

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE GOVERNOR'S COMMITTEE ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Note: This document contains background information and policy recommendations related to the issue area of "Recreation" only. To access the Committee's full report which covers ten issue areas, please visit the Committee's website [here](#).

RECREATION

GOAL

Ensure the full inclusion, participation and integration of people with disabilities into recreational opportunities, venues and services in Texas.

Overview

Recreation, defined here as healthy or productive activities engaged in for enjoyment, can be valuable in promoting good health and engagement in the community, while strengthening family ties. When compared to policy areas like health or employment that can affect a person's everyday life in obvious ways, the importance of recreation may seem relatively minor. Far from being relegated to the position of a luxury or an afterthought, though, recreation is a vital ingredient in a good life and deserves State support.

State support of recreational opportunities does not mean that lawmakers should mandate that all Texans "get out there and have some fun!" Instead, State policies can support inclusive, affordable, and welcoming recreational environments for all Texans, including Texans with disabilities. The goal should be opportunities for full participation by people of all disability types in activities of their choosing, including playing sports, participating in the arts, experiencing the natural world, and attending athletic and cultural events. Further, these opportunities should be inclusive, allowing people to participate together, strengthening bonds among family members, friends, and community.

An investment in recreational opportunities for all Texans is also an investment in good health. There is a strong correlation between many recreational activities and healthy living. All people benefit from regular, moderate physical activity. Activity promotes good health and can prevent secondary disease, including cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and diabetes. Although this need for activity is universal, people with disabilities are less likely to engage in a beneficial amount of physical activity.¹

Respondents to the Texas Governor's Committee Citizens' Input Survey noted the relationship between a lack of recreational opportunities for people with disabilities and the challenge of obesity. One respondent summarized the issue: "[i]f we do not work towards inclusion in recreation then the obesity epidemic will continue for people with disabilities."²

Because many recreational activities have physical components, it can be easy to focus on people experiencing physical challenges and to forget that people with intellectual, developmental, and sensory disabilities need to be included in recreation, too. The Committee's policy recommendations encourage creating recreational environments that are physically accessible to people with mobility disabilities and we also recommend inclusive practices, such as increasing training and awareness of reasonable accommodations available to people of all disabilities. A person with an intellectual disability may

require assistance in filling out an application to join the local recreational center; someone who is blind may require printed materials in an alternate format, such as braille. Staff at recreational venues should be aware of the rights and needs of people with disabilities, so that all people can be welcomed and included in recreational activities.

Background and Purpose: Physical Accessibility of Recreational Venues

Some of the simple moments spent with family that many of us take for granted are denied to families affected by disability. As an example, picture a traditional playground for children. Many respondents to the Citizen Input Survey mentioned that children's playgrounds are often full of unintended barriers to children and adults with disabilities. Now picture a child in a wheelchair enjoying swings and rides at a playground as much as any other child.

If this image seems impossible, you may enjoy a visit to [Morgan's Wonderland](#). This outdoor recreational facility in San Antonio demonstrates the level of inclusion possible when people with disabilities are considered from the start. For example, where many traditional play areas use mulch to surround playscapes, the simple choice to use a rubberized surface instead of mulch at Morgan's Wonderland makes the surface much easier for people in wheelchairs or using other mobility assistance devices to navigate. Swings and amusement park rides can be built with ramps and sized to accommodate riders with various disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs.

Morgan's Wonderland is an exceptional recreational venue, but it also represents a new standard to which our existing facilities could aspire. For many years, outdoor play areas, amusement parks, and sporting facilities were not required to comply with standards of physical accessibility, but that is changing. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has existed for over 20 years, it has only recently been expanded, through implementing regulations, to apply to many recreational facilities. Beginning March 15, 2012, the [ADA Standards for Accessible Design](#) apply to newly designed or constructed recreational buildings and facilities and to existing facilities when they are altered. These regulations now apply to many amusement rides, recreational boating facilities, fishing piers, exercise machines and equipment, golf and miniature golf facilities, play areas for children, saunas and steam rooms, swimming pools, wading pools, and spas.³

Another piece of the same ADA standards update opened new recreational opportunities for people with mobility disabilities. A rule change with a compliance date of March 15, 2011, mandated that people with mobility impairments be allowed to take their wheelchairs or "other power-driven mobility devices" onto public trails, such as walking and hiking trails. This rule applies to trails managed by state and local governments and other trails open to the public.

These new standards are a significant step in the right direction. The Committee recommends prompt and robust compliance with the new standards. As always, accessibility requirements as laid out in State and federal law should be viewed as a floor, not a ceiling. Texas State and local governments and private actors can always go above and beyond the requirements of law in creating accessible, affordable, and inclusive recreational opportunities.

