

National Caucus of Environmental Legislators

Outdoors as an Accessibility Solution Briefing Book



NCEL

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This Briefing Book was written by Meryl Luoma-Mannisto, who served as NCEL's 2025 Capstone Fellow in conjunction with Colorado State University.





An Introduction to the Outdoors as an Accessibility Solution

[More than one quarter](#) of the adult American population is disabled, yet people with disabilities have not been considered in public spaces, especially the outdoors, until very recently.

The [benefits](#) of time spent outdoors have been proven to be positive for everyone, [especially](#) for people with disabilities. [People](#) who rely on limited senses can experience more freedom and create an independent connection to the outdoors. Listening for distinct bird sounds, or visually and tactilely identifying leaves from different trees, can help [improve memory](#) and [focus](#). Despite known benefits, people with disabilities [typically live](#) in more urban areas with fewer immersive outdoor spaces. Black and Indigenous people are [more likely](#) to be disabled while having [less access](#) to the outdoors.

States can help increase access for all through policies that prioritize inclusive and universal design, eliminating [some](#) of the barriers that [marginalized](#) communities face.

There is [no panacea](#) nor one set of rules to remedy and further accessibility in the outdoors. Engaging with people with disabilities, paraprofessionals, and caretakers to find out what accessibility needs would improve their communities is imperative to successfully create an equitable outdoor environment. Through legislation that creates iterative resources, transportation options, financial assistance, indoor and outdoor infrastructure, and enforces safety, states are creating access for people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act ([ADA](#)) protects people with disabilities from discrimination across many aspects of public life. The original ADA was unclear on outdoor and digital spaces, and some may still believe these spaces are exempt from the ADA. However, the original legislation has been updated since its inception to reflect the changing needs of those it serves.



Overview

Less than [3%](#) of the internet is actually accessible for people with disabilities, and in a digital age, online access is [necessary](#). Knowing what accessible infrastructure and [opportunities](#) exist is imperative to participating in outdoor recreation. [Online resources](#) reduce barriers to people with disabilities by allowing people to plan ahead and determine which recreation sites accommodate their needs.

Policy Options

- **State ADA Compliance:** Website accessibility is a low-lift, high-impact intervention for supporting individuals with disabilities. California ([SB 1442](#)) mandates that all state entities make their websites and digital information accessible to all people with disabilities, per Section 508 of the ADA. The law also requires contractors to accept and respond to accessibility complaints, ensuring that compliance is maintained.
- **Determining Needs:** Colorado ([HB23-1296](#)) established a task force to enforce the rights and examine the needs of people with disabilities in accessing state-funded outdoor recreation. Four sub-committees within the task force handle different access areas, including housing and government.
- **Expanding Rights for People with Disabilities:** Through creating legislation that requires electronic accessibility standards to be met, people with disabilities are able to find the information they need. Colorado ([HB21-1110](#)) creates electronic accessibility requirements that follow updated international [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#), along with expanding how the state defines ableism and civil pursuits that can be taken.
- **Health and Human Services:** Health practitioners and researchers increasingly recognize the importance of outdoor access in individual and population health. States can increase the visibility of the outdoors as an existing public resource by enhancing how health and human services information is shared. Nevada ([NRS232.359](#)) creates a system to provide non-urgent services and information concerning human welfare. This includes a [website](#) with many resources for people with disabilities, accessible by scrolling through the main site page.
- **Create Trail and Recreation Area Guides:** States can build on nonprofit-led efforts to create comprehensive guides of accessible trails and recreation areas, such as those [created by Disabled Hikers](#), by directing the creation of disability-friendly guides in partnership with communities. With [44% of people over 65](#) having one or more disabilities, New York ([S.1466](#)) explored the creation and periodic updating of a Senior Trail Guide to assist active seniors in identifying accessible walking and hiking opportunities in state parks and trails.

Best Practices: Online Transparency

Having accessible online information about recreation opportunities [increases](#) the amount of people able to engage with the outdoors. [Arizona](#) created an iterative ADA platform specifically for recreation opportunities at their state parks, including the Family Campout program that connects families with limited camping knowledge to the outdoors. Providing virtual tours of facilities, like [Michigan's](#) accessible recreation platform, creates avenues for more independence by reducing uncertainty about recreation. Additionally, [Washington's](#) recreation website has an interactive ADA features map and highlights the [Disabled Hikers Guide to Washington State Parks in King County](#).





