

# Accessibility from the Start: A Practical Guide to Inclusive Event Planning

Levitt Network Training

March 10, 2025

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Presented by Elizabeth Ralston, MPH

# About Elizabeth

- ★ I am a consultant who guides organizations in the strategic development of an accessibility road map, with an emphasis on equity and inclusion
- ★ I help organizations expand their capacity to engage their audiences through powerful storytelling, program delivery, and strategic outreach, all with an eye on accessibility.
- ★ Public Health and Nonprofit background
- ★ Individual with lived experience of disability: deafness
- ★ **Fun Fact:** Served in Peace Corps Malawi

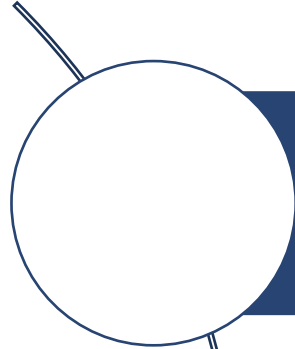


# Creating an Open Learning Environment

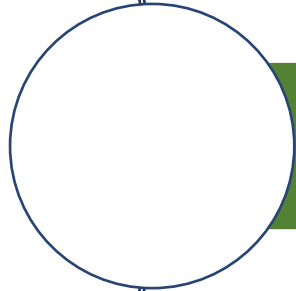
- Approach with curiosity
- Speak your truth
- Recognize privilege
- Listen and pause for understanding
- Assume best intent
- Confidentiality
- Stay engaged
- Take care of access needs

# Today's learning objectives

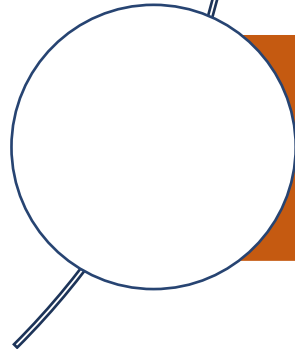
By the end of our session, you will:



