \$272,000 per year, provides just under 50% of the operating budget for NCA.

The NCA is committed to the full participation of people with disabilities in parks, recreation, and tourism. Through its comprehensive services of research, technical assistance, and education, we focus on universal design and practical accessibility solutions that create inclusive recreation opportunities for people of all abilities.

TRAINING

Since 1992, NCA has:

- Offered 121 training courses, often in or near national parks, in all parts of the country
- Been attended by over 1500 NPS employees and concession operators.
- Offered distance learning via satellite, the internet and CD's.

The training programs for NPS personnel have focused on topics such as retrofitting of park facilities, designing media for accessibility/exhibits, comprehensive accessibility planning and universal design. We also provide both classroom and hands-on-training on subjects such as trails, campgrounds, and picnic and visitor services.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

On-going technical assistance is provided to the NPS through telephone conversations, technical reports, a state of the art and up to date website, emails, newsletters, videos, and onsite assessments and consultation. Our technical assistance focuses on assisting NPS personnel in order to meet the requirements of the Architectural Barriers Act and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. NCA also provides outreach technical assistance and training programs to state and municipal recreation land management agencies on compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

RESEARCH

NCA conducts and facilitates research on issues critical to accessibility in the NPS. In conjunction with NCA research partners at other Universities (such as Minnesota, Tennessee and Georgia); our research has helped shape the development of national policy and accessibility standards. Included are:

- A swimming pool accessibility study for the U.S. Access Board resulting in the development of accessibility standards (ABAAS)
- Performance of assistive mobility devices and temporary surfaces for beach access;
- Effectiveness of surface treatments to create accessible trails.
- Functional aspects of accessible picnic elements;
- Activity of people with disabilities in the National Survey of Recreation and the Environment;
- Assessment of visitor expectations and perceptions in outdoor developed areas; and
- Campground accessibility policies and practices.

Our research is based on questions that are received directly from the parks and where study is required to assist the parks in making affordable and practical decisions on creating better access. As an example, our study on Visitor Expectations and Perceptions of Program and Physical Accessibility in the National Park Service was conducted on site at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Blue Ridge Parkway, Shenandoah National Park, Mammoth Cave National Park, and Hot Springs National Park. Similarly, our current national research on accessible trail surface alternatives is a result of the

high volume of questions that we received from National Park staff on this issue.

Impact

The National Center on Accessibility constantly seeks feedback on the value and impact of its services. In 1995, our first impact study revealed that 100% of the survey respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with our services. More importantly, 97% reported that the services that they received from NCA had had at least a moderate impact on their ability to serve people with disabilities. This level of impact was consistent in responses to questions about NCA research, training, and technical assistance. In 2002, the Indiana University Center for Survey Research conducted a telephone survey of NCA training program participants for the preceding five year period. Once again the survey results were encouraging with over 85% of the respondents indicating that the training program that they had attended had improved their attitudes towards accessibility and towards people with disabilities; and over 75% indicated that as a result, they had been able to initiate more physical access to their facilities. However, just over 50% indicated that they had made any improvements or progress in program accessibility. The latter is significant, in that an earlier study conducted by NCA in 1999 had indicated a general lack of understanding of program accessibility among NPS respondents. In 2005, Quality Values, Inc. conducted a six month online survey to determine how many training participants in a trails accessibility course had been able to actually implement information learned in the course. Over 80% of the survey respondents had been able to use course information at their park within six months of the training.

ONSITE VISITATIONS AND ASSISTANCE

In addition to our training, technical assistance, and research activities, NCA has provided more in-depth onsite accessibility assistance to over 45 National Park Service units. Examples of this assistance include:

