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# Search for Best Practices in Inclusive Recreation Phase One Report

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## Background

In its adoption of a "Position Statement of Inclusion," the National Recreation and Park Association made a clear statement on the value of inclusive service delivery (ISD) to participants with and without disabilities and the broader community. Numerous professional practices designed to facilitate inclusive community recreation have been developed, field-tested, and disseminated. Despite major federal disability rights legislation and broad dissemination of these inclusive practices, they are not commonly practiced in most community recreation agencies. This technical report presents results from the first phase of a comprehensive, qualitative research project designed to study best practices (i.e., administrative, programmatic, and consumer levels) that result in inclusive and sustainable community recreation.

Through interviews with field leaders and extensive reviews of published reports and relevant literature, a list of agencies perceived to be providing exemplary ISD was generated. Criteria based on promising practices (see Table 1) were established and the sample agency group was fine-tuned to 15 agencies representing a wide range of geographic regions and community sizes (see Table 2). Interviews were conducted with 8 administrators and 14 inclusion facilitators across the 15 agencies using a semi-structured interview guide of concepts informed by the review of literature. Content analysis of the data from each agency was conducted and compared across agencies for across-case analyses. The primary theme emerging from the data was that a "cookie-cutter" approach to ISD did not exist. While "promising" practices were used in these exemplary agencies, the implementation and interpretation of these approaches varied widely. A description of these approaches follows.

Table 1

Criteria Used to Establish Sample Agency Group

Criteria	
1	Agency mission reflected a welcoming philosophy of all citizens in the jurisdiction
2	Agency had designated an employee to facilitate inclusive service delivery
3	Agency's inclusive practices and services were systemic
4	Agency had been providing inclusive service delivery for at least 5 years

Table 2

Distribution of Public Recreation Agencies Meeting Criteria Across Geographic NRPA Region & Population

Agency #	NRPA Region	Population*
1	Mid-Atlantic	263,000
2	Pacific Southwest	478,000
3	Mid-Atlantic	802,000
4	Southern	2,253,000
5	Great Lakes	331,000
6	New England	40,000
7	Pacific Southwest	180,000
8	Midwest	95,000
9	Pacific Northwest	138,000
10	Great Lakes	55,000
11	Great Lakes	69,000
12	Southern	187,000
13**	Great Lakes	8,600 – 31,000
14**	Great Lakes	9,000 – 128,000
15**	Great Lakes	3,000 – 69,000

\* Based on 2000 Census Data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001)

\*\* Inclusion facilitator shared by recreation agencies of neighboring communities

# Administrative Practices

### Administrator Principles/Values

- Viewed recreation as a right, and not a privilege
- Viewed inclusion broadly, including underrepresented populations of all types
- Considered inclusion as consistent with the overall mission of the agency
- Considered inclusion as an aspect of quality customer service
- Spoke frequently of the agency's commitment to inclusion when addressing policymakers, community groups, employees, etc.
- Generated agency support for inclusion from "top-to-bottom," including policymakers, administrators, middle managers, programmers, program assistants, office staff, maintenance and janitors, etc.
- Fostered an agency culture that was welcoming and accommodating and that had changed its mindset from inclusion being a mandate of the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) toward a genuine desire and commitment to serving all community members

### Agency Goals

- Agency-wide goals specific to ISD were established
- Goals related to ISD were written into strategic plans and master plans
- Many had resolutions on public record documenting community policymakers' continued support and funding of ISD

### Hiring Practices

- *Hiring or designating a staff member to serve as an inclusion facilitator (IF)*
  - IF workloads:
    - Only 3 of the inclusion facilitators devoted 100% time to inclusion; 2 of which worked within a cooperative structure where they facilitated inclusion in multiple neighboring agencies and communities (see "Organizational Structure" section)
    - 12 inclusion facilitators also had other responsibilities related to the facilitation and coordination of therapeutic/specialized/adapted programming
  - 86% of the IF's were Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists
  - Typical roles of the IF:
    - Informed policy review and development as it relates to ISD and the ADA
    - Informed planning and development of new construction and refurbishment projects on ADA code, as well as necessary considerations that go beyond ADA code, allowing for greater access and inclusion
    - Agency's primary contact on ISD matters
    - Assessed participants with disabilities
    - Developed individualized accommodation plans
    - Provided staff training and support
    - Evaluated ISD