Identify barriers and opportunities for accessibility in events



Become familiar with accessibility offerings in outdoor events



Identify accessible marketing strategies

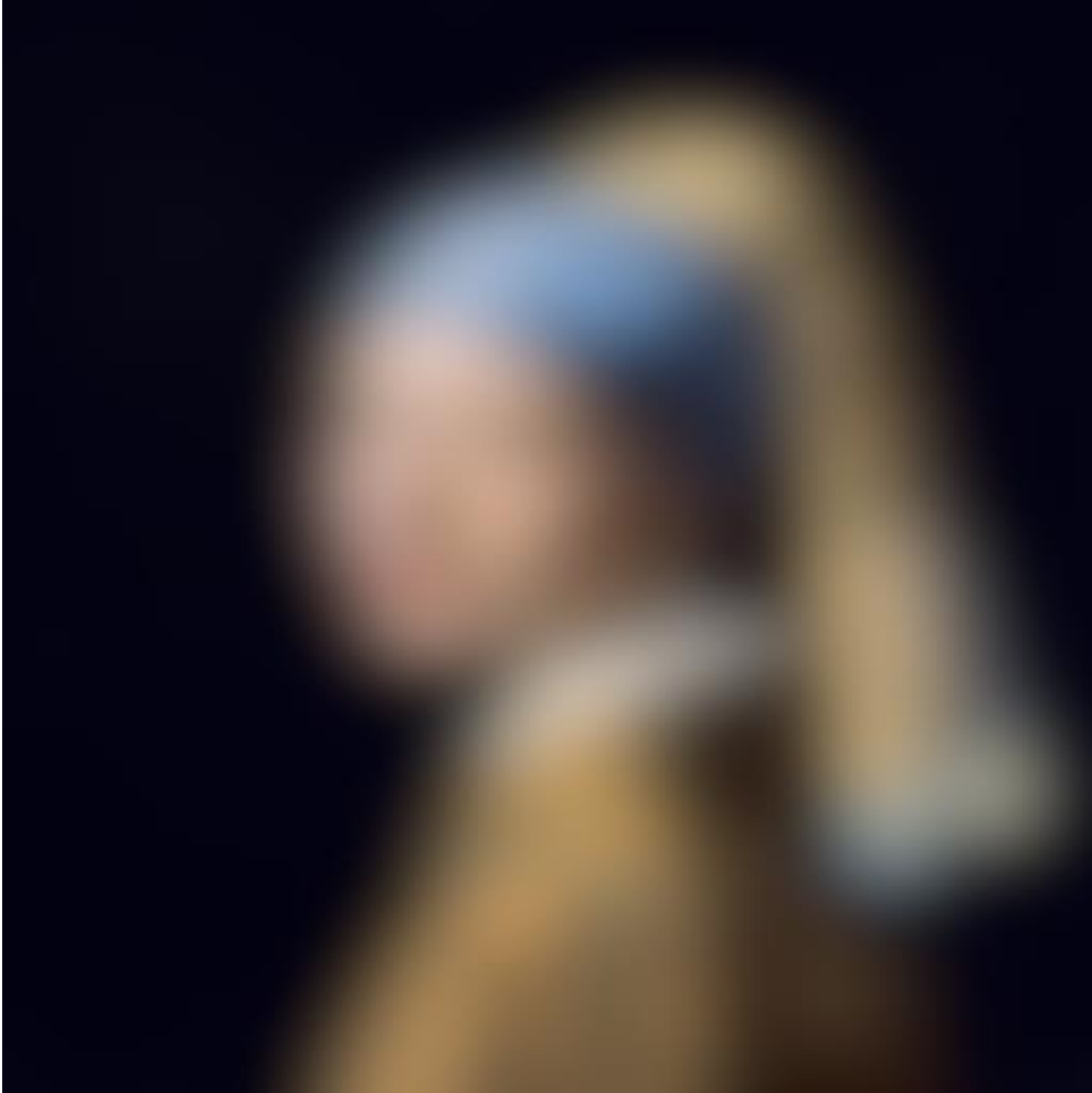
Warm up

**What are your organization's strengths in event accessibility?**

# Outdoor event accessibility goals

- Make your event a **welcoming and inclusive** experience:  
Going beyond ADA compliance
- Provide excellent **customer service** to EVERYONE!
- Treat disabled patrons with the **same courtesy** as anyone else
- Create **multiple ways** of accessing experiences and information

**Defining accessibility**





How did you feel as I was showing you this piece of art?

# Accessibility

ac·ces·si·bil·i·ty  
/əkˌsesəˈbɪlədē/

*Noun*

the quality of being able to be reached or entered.

the quality of being easy to obtain or use.

the quality of being easily understood or appreciated.



If something is inaccessible-- there are barriers to information, knowledge, use, and entry.

**Access is CUT OFF.**

# Barriers and Opportunities

# Your journey to an Outdoor Event

Scenario: You are a person with a disability.

What barriers would you encounter?



# Barriers to Participation

Location

Transportation

Physical

Socioeconomic

Communication

Attitudinal

**The goal: identify and remove barriers so community members can access our programs.**

**Planning for accessibility**

# Strategies for Implementation

**Organization  
level**

**Preparation for an  
Accessible Event**

# Organizational level

**1**

**Buy-in**

**2**

**Partnerships**

**3**

**Training and  
support**

**4**

**Budget**

# Ways to prepare

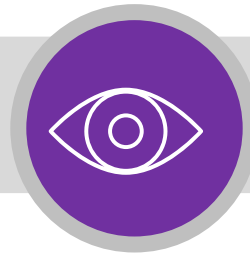
1. Understand your audience
2. Planning questions
3. Determine accessibility goals
4. Determine your budget
5. Do a site visit
6. Convene disability advisory group
7. Communications are accessible
8. Who are your partners and who will you outreach to?
9. Registration process is easy and people can ask for accommodations
8. Train your team
9. Designate roles
10. Evaluate