Overview

Getting to the outdoors can prove to be a challenge for recreators with disabilities. The challenge for state officials is understanding and meeting the demand for outdoor accessibility. Public transportation is [inaccessible](#), and inclusive transit is typically limited and [costly](#). People with disabilities' inability to get to the outdoors lessens the visible accessibility needs at these spaces.

Policy Options

- **Providing Direct Access for People with Disabilities:** Nevada ([S.B.405](#)) creates the Transit-to-Trails Task Force to improve public transit access to outdoor recreation areas, which was born out of record-breaking public land visitation rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The task force will find areas of high need with limited access to recreational areas and seek funding to increase accessibility.
- **Funding for Transportation:** The cost of transportation is a [prohibitive](#) cost for many schools across the country. Minnesota ([84.976](#)) requires the Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources to establish and oversee a grant distribution program — focused on recipients with increased barriers — for nature-based education and transportation to these opportunities. In addition to transportation funding, Minnesota's [HF 2548](#) will establish an Outdoor School for All grant program to assist in providing equitable immersive nature-based educational experiences for students in the state.
- **Usable Sidewalks:** Delaware ([S50](#)) establishes a Pedestrian Council in order to assess and make recommendations to improve sidewalks, with the intended impact of increasing accessibility for people with disabilities while reducing the number of pedestrian fatalities from vehicle strikes.
- **Long-Term Access for People with Disabilities:** Illinois [S1892](#) makes it so people with disabilities are automatically renewed for free transit access every five years after the proper form is submitted. Previously, they were required to recertify annually. This reduces the burden, time, and money spent on having to recertify yearly.



Together 4 Brothers

[Together 4 Brothers](#) (T4B) is a network of young organizers, professionals, and students working to create health equity for boys and young men of color (BYMOC), their families, and transit riders. They work throughout New Mexico, focusing heavily in Albuquerque, on food justice and outdoor equity. Educating and creating leaders from communities that are disproportionately negatively impacted, T4B helps groups identify their issues, trace them to the root causes, and craft possible solutions. One of those solutions has been T4B advocating for, and eventually obtaining, free public transit in the city of Albuquerque.





Overview

Visitor centers, bathrooms, and other indoor facilities are critical to ensuring the safety and security of people who choose to spend time in nature. Accessible spaces meet the health, comfort, and knowledge needs of more recreators, creating more and higher-quality recreation opportunities for all. Through monumental bipartisan legislation, [The Great American Outdoors Act](#) has provided funding and resources for the repair and remediation of public recreational sites and Bureau of Indian Education funded schools — including deferred maintenance projects on infrastructure.

Policy Options

- **Inclusive Bathrooms:** Accessibility in bathrooms goes beyond stalls that accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility vehicles. States can increase equity through funding for widely unavailable access needs. Tennessee ([H.B. 2690](#)) requires the state to issue grants and funding to install powered, height-adjustable universal-changing tables in public areas, including 18 state recreation sites as of 2025.
- **Emergency Preparedness:** Indiana ([H1113](#)) requires the adaptation of an audio frequency induction loop system or beacon alert system in all [Class 1 buildings](#), those open to the public, or that host employees. It also requires professionals certified in distributing hearing aids to educate the recipient on telecoil and audio frequency induction loop systems.
- **Closed Captions:** In [rural areas](#), disaster shelters and the capacity of emergency responders are limited, especially regarding people with disabilities. Hospitals serve as the [only](#) shelter and information source for many before, during, and after emergencies and natural disasters. Minnesota ([S2603](#)) requires all medical facilities to have closed captions on as a default if the device has the capability, ensuring accessibility to patrons.
- **Designing With Inclusivity in Mind:** By considering access needs in the planning process, states can make recreation spaces inclusive from the start. Utah ([H.B.336](#)) expands the requirements for building recreation spaces to include the acquisition of adaptive equipment.



Case Study: Sensory-Friendly Hours

Recreation spaces have [historically](#) been designed for neurotypical people, and the already limited inclusive opportunities can be difficult to find. Time outdoors has been shown to decrease overwhelming sensory feelings within neurodivergent individuals, along with directly [increasing measurable health outcomes](#), like vitamin D production in an individual's body. The North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources has a [resource](#) on sensory-friendly activities, their locations, and descriptions of how they are designed for people with sensory sensitivities. Similar resources exist for [Indiana](#), [Maryland](#), and [Michigan](#).