The creation of inclusive recreational environments will require work beyond the physical environment and may require reworking traditional models. For example, many respondents to the Texas Governor's Committee Citizens' Input Survey brought to light an issue that the survey itself did not contemplate: the double cost incurred for a person with a disability to attend any kind of paid recreational event with a personal attendant. Respondents suggested free or discounted admission for personal attendants assisting a person with a disability. Several other open-ended responses mentioned the difficulty – if not impossibility – of attending events in venues that do not have family restrooms. If the mother of an adult son with a disability needs to accompany her son into a restroom, should she visit the men's room or the women's room? A private, family restroom, as opposed to a communal men's or women's restroom, is the natural choice, but not all venues are equipped with family restrooms.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 7.1:** Promote the rights and preferences of people with disabilities in the design and development of recreational services, programs, facilities, and functions, and encourage prompt compliance with the revised [2010 federal accessibility guidelines for recreational facilities](#).
- **Recommendation 7.2:** Increase awareness of new requirements in effect on March 15, 2011 and March 15, 2012 from the Department of Justice regulations to Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, in particular requirements that entities permit the use of wheelchairs and other power-driven mobility devices in all areas open to pedestrians, including walking and hiking trails.
- **Recommendation 7.3:** Incorporate [universal design and accessibility](#) into the long-range planning of State parks, public beaches and other recreational opportunities for Texans with disabilities.
- **Recommendation 7.4:** Encourage large public venues to incorporate family restrooms as an accessible amenities option.

Background and Purpose: Accessible Travel and the Aging Population

Throughout the Committee's report, we have discussed the effect that the graying of the Baby Boom generation has had on various facets of American life. Yet another facet affected by the aging Baby Boom generation is an increased demand for accessible travel options. Baby Boomers are aging and many are acquiring age-related disabilities, such as hearing loss and reduced mobility, but many Boomers are not letting these disabilities prevent them from traveling. Scott Rains, a 56-year-old minister who is a quadriplegic and avid traveler put it this way: “[t]hey don't intend to let hip replacements and insulin shots prevent them from traveling [...] Nor will they be pandered to, stigmatized, or written off.”⁴

Accommodations for travel would preferably include accessible hotel rooms, the availability of captioning and [audio description](#) during in-flight entertainment, and much more than can be included here. More information about accessible travel can be found through the website of the [Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality](#). State and federal laws contain guidelines meant to ensure that transportation and lodging facilities are accessible to people with disabilities, but, as is often the case, industry experts report that there is a gap between the law as written and the law as implemented.⁵ All people with disabilities deserve equal access to travel opportunities; the Baby Boom generation may help to make the business case for accessible travel.

Travel and tourism play an important role in the Texas economy. When visitors spend time and money in Texas, they create jobs and tax revenues for communities within the State. In 2011, the gross domestic product of the Texas travel industry was \$24.9 billion. This figure is comparable to Texas's other major export-oriented industries such as microelectronics and agriculture and food production.⁶

By creating accessible travel options and amenities in Texas, Texas businesses will not only be doing the right thing, they will also be satisfying their legal obligations and harnessing a valuable market.

Policy Recommendation:

- **Recommendation 7.5:** Encourage travel agencies, hotels, and other providers of travel and recreation activities to go above and beyond the minimum legal requirements of accessibility to create an atmosphere that is usable and welcoming to people with disabilities.

Background and Purpose: Adult Playgrounds

Playgrounds are no longer just for children: another emerging trend in recreation is the creation of adult playgrounds. These outdoor fitness areas contain low-impact exercise equipment designed with adults in mind. Located in public parks, adult playgrounds provide many of the benefits of membership at a gym, but use of the equipment is free. Adult playgrounds first turned up in Europe and China, but have since made their way to the United States and now can be found in urban centers in many warm weather states, including Texas, and even in colder climates, such as the Bronx in New York.⁷

From a disability perspective, adult playgrounds come with many benefits: they provide an inexpensive way for adults at a variety of fitness levels to participate in healthy activities and they have the potential to assist in anti-obesity efforts. In general, regular physical activity improves physical and mental health and can help to prevent other chronic diseases, including diabetes, depression, heart disease, and memory loss. Further, some parks are designed to be “multigenerational,” where adult exercise equipment is integrated with or adjacent to play equipment for children. These multigenerational parks allow grandparents, parents and caregivers opportunities to exercise while a child plays.⁸

Policy Recommendation:

- **Recommendation 7.6:** Promote the creation and development of adult playgrounds and multigenerational playgrounds that will encourage physical fitness and healthy lifestyles.

ENDNOTES

¹ National Council on Disabilities. (2009, September 30). *The Current State of Health Care for People with Disabilities*, p. 37. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2009/Sept302009#exesum>

² 2012 Texas Governor's Committee Citizens' Input Survey

³ United States Department of Justice. (2010, August 3). *Fact Sheet – Adoption of the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design*. Retrieved from ADA website: http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/factsheets/2010_Standards_factsheet.html

⁴ Elliot, C. (September 2011). *Rebels with a Cause*. Retrieved from the National Geographic Traveler website: <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/traveler-magazine/the-insider/baby-boomers/>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Dean Runyan and Associates. (June 2012). *The Economic Impact of Travel on Texas, 1990-2011*, p. ii. Retrieved from OOG [Tourism Division] website: <http://travel.state.tx.us/getattachment/7941c6e2-2d92-4c42-84af-a7156318ad0d/TXImp11pRev.aspx>

⁷ Hu, W. (2012, January 29). *Mom, Dad, This Playground's for You*. Retrieved from the New York Times website: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/nyregion/new-york-introduces-its-first-adult-playground.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁸ Abrahms, S. (2012, August 16). *The Shape of Things to Come: Adult Playgrounds*. Retrieved from AARP Blog website: <http://blog.aarp.org/2012/08/16/sally-abrahms-caregivers-exercise-adult-playgrounds/>