# Understanding your audience



Hearing



Vision



Neurodiverse

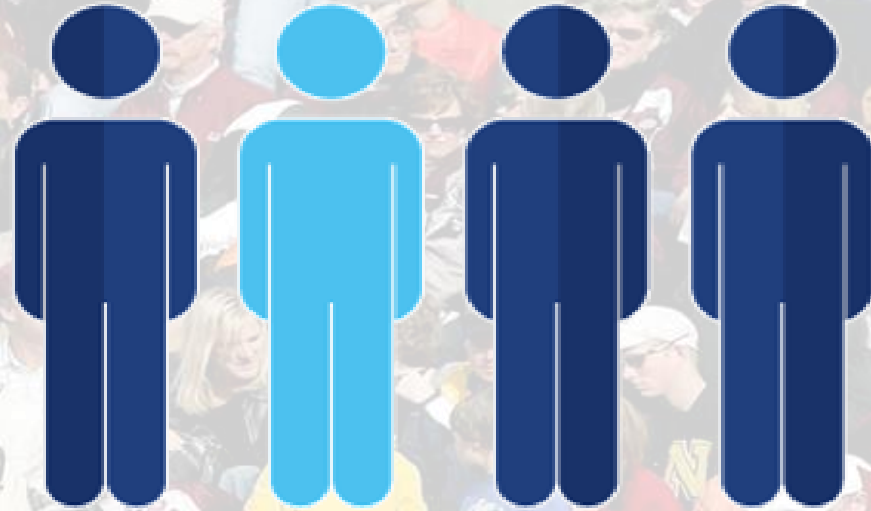


Mobility



**It is not one size fits all!**

# Some numbers



**1 IN 4 PEOPLE has a disability: it is the largest minority group that anyone can join at any time!**

**10,000 people turn 65 EVERY DAY in the US**



# Types of disabilities

**Physical**

**Hearing**

**Vision**

**Neurodiverse**

ADHD

Autism

Dyslexia

Down  
Syndrome

**Non-apparent**

Anxiety

Chronic pain

PTSD

Traumatic  
brain injury

Disability intersects with socio-economic status, geography, gender, race, ethnicity, and age.

# Non-apparent disabilities

SOME DISABILITIES LOOK LIKE THIS



SOME LOOK LIKE THIS



# What are your accessibility goals?

Consult your budget

**Bumbershoot example:**

Half the stages  
have captions/  
interpreters

Improve access to  
people with  
mobility  
challenges

Increase offerings  
for people who  
are neurodiverse  
(e.g. quiet space)

Better marketing  
regarding  
accessibility

# Accessibility should be built into the planning process from the very beginning!

It is a practice and a standard to integrate into every part of your planning process.



**EVERYONE  
BENEFITS!**

**It's a Journey, not a Destination!**

# Questions to Ask During the Planning Process

Are we reaching the communities we want to serve?

Are people with disabilities and intersectional identities included in the planning and design of the event?

What is the terrain like? How will the event impact existing structures (e.g. curb cuts)

Are marketing and communication practices accessible?  
Are the materials using inclusive language? Is the registration process easy?

## Questions (con't)

Have we examined our own biases and assumptions towards people with disabilities?

Are people with disabilities given enough time to ask for accommodations?

What training do we need for staff and volunteers?

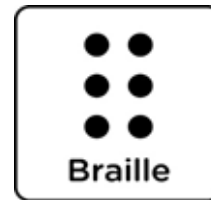
Are access providers booked well in advance?

What is the accessibility budget?