Overview

Ample accessible parking, flat and even surfaces, and roadways to get to the outdoors are [accessible forms of infrastructure](#) that make recreation more available to all. States can provide equipment — like Missouri’s [beach chair program](#) — at recreation sites that are less accessible to provide quality recreation experiences for everyone.

Policy Options

- **Equipment for Navigating Outdoor Spaces:** Virginia ([H.B.1186](#)) established a two-year all-terrain power wheelchair pilot program to develop guidelines and enter contracts to provide all-terrain power wheelchairs in state parks. In November of 2026, a report will be published regarding the effectiveness of the program and suggestions for future implementation areas.
- **Creating Opportunities:** Creating genuinely accessible recreation infrastructure can be done through task forces with designated individuals that examine a community’s accessibility needs. Oregon ([HB 2171](#)) created statewide recommendations and standards for the design of all recreation areas within state parks and requires the OR State Department of Fish and Wildlife to use those guidelines for future projects. However, the subsequent implementation of these guidelines faced scrutiny, with feedback highlighting concerns regarding the effectiveness of community engagement during the rollout, the perceived adequacy of the final design standards, and the ongoing execution of guidelines. This case underscores both the benefits and future growth areas for states, such as California, with its proposed [AB 1225](#), to ensure diligent and collaborative execution following the passage of new legislation.
- **Parking Spaces:** Delaware ([S28](#)) increases the penalty for parking in and on accessible spaces without the required placard. [Accessible](#) parking is usually limited, as it takes up more space, and this ensures that those limited spaces are held for people with disabilities. Hawaii ([S1008](#)) passed similar legislation that requires the establishment and enforcement of accessible parking.
- **Complete Streets:** In New Jersey ([S147](#)), the Department of Transportation is directed to reimagine public highways and streets through a universal design framework. They will prioritize pedestrian traffic, public transportation, and safe transit of those with mobility impairments and provide recommendations.



Case Study: Accessible Playground Equipment

When polled, [nearly 90%](#) of Americans believed that there should be inclusive and accessible playgrounds within their communities. Communication boards are [an effective, low-cost way to improve accessibility](#). A display of simple photos or illustrations of common playground topics enables disabled children and children speaking different languages to play with peers. Maryland [H.B.420](#) requires newly constructed public play areas to include communication boards. New Jersey ([A2187](#)) created Jake’s Law, requiring all playgrounds to be completely inclusive, including having 20% shade cover, accessible parking spaces, and curb cuts. Illinois ([HB 3457](#)) prioritizes funding for accessible playground development and correction of existing playground infrastructure.





Overview

Making the outdoors accessible to everyone is important, and acquiring funding to implement [universal design](#) will not happen overnight. Opening existing places to people with disabilities to [recreate](#) in and assisting in grant writing are ways to further equity for people with disabilities.

Policy Options

- **Prescribing the Outdoors:** States can provide funding to maximize the healing benefits of the outdoors for community members. Illinois ([H.B.1526](#)) directs the Department of Public Health to create an Outdoor Rx Program and Fund that awards grants for outdoor and nature-based therapies. Similarly, Arizona ([S.B.1418](#)) would establish the Outdoor Rx Program to fund outdoor-based therapy initiatives focusing on veterans and their recovery.
- **Expanding Access:** States can capitalize on existing recreation opportunities for disabled recreators by opening trails to them. West Virginia [H.B.2288](#) allows people with disabilities to operate small electric vehicles on the 78-mile Greenbrier Trail, which was previously inaccessible to wheelchair users.
- **Rural Assistance:** Residents of rural America are [more likely](#) to be disabled than urban populations. Vermont's Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) ([S.34](#)) provides development assistance to rural municipalities and businesses, with the recreation industry being a priority area. REDI focuses on aiding rural communities to find funding and grant opportunities.
- **Healthcare for Workers:** People with disabilities need health insurance in order to afford the assistance and accommodations needed to lead a fulfilling life, and time spent outdoors has been shown to further [improve](#) mental and physical health. Maryland ([S790](#)) prevents the Department of Health from discriminating against those in the Employed Persons with Disabilities program through restricted medical access based on their earned income.



