

Something for Everyone

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Article:

Some 150 years ago, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned New York's Central Park as a green oasis where people of all walks of life, regardless of community standing or socioeconomic status, could escape the bustle of the city. Today, recreation professionals are tasked with a common goal: Provide active pursuits to all users, regardless of ability level.

Across the nation, many agencies have risen to this challenge, implementing best practices in inclusive service delivery. Surprisingly—or perhaps not—the elite have established their position by adapting these practices to their particular agencies and communities. Just as accommodations for people with disabilities are made individually, public recreation agencies must personalize their inclusive service delivery practices according to their structures and processes, as well as the needs and interests of the communities they serve.

Three agencies in Eugene, Oregon; Groton, Connecticut; and Durham, North Carolina, are experiencing Noteworthy success at providing inclusive services, implementing best practices in an innovative manner tailored to their agencies and to their communities.

Staff Who Get It

Nestled halfway between the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade Range, Eugene, Oregon, offers a wealth of recreation options throughout the year. City policymakers recognize that being involved in meaningful leisure activities has a positive and profound impact on the lives of people with disabilities. They also believe that residents—with or without disabilities—deserve the right to choose how they spend their free time.

Some 144,000 people rely on Eugene Recreation Services, an agency that offers the community hundreds of classes, programs, and activities. It formed its Adaptive Recreation Division in 1969, urged by a group of local parents and influenced by the University of Oregon's special education department.

The city put its inclusion policy into writing in 1980. That same year, Molly Elliott joined the team as a certified therapeutic recreation specialist as well as an inclusion specialist. “It's important to look at people not as a deficit or a problem, but as having assets,” says Elliott, recipient of NRPA's Meritorious Service Award. “We're trying to increase their assets.”

It is integral to the goals and philosophy of the department that each employee works toward inclusion. From the beginning, the hiring process involves determining potential employees' disability awareness and asking situational questions to gauge how well they will serve participants with and without disabilities. While most inclusion takes place in camps during the summer months, each employee hired by the recreation division receives basic inclusion training.

Eugene Recreation Services represents a decentralized organizational structure for accommodating participants with disabilities, which empowers employees by giving them control in the provision of services. This kind of

structure allows decision-making and the communication of ideas to flow from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

"The great thing is that I'm directly involved in supporting only two out of the 42 kids requesting assistance in summer camp," says Elliott. "Everyone is managing the inclusion services within their respective program areas. This is incredible for our organization."

Sharing the Message

With a population of approximately 41,000, Groton, Connecticut, offers its residents such activities as outdoor education, gymnastics, teen programs, aquatics, and various camps and trips. All are also made available by Groton Parks and Recreation for people with disabilities.

Inclusive recreation has been an important part of Groton's programming for almost a decade, starting with a single program. Today, it extends throughout the department.

Presented in 2005 with the National Institute on Recreation Inclusion's Excellence in Inclusion Award, the agency supports a unique approach to inclusion that is rooted in sharing success stories. Each season, the department publishes a program guide, *Discover*, which describes the activities and programs available to the general community. A cover story about the successful inclusion of an individual with a disability is published in at least one edition. Sharing success stories has been an effective way for the entire community to see and hear about the department's efforts in making inclusion a reality.

I Do Your Job, You Do Mine

Located in the beautiful central region of North Carolina, the Durham Parks and Recreation Department serves a city of some 250,000 residents. Almost 100 staff and an operating budget of more than \$1.5 million allows the agency to provide a variety of activities and programs, ensuring that its facilities and services address the recreational needs of all participants.

The history of Durham Parks and Recreation's inclusive services dates back to the late 1980s, when patrons were encouraged to seek out inclusive opportunities at only two of the agency's existing facilities. Today, participants can choose from all 11 facilities and receive the inclusive services they desire. "We will serve anybody anywhere," says director Rhonda Parker. "We will make support available to help anyone succeed in any program."

Inclusion is no easy task, and it can require additional staff and resources. Ensuring that every participant receives the *same* opportunities can be time-consuming and labor intensive. Why has Durham gone through considerable expense and effort to offer inclusive services? "We believe it to be the best practice," says Sarah Hogan, Durham recreation manager. "All people benefit when no one is left out."

To reach this level, the agency has taken its staff-preparation techniques one step further. In addition to training sessions covering the basics of disability etiquette, sensitivity; and awareness, the agency has developed a practice it refers to as staff-swapping. Durham's general program staff has the opportunity, with supervisor approval, to swap positions with a staff member working with specialized programs serving only participants with disabilities.

Here's how it works: A staff member from the athletics unit could spend one week working in a therapeutic summer camp program for youth with significant disabilities, and the inclusion professional would jump to athletics. This swap allows staff, who in the past may have had limited exposure to participants with disabilities, to gain awareness and sensitivity as well as acquire important skills through hands-on experience.

Although the experience may offer a support role in a segregated program rather than a truly inclusive setting, it provides staff a tremendous opportunity to interact with, communicate with, and serve participants with disabilities.

The common thread these three agencies share—beyond the use of best practices that enable them to accommodate individuals of varying abilities—is the real commitment of all agency staff to continue to focus on the need for—and the delivery of—equal services for all community members. But perhaps what is most intriguing is that the cities of Eugene, Groton, and Durham have proven unequivocally that inclusive service delivery is both feasible and achievable.