# Accessibility Offerings

# Types of Accessibility Offerings



**LOOPED AUDITORIUM**



**Switch hearing aid to t-coil**

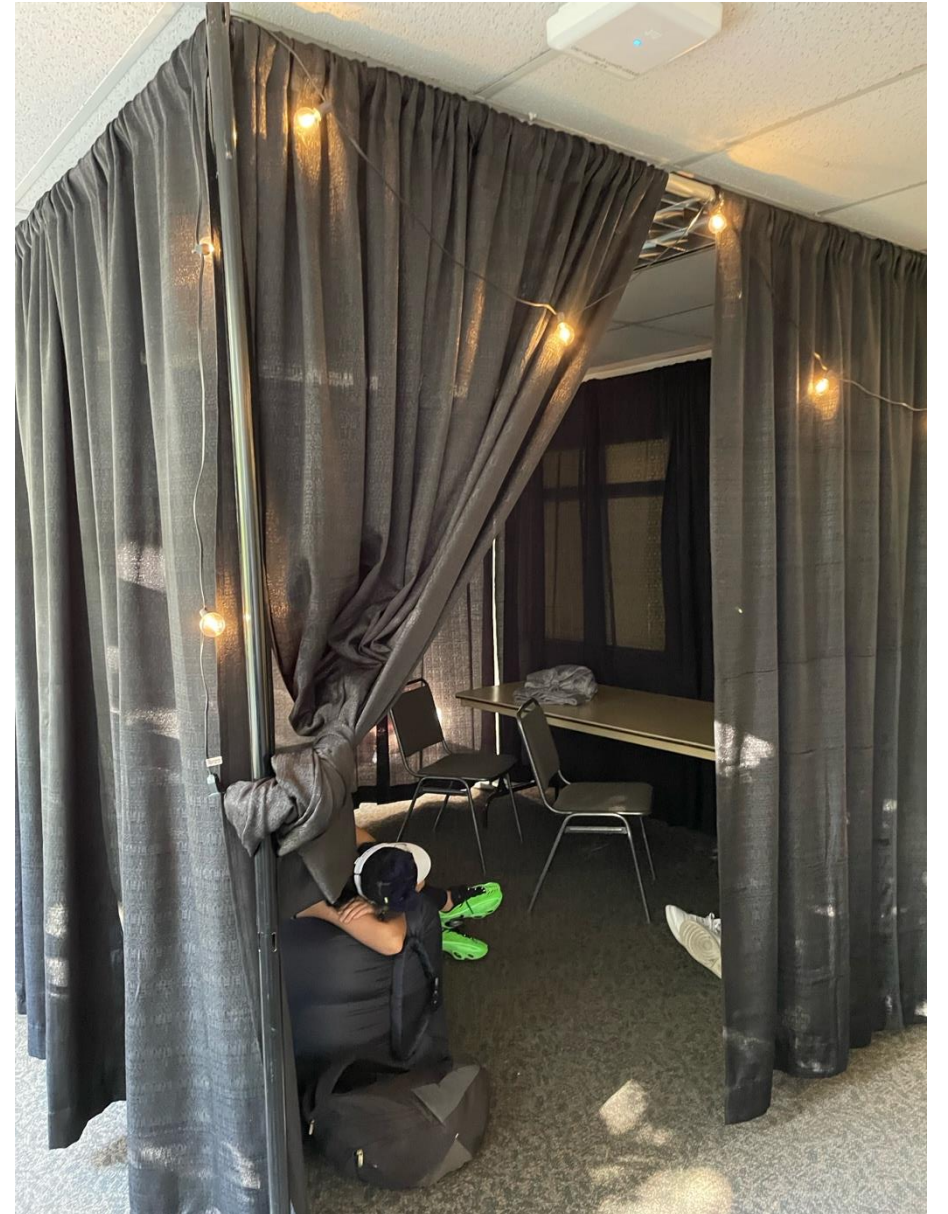
# Captioning



# Interpreters



# Quiet space



# Accessibility booths



# Map with access symbols



# Access Volunteers



# Viewing platforms and mobi mats for uneven terrain



Photo by Syren Nagakyrie, Disabled Hikers

# Signage



**BUMBERSHOOT FESTIVAL SCHEDULE**  
SATURDAY SEPT 2ND

STAGES:	FOUNTAIN	FISHER	MURAL	KEXP	VERA
1:00	MORGAN AND THE ORGAN DONORS 1:25-3:55 PM	PRESSHA 1-3:50 PM	LONG DARK MOON 1-3:50 PM		
2:00		THE DIP 1:55-3:35 PM	CHONG THE NOHAD 3:40-5:20 PM		SCARVES 3:45-5:30 PM
3:00	WARPAINT 2:35-3:15 PM	JACOB BANKS 3:05-4:05 PM	SLIFT 2:35-3:05 PM	BREAKS & SHELLS 3:30-4 PM	W/SHOPS 3:45-5:30 PM