Case Study: Hunting and Fishing

[In 2022](#), 14.4 million Americans 16 and older participated in hunting, and 39.9 million participated in angling. States have pursued policies to make these activities more accessible to all, such as Florida ([S.379.353](#)), which allows for permanently disabled residents to obtain base hunting as well as freshwater and saltwater fishing licenses at no cost. To provide hunting opportunities to intellectually and developmentally disabled adults, Michigan ([H.B.5737](#)) allows previously ineligible people to hunt with the mentoring and supervision of an eligible guardian(s). Montana ([S.B.238](#)) allows donations on hunting license sales to create a program to help nonprofits acquire modified archery equipment for bowhunters with disabilities.



Overview

Historical and ongoing discrimination, redlining, and racist policies have [precluded](#) many people from feeling safe and accepted in the outdoors. Representation and being consulted will inevitably make people with disabilities [feel more welcome](#) and safe in the outdoors. Knowing that inclusion and adaptive needs were in the planning process can create peace of mind for recreators.

Policy Options

- **Increasing Independence:** Texas ([SB1664](#)) expanded upon the federal ABLE Act, allowing Texans with disabilities to save money in a special account to be used for qualifying disability expenses, including transportation, outdoor recreation, and education. Having a separate account increases the amount that people with disabilities can have in savings and creates opportunities for independence, as the average Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) monthly income is less than [\\$1,800 in 2025](#).
- **Asking the Experts:** Iowa ([H.F. 2364](#)) directs the Natural Resources Commission to research with disability advocates and experts to provide recommendations to improve state park accessibility for people with disabilities. Legislators also chose to allocate over \$1 million towards related parks accessibility improvements.
- **Community and Well-Being:** New Jersey ([N.J.S.A 52:14-34.4, 34.5, and 34.6](#)) established the Inclusive Healthy Communities Grant Program to provide support to improve the well-being of people with disabilities. A primary focus is improving access to outdoor recreation opportunities and natural areas for people with disabilities.
- **Higher Education:** The lack of [federal grants](#) at the postsecondary level makes obtaining advanced degrees increasingly difficult for people with disabilities. An inability to obtain higher education limits access to equitable [earnings](#) and job opportunities, including high-demand, skilled outdoor jobs. Louisiana [S.192](#) creates a state fund for those with developmental and intellectual disabilities to pursue a postsecondary education.

Spotlight: Disabled Hikers



[Disabled Hikers](#) is a disabled-led community organization that celebrates people with disabilities' experience in the outdoors through: offering inclusive programming to redefine what it means to experience nature, training and empowering Disabled leaders in the outdoors, and creating informational guides and resources regarding accessibility. In efforts to make accessibility the standard, Disabled Hikers collaborates with state parks and agencies to create opportunities for people with disabilities to engage with the outdoors in meaningful ways. Their narrative-changing work is a model for decision makers looking to expand and promote all quality experiences in the outdoors.



NCEL Resources

1. [How States Are Using Outdoor Access to Boost Public Health](#)
2. [The Outdoors as a Health Solution Briefing Book](#)
3. [Outdoor Engagement Issue Page](#)
4. [Outdoor Opportunity Legislative Toolkit](#)

Additional Resources

1. [Accessibility Standards and Guidelines](#) | **Access Outdoors Occupational Therapy**

Compilation of various resources on accessibility standards from parking lots to creating ADA-compliant camp programs.

2. [Accessible Recreation in West Virginia](#) | **West Virginia University**

List of accessible recreation opportunities divided by county in West Virginia. Each submission has the address, contact information, and accessibility features.

3. [Accessible Nature Info](#) | **Accessible Nature Info**

Provides information on accessible trails across North America. Trails are delineated by Very Easy or Wheelchair Accessible through easily identifiable symbols.

4. [Disability Employment Legislation Database](#) | **National Conference of State Legislatures**

Online database of legislation from 2016 onward covering topics related to the advancement of people with disabilities. Results can be filtered by many factors, including state, year, and subtopic.

5. [State-level Accessibility Law and Policy](#) | **Section 508**

Information on states that have published online accessibility laws similar to the federal regulation Section 508.

6. [Trail Accessibility Hub](#) | **American Trails**

Comprehensive website for the planning, construction, and upkeep of accessible trails and recreation opportunities. Provided are guidelines, free webinars, and examples for stakeholders to use and engage with.





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202.744.1006 • ncelenviro.org • 1140 3rd St NE, Office 2137 • Washington, DC 20002