- IF skill sets:
  - Knowledge on disability and accommodations
  - Knowledge of ADA requirements
  - Programming skills (to assist general programmers with improved programming strategies that foster inclusion)
  - Proficiencies in bridge-building, communication, and collaboration
- *Hiring considerations for general recreation staff*
  - Sought job candidates with experience engaging participants with disabilities to fill general programming positions
  - Job descriptions of general recreation positions included responsibilities for including participants with disabilities (especially those of part-time, seasonal, or temporary employees)
  - Job candidates were informed of the agency's expectations related to inclusion and asked questions about inclusion during job interview
  - Contractual service agreements (e.g., program instructors) reflected the expectation of compliance with the ADA and inclusion
- *Preparing staff*
  - Provided training to all staff (including administrators, office staff, janitors, and maintenance staff)
  - New hires were provided with information on the agency's philosophy and expectations in regard to ISD, disability awareness and etiquette, roles of the IF and general recreation staff, and agency inclusion processes
  - More technical aspects on inclusion and accommodations (e.g., participant-specific needs) were typically offered to staff only after a participant with a disability had already registered to participate in the program

### Organizational Structure

Three organizational structures for ISD were identified

- *Cooperative structure:* 20% of agencies used a cooperative arrangement between neighboring small communities for a shared IF
  - Cooperative consisted typically of communities with less than 50,000 residents
  - Cooperatives involved four to nine communities
  - 66% of cooperatives funded originally by grant funds, continued by annual contributions from each recreation agency to the salary and budget of the shared IF
  - 33% of cooperatives funded through specialized tax levies
- *Centralized structure:* The remaining 80% of agencies began with a centralized structure for ISD, involving the creation of a separate inclusion unit or one falling under a therapeutic/specialized/adapted recreation division
  - All ISD matters sent directly to the inclusion unit
  - Staff of inclusion unit processed assessments, developed accommodation plans, and implemented accommodation strategies
  - Currently common in communities with populations between 50,000 to 150,000

- *Decentralized structure:* Of the 80% of agencies that began with a centralized structure, 42% evolved into a decentralized structure, in which inclusion staff were assigned to other units within the department, working alongside program staff with shared programming responsibilities in addition to supporting ISD for participants with disabilities

### Budget

- Initial funding for inclusion came from general operating funds and/or specific tax fund sources, and in a few cases, external grant funding
- In cooperative agreements, each agency with access to the IF paid into a pool of funds used to support the IF
- Line-item in budget had been established specifically to support inclusion, typically 3 – 5% of the agency’s operating budget
- Additional funds to support inclusion were often established by adding an additional charge to the registration of all participants and funds from self-sustaining programs

### Physical and Programmatic Accessibility

- Proactive in addressing physical and programmatic accessibility
- Policies and practices under constant review by IF to ensure accessibility
- Attorney or risk manager representing the municipal body played a significant role in assuring that the agency’s policies and practices were consistent with the ADA
- Strategies for addressing physical and programmatic accessibility included:
  - Formation of a within-agency advisory council, including representatives from each of their units and a CTRS that convened monthly to address programmatic and physical accessibility concerns that arose and to develop overall ISD policies and practices
  - Formation of a group to address programmatic and physical accessibility, but only when the need arose, and included agency representatives from relevant units, the administrator, inclusion facilitator, and county attorney

### Marketing

- *Inclusion statement:* Appeared in all printed and electronic materials, samples include:
  - The benefits of recreation participation are provided to every resident in the XXX area, including those with and without disabilities. Please let us know when you register if you need assistance to participate due to a disability, or call [contact person] to discuss your participation.
  - The City of XXX proudly supports the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you are in need of program modification, please contact the program supervisor 2 weeks prior to the program start date.
  - XXX continues its commitment to serving County residents and visitors with disabilities. In compliance with the intent and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act, our commitment is to ensure accessible programs and services for County residents.

- *Program guide:* Availability of inclusion supports presented in multiple locations within the program guide, including with registration information, on the registration form (both paper and electronic), and on pages dedicated to services provided specifically for participants with disabilities
- A story on a successful inclusion experience was often included in the program guide and newsletters
- *Direct marketing:* IF's spoke with parent groups, advocacy groups, school classes and teachers, and service providers to market the availability of ISD
- *Word of mouth:* Primary form of advertising
- Improved marketing was cited as a continuing need across agencies

#### Agency ISD Evaluation

- Program evaluation and participant counts are the only measures being used

# Programmatic Practices

### Program Registration

- Registration forms provide an opportunity to indicate a need for accommodations
- Registrations indicating a need for accommodation kick-start a process, some more formal than others, for identifying and addressing people's accommodation needs; in all cases the first step entailed an individualized assessment
- Approximately 50% of the agencies created and maintained files on participants documenting their support needs