4:00	MAJOR LEAGUE DJZ 3:55-4:45 PM	ANABEL ENGLUND 4:45-5:35 PM	SWEET WATER 3:30-4 PM	CHIRURENDA RENAISSANCE 4:30-5 PM	TV STAR 3:45-4:30 PM
5:00			THUNDERPUSSY 4:20-5 PM	DAVE B 5:30-6:15 PM	RADIOACTIVITY 4:30-5:30 PM
6:00	RIDE 5:35-6:35 PM	DURAND JONES 6:35-7:35 PM	PUDDLES PITY PARTY 5:35-6 PM	REIGNWOLF 6:45-7:30 PM	GIRL TROUBLE 4:30-5:30 PM
7:00			MAYA JANE COLES 6:35-7 PM	MATT AND KIM 7:15-8:35 PM	SCREAMING FEMALES 7:30-8:30 PM
8:00	AFI 7:30-8:30 PM	BRITTANY HOWARD 8:35-9:35 PM	SUNNY DAY REAL ESTATE 8:45-9:45 PM	DESTROY BOYS 8-9 PM	HONEY & HES PUNK 8:30-10:30 PM
9:00			ZHU		

## SYMBOLS

- Medical
- Accessible Restrooms
- Quiet Space
- Accessibility Booth
- Closed Caption
- ASL
- Accessible Parking Entrance
- Bike Parking
- Bar Service
- Food Service
- Beer Garden
- Information Booth
- Water Station
- Producer's Circle

