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Looking Beyond The Obvious

Many of our visitors or potential visitors face physical or cognitive challenges that can inhibit their enjoyment of our sites. In recent years, many agencies and organizations have made great efforts to remove barriers, particularly those that are in violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). Accessibility guidelines have been written and implemented, and interpreters are often on the front lines of ensuring that our sites and programs are accessible. However, many challenges that visitors face are not readily apparent, and as such, may not be adequately addressed.

Accessibility guidelines do a good job at addressing obvious disabilities. They provide guidance on wheelchair passage, font size and contrast, and the use of assistive listening devices. However, these address only a small fraction of the challenges that people face. There are numerous disabilities that are not obvious to casual observers, but when we look at the statistics, it is clear that many of our visitors – on our hikes, at our visitor centers, in our school programs – face some sort of challenge.

Statistics:
- One in five Americans has a disability[1]
- One in ten Americans has a severe disability[2]
- One in eight American children ages 6-14 has a disability[3]
- One in two American seniors ages 65 and older has a disability[4]

The less obvious disabilities are often, although not always, cognitive. Common 'hidden' disabilities include: ADHD, which affects 5-10% of American children[5] and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), which impacts 5-15% of American children, some of whom may also have co-occurring conditions such as ADHD or an Autism

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[1] http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97pubs/cenbr975.pdf
[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid
[4] Ibid
[5] http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html, accessed 3/28/2014

Spectrum Disorder (ASD). [6] These conditions can also affect adults. A common physical disability that may not be readily apparent is arthritis, which afflicts 20% of Americans, mostly seniors, but some younger people too. [7]

Lastly, while not considered a disability under the ADA, lack of English language skills is a challenge faced by one in twenty people living in the United States. [8] In California, one in five school children is considered an English Language Learner. (1.346 million children)[9],[10].

Other common conditions covered under the ADA that may not be readily apparent include: depression, visual impairments such as red-green color blindness or partial loss of vision, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, dyslexia, cancer, etc.

From just these few examples, we can see that there are needs among our visitors that we may not be meeting.

The session presented at the NAI Region 9 Spring 2014 conference will, after reviewing some of these basics, be largely an audience-driven discussion. The goal is for session participants to brainstorm and share ideas for addressing some of these less-obvious accessibility issues. As a starting point for the discussion, and as a reference for those who are reading this but were unable to attend the session, I have provide a brief list regarding some of the conditions mentioned above. To learn more about improving accessibility in general, particularly in exhibits, visit California State Parks, the National Park Service, the Smithsonian, or US Forest Service for their accessibility guidelines.

Some techniques to address common "hidden" challenges among visitors
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Give plenty of warning about transitions
- Give clear directions
- Provide tasks to do (e.g. help with demonstrations or by holding or fetching props)
- Offer opportunities for movement or to touch things
- Create a quiet space or nook where a person can go to regroup when over-stimulated.

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[6] http://www.ucsf.edu/news/2013/07/107316/breakthrough-study-reveals-biological-basis-sensory-processing-disorders-kidsi, accessed 3/28/014
[7] http://www.arthritis.org/files/images/newsroom/Arthritis_Prevalence_Fact_Sheet_5-31-11.pdf, accessed 3/28/2014
[8] http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-22.pdf, accessed 3/28/2014
[9] http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/cefelfacts.asp, accessed 3/28/2014
[10] http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/cefenrollgradetype.asp, accessed 3/28/2014

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)
- Give plenty of warning about transitions
- Provide sufficient space, e.g. in visitor centers, so that people aren't bumping into each other
- Create a quiet space or nook where a person can go to regroup when over-stimulated.
- Provide spaces, e.g. a simulated tree log, for crawling through or refuge
- If your center gets loud, consider supplying earmuffs/earplugs or having them for sale in the visitor center.

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)
- Offer opportunities for movement or to touch things
- Create a quiet space or nook where a person can go to regroup when over-stimulated.
- Provide spaces, e.g. a simulated tree log, for crawling through or refuge
- If your center gets loud, consider supplying earmuffs/earplugs or having them for sale in the visitor center.

Arthritis
- Make exhibits with moving parts easy to manipulate. Do not design things that require a strong grip or great finger dexterity (unless it is an integral part of the exhibit).

Language challenges (English language learners, foreign visitors, dyslexia):
- Use visual aids and graphics to supplement or illustrate what is being said or written.
- Avoid jargon
- Break instructions or text in small chunks
- Check in frequently for comprehension