- Home of FDR -NCA participated as the accessibility expert in a Value Analysis to determine the best method of making the second floor of the Home of FDR accessible to visitors with disabilities.
- Trail of Tears Museum, Cherokee Cultural Heritage Center, Tahlequah, OK
- We provided advice on Universal Design and accessibility throughout the planning, design, fabrication and completion of the exhibition. This project received a national media award by the National Association of Interpretation in 2001.
- Gulf Islands National Seashore- was requested to advise the Gulf Islands NS Wayside Project team on the outdoor exhibits and waysides as a part of the hurricane recovery process.
- Yosemite NP – We participated as the accessibility consultant on the Yosemite Valley Visitors Center Exhibit Hall planning process, and provided accessibility advice to the exhibit contractor. Yosemite is currently in the process of contracting for the rehabilitation of the Exhibit Hall that will include accessibility features.
- Bandelier NM – NCA provided accessibility advice on the Park's museum rehabilitation project. Bandelier has since rehabilitated the museum and has included accessibility in both physical and programmatic areas.
- Petroglyph National Monument - We provided accessibility advice to the park staff on the long range planning for both physical and programmatic aspects of the park's future plans. The park has since made exhibit modifications that include accessibility and are currently developing an audio described video.
- Chaco Culture NHP – Site Evaluation providing recommendations & guidance for accessibility in a historic and culturally sensitive site.
- Cape Hatteras National Seashore has, as a result of a complaint, and consultation by NCA, developed more disability friendly policies for visitors to the light house. NCA training of Seashore staff has resulted in new policies that have translated into improved visitor experiences according to management.
- Natchez National Historic Park has made major accessibility improvements to the grounds, mansion, and exhibits and as a result has received two accessibility awards for the changes made.
- Harpers Ferry Center – NCA has been instrumental in the development of the large print format brochure for the C & O Canal NHP.

What are the major current needs on accessibility in the NPS?

Significant strides have been made in recent years, particularly in the area of physical accessibility. However, there is still much more to be done to ensure park visitors with disabilities have the same benefit of the services available to visitors without disabilities. With the appropriate resources, we believe that we could assist the Park Service in the future to accelerate accessibility improvements in the following ways:

- As we identified in both our 1999 and 2002 studies cited earlier, a major need is for NPS Managers to insure that accessibility is built into all new construction plans as well as in all retrofitting and rehabilitation projects. All designs and projects require oversight and supervision by someone with knowledge of accessibility design and alteration standards. We believe that training for design and construction personnel may greatly increase the assurance that accessibility will be included in all such projects.
- The development of policies and guidelines for new or renovated exhibits and other media such as captioning, audio description, assistive listening systems, maps and models should be developed to insure that any new or renovated exhibit is accessible. This should be a priority, and NCA can assist the NPS by providing training for exhibit designers and consultation with NPS Harpers Ferry staff. It is clear that NPS managers have an understanding of the standards under the Architectural Barriers Act but lack the same understanding of the requirements for program access of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, Section 504. In most instances, the NPS depends on exhibit design contractors to insure exhibit accessibility and they also lack the knowledge and understanding of Section 504.
- As the NPS continues to conduct comprehensive condition assessments on its assets, it is imperative that accessibility deficiencies be identified in those assessments. NCA could assist in this regard by mobilizing assessment teams, as well as continue to provide training for NPS managers so that they are equipped to complete the assessments.

While physical accessibility remains a major need throughout the National Park system, programmatic accessibility should be treated with equal concern. It appears that many NPS units do not fully understand programmatic accessibility. Program accessibility is not as tangible as physical accessibility but is just as important. NPS staff has major difficulties in understanding and incorporating programmatic accessibility into their planning process. We are encouraged that more and more parks are contacting us for assistance in this area, but the lack of understanding and overall concern for making exhibits, interpretive programs and audio visual presentations remains.

On a personal note, I had the opportunity to spend several days during the summer of 2005 in three western states National Parks. I had the opportunity to speak with park staff in each park and to review accessibility features while there. In general, I found that there was an absence of accessible exhibits and audio visual programs in each park. Accessible wayside features were rare. In talking with NPS staff, they did not seem to have extensive knowledge of program accessibility, did not know if their visitor center videos were captioned or audio described and couldn't find or didn't know how to use them when they did. There was a lack of knowledge and concern among NPS staff that I spoke with in each park, regarding the priority for accessibility. I was also aware that at one park, little progress had been made in addressing a 1999 accessibility audit report from the NPS Accessibility Management Program staff, which was conducted as a result of a formal complaint.

Conclusion

In closing, it should be noted that the status of accessibility in the National Park Service is not unlike other federal, state or local recreation land management agencies. Across the board, at all levels, park and recreation professionals are challenged with creating access and retrofitting facilities and unique recreation environments with limited resources, budgets, and staff expertise. Thousands of visitors with disabilities to national, state and even neighborhood parks have directly benefited over the last 14 years from the cooperative agreement between the NPS and Indiana University. But there is still more to do. Through continued support and partnerships such as this, the NPS, as one of the largest stewards of public lands in the world, can persevere and accelerate its accessibility initiatives and continue to serve as an accessibility management model to other recreation land management entities.