## AREAS

Main Stage

# Sighted guides and audio description

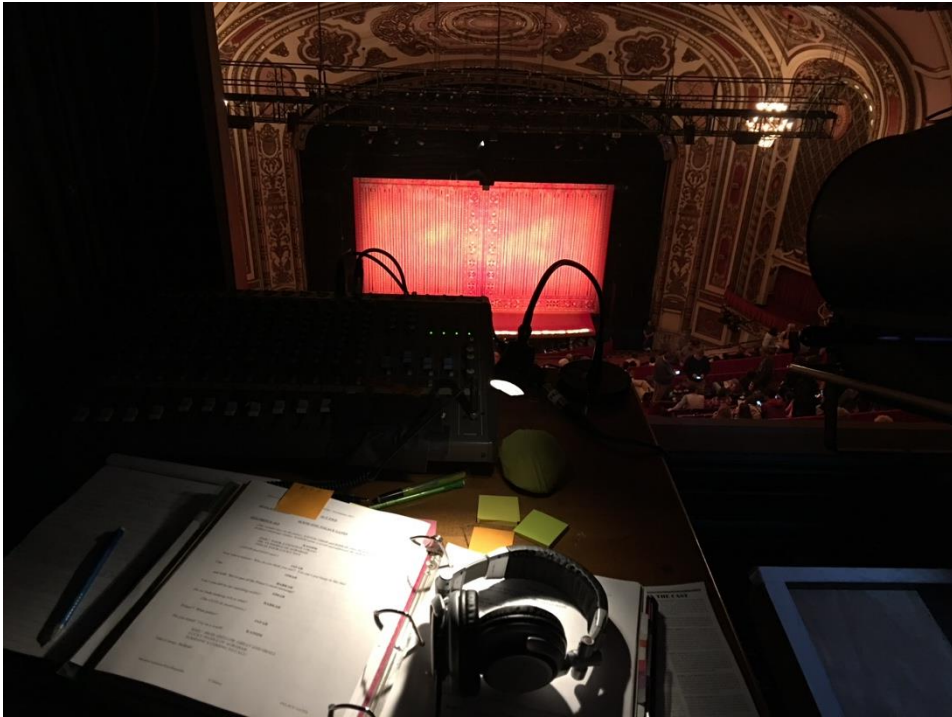


Photo provided by Bridget Melton, audio describer



# Accessible dining options



Long lines at food truck



No seating at food truck



Food vendor with accessible purchase point

# Additional accessibility options

- ✓ Mobility equipment loans (wheelchairs, scooters)
- ✓ Alternative format materials (Braille, large print, tactile maps)
- ✓ Allergen information from food vendors
- ✓ Service animal support (water station, etc.)
- ✓ Charging stations for wheelchairs (consider placement- near stage is ideal as opposed to far away)
- ✓ Performer accessibility support
- ✓ Inclusive evacuation and emergency plans
- ✓ ADA compliant portable restrooms

# Site visit

Consider the footprint of your event: terrain, intersections with the environment, scope

Structures: what are you currently working with or need to build? Are they free of obstacles and cane detectable?

Getting there and around: parking, pathways of travel, drop off/pick up areas

Seating, viewing, rest areas and shelter from elements

Accessible restrooms, also for family and companion

Dining/Concessions: seating and purchase areas

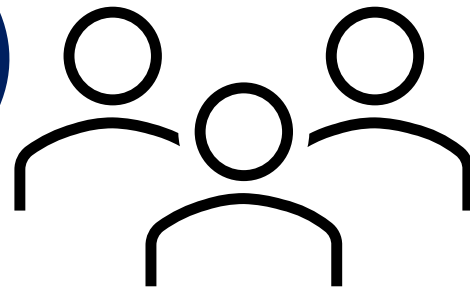
# Convene a disability advisory group

Can get the word out

Pay them a stipend

Give valuable feedback during and after

User experts





**Strategies to make your marketing accessible**

# How do you get patrons with disabilities to come?

**Can your communication and marketing materials be accessed by anyone?**

**If people don't know what you offer, they won't come!**

# What is the goal?

The ultimate goal: Eliminate the need for the attendee to figure out if the event is accessible. Clearly communicate the accessibility offerings that have been put into place.

Be sure your communication/marketing materials a) **consistently** talk about accessibility offerings and b) can be accessed by **ANYONE**.

# Accessible Marketing Strategies

- Communications: getting the word out and using multiple modalities
- Digital: Website, e-newsletters, social media
- Print Collateral: Postcard mailers, posters, flyers



# Communications

Promotional material includes information on accessibility offerings consistently

Accessibility information is publicized well in advance

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The event website uses a short URL. Dedicated accessibility page and way to request accommodation

All social media is accessible (alt-text for images, captioning for videos)

# Communications (con't)

**Accessibility Information is publicized in advance**

✓ **Outline offerings and how to get information**

✓ **Use disability access icons (wheelchair symbol, ASL and CC)**

✓ **“Know before you go”: email, newsletter, accessibility page on website**

# Know Before You Go: What is in it?

## Information about what to expect

- Date/time of event
- Agenda
- Parking, Drop off
- How to get there
- Terrain
- Accessibility offerings (include Accessibility booth)
- Any content/sensory warnings (strobe lighting, sudden loud noises)
- Contact information for point person

# Digital Marketing Strategies

## Social Media:

Use social media channels to