

Oral Testimony of Nancy Starnes

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Oversight Hearing on Disability Access in the National Park System

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Chairman Pearce, Ranking Member Christensen and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, thank you for conducting an oversight hearing on disability access in the National Park System and providing the National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.) with an opportunity to comment on this important topic. My name is Nancy Starnes and I am Vice President and Chief of Staff for the National Organization on Disability. As a person who has used a wheelchair for 33 years, I have both a personal and professional interest in the subject of today's hearings.

N.O.D. is a non-partisan, non-profit disability organization founded in 1982 as an outgrowth of the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons. N.O.D. is a national organization whose mission is to promote the participation of America's 54 million men, women and children with disabilities in all aspects of community life.

Over the course of the past 18 years, N.O.D. has commissioned a number of Harris Interactive Surveys to measure the quality of life of people with disabilities on a wide range of critical dimensions, to document the participation gaps between people with and without disabilities and to develop trend lines over time to measure progress in eliminating those gaps. The significant indicators include: employment, income, education, health care, access to transportation, socializing, going to restaurants, attendance at religious services, political participation and life satisfaction. The data from the surveys suggest that some progress is being made, but that people with disabilities still remain at a disadvantage in most of these areas.

Two of the statistics from the *2004 N.O.D./Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities* bear particular relevance to today's hearing:

- Socializing: The statistical gap between those with and those without disabilities is 10 percentage points. This gap has increased slightly since 1994. National Parks provide opportunities for people

with disabilities to interact with a wide range of individuals in a natural setting that offers physical challenges and rewards perseverance. Vacation memories from a National Park Service experience can be the source inspiration for a lifetime.

- Transportation: Thirty percent of people with disabilities are much more likely to experience inadequate transportation than are their non-disabled counterparts. Even as many of the physical barriers to National Parks and other public places have become less burdensome or disappeared altogether, transportation remains the key to being able to take full advantage of the opportunities the advances afford people with disabilities.

On January 25, 1999, the National Organization on Disability entered into a partnership agreement with the U.S Department of the Interior, National Park Service to conduct a fund raising campaign for artwork at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial that would provide recognition of President Roosevelt's leadership while in a wheelchair. N.O.D.'s five year "Rendezvous with Destiny Campaign" inspired large- and small-scale donors from across the country to raise \$1.65 million in private funds to add the statue of FDR in his wheelchair that now adorns the prologue to the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC. The first donation of \$378.50 was personally raised by children of Lindbergh Elementary School in Palisades Park, New Jersey and delivered to N.O.D.'s Founder and then president, Alan A. Reich. The "Rendezvous with Destiny Campaign" culminated in a dedication ceremony for the statue at which President Clinton said, "This is a monument to freedom—the power of every man and woman to transcend circumstance, to laugh in the face of fate, to make the most of what God has given." The FDR Memorial is just one of the many stars in our National Park System that calls visitors, including those with disabilities, to remember and celebrate the life, dignity and freedom that of our American way of life represents.

We at N.O.D. hear from time to time that people with disabilities are facing barriers to access in the National Park System. From the first designation by the National Park System of Yellowstone in 1782 to the most recent designation, Great Sand Dunes in 2000, the incorporation of accessibility features into parks, monuments, trails and historic sites has encouraged visits by more and more people. With each generation since Yellowstone was designated as a National Park, people with disabilities have grown in their expectation that these wonderful national treasures would be accessible to them. Today, these sites offer recreation and education opportunities for people of all ages and all abilities.

“Barrier-free” and “universal design” concepts applied to facilities, trails and historic sites in our National Park System ensure the broadest use by people with disabilities whether they are visiting unaccompanied or with additional visitors who provide support as family, friends or professional caregivers.

“People with wheelchairs are somewhat an indicator of the species—if you provide for them, you accommodate a lot of other park users,” said landscape architect Mike Brown at a 1992 Statewide Trails Conference. He continued, “All of us have been or will be at some time dependent on others, needing help to get around. So barrier-free design helps all of us.”

The National Park System has been recognized 10 times for its accessible features but more can be done to address the barriers some people with disabilities face. As an example, one individual reported to N.O.D. that he could not access some National Parks because of a rule barring motorized vehicles from passing beyond the parking area. He was not able to use his wheelchair to reach the interior site some distance from the parking area and had to rely on his van to get to his destination. The increasing use of Segways by individuals with mobility impairments raises additional issues regarding restrictions of wheeled vehicles in National Park sites. Other areas for improvement include providing printed information in alternate formats, i.e. large print, Braille and audio cassette. Braille was used at the FDR Memorial as a visual component of the site but was not accurately produced, and may send an unintended message to those who are blind.

In addition, research conducted in 2001 by the University of Tennessee for the National Center on Accessibility regarding National Parks revealed the following areas of concern for visitors with disabilities:

- Lack of sufficient accessible parking
- Lack of accessible restroom facilities
- Lack of access to utilities and drinking water
- Lack of access to storage, trash and recycling areas
- Lack of accessible to trails, overlooks and viewing areas
- Lack of accessible camping facilities
- Lack of access to the Visitors Center
- Lack of curb cuts

N.O.D.’s Accessible America Competition encourages local government of any size to enter their best practices ideas that promote the participation of people with disabilities in their city, town or county. Many of the 150 entrants who have vied for the designation as America’s most “disability-friendly community” have proudly pointed to the important role that their parks and recreation programs play in integrating people with disabilities into community life. We at the National Organization on Disability believe that our National Park System should do the same thing.

Thank you, on behalf of the National Organization on Disability, for the invitation to appear before you today. We applaud the dedicated individuals who are elected, appointed or employed to bring the National Park experience to everyone and are ready to work with them to address instances where people with disabilities face barriers to the Park System. I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you might have.