### Individualized Assessment

- Conducted by IF or inclusion staff
- Typically involved a phone or in-person interview with parents and/or participant
- Additional strategies included:
  - Questionnaire or profile completed by parent/participant
  - Communication with teachers, case managers, and/or specialists
  - Observation of participant in school setting
- Information gathered included: Health and safety information, cognitive and social abilities, behaviors and behavior plans, participant's likes/dislikes, fears, sensitivities, adaptive equipment, and in some cases, information on activities of daily living (ADLs) and augmentative communication

### Accommodation Plan

- Based on assessment data, a plan was designed that outlined specific accommodations and supports agency would provide and responsibilities of other parties (i.e., parents, care providers); often a formal written document
- Behavioral plans tended to be more formal, some even requiring signatures of all parties involved (e.g., parents, IF, program staff)
- Accommodation plans were shared with program staff prior to the individual's participation in the program

### Adaptations/Accommodations

- Agencies were willing to make adaptations and purchase adaptive equipment
- Expensive adaptive equipment seldom needed
- *Inclusion Support Staff*
  - Most common accommodation used
  - Increased staffing in program (i.e., lowering participant-to-staff ratio) or provision of a one-to-one support
  - Primary role was to provide individualized support based on identified needs to ensure successful and safe participation by all participants
    - Provided additional prompts, physical guidance, and assistance with acquisition of leisure skills
    - Provided assistance with social skills and interaction with peers
    - Facilitated communication between parents and general programmers
  - Depending on agency structure, either hired and paid by inclusion unit or program unit
    - Even if hired by program unit, IF played key role in interviewing and making employment recommendations/decisions

- Provided with extensive training by IF, including
  - Expectations of position, behavior management, health issues, adaptations, administrative policies relevant to inclusion, providing program structure, cooperative games, facilitating interaction and encouraging friendships, and characteristics specific to particular disabilities
  - Information specific to assigned participant's support needs
- Successful teamwork between general program staff and trainer advocates correlated with the provision of same training for both types of staff, side-by-side
- Fading of trainer advocates encouraged as inclusion efforts met success
- Pay differential between wages of inclusion support staff and general programmers was eliminated to support greater teamwork
- 13% of agencies did not hire inclusion support staff; instead hired additional general program staff to reduce participant-to-staff ratios
- *Other adaptation examples*
  - Sign language interpreters, alternative formats for printed material, picture schedules and communication boards, provision of space with low stimulus for "cooling off," changes to teaching styles, adapted materials (e.g., lighter balls, paintbrushes with large handles, grip gloves for fitness center), adaptations to activity rules or procedures, and financial assistance through scholarships

#### Personal Care

- 50% of agencies provided personal care; same agencies provided personal care in segregated/therapeutic/adaptive programming
- If not providing personal care, agency policy stipulated that a personal care attendant or family member could accompany participant in program to provide such care with no additional registration fee

#### Specialized Training for Program Staff

- Provided on an "as needed" basis after an individual requiring inclusion supports registered for a program
- Specific to the individual's needs and the accommodation supports that were deemed most helpful in creating a successful experience for the participants
- IF's often visited programs and modeled facilitation techniques that support ISD for the program staff to see and acquire

#### Preparing Nondisabled Peers

- Most agencies provided on an "as needed" basis (e.g., visual evidence of a participant being rejected by peers, when other participants were asking questions indicating a need for clarification and recognition of individual differences); a formal part of the inclusion process in only 13% agencies
- Most commonly conducted in lengthier programs (e.g., summer day camp) that provided multiple peer interaction opportunities

### Facilitating Peer Interaction (i.e., social inclusion)

- 3 strategies described
  - *Physical integration*: Physical proximity and physical involvement in activity even if continuous prompts, redirection, and hand-over-hand assistance is necessary
  - *Peer empowerment*: Solicited assistance of nondisabled peers in helping a participant with a disability become involved in activity
  - *Social skill* development: Participants with disabilities were assisted by inclusion support staff in learning basic social skills, such as introducing oneself, taking turns, sharing materials, etc.

### Documentation

- In agencies with more formal processes for inclusion (i.e., maintaining files on each participant receiving inclusion supports, including assessment data and written accommodation plans), documentation was also a formal part of the process
- Documentation included staff notations concerning participants' levels of success using different accommodations, behavioral notes, and in a select few cases, observed participant outcomes

### Program Evaluation

- Evaluation of ISD conducted along with program evaluations
- Questionnaires completed by participants and/or parents of participants with disabilities, general recreation program staff, inclusion support staff
  - Evaluated perceptions of inclusion process, accommodations provided, success of accommodations, additional training needs, and program outcomes
  - Often experienced difficulties in collecting parent evaluation forms – few parents actually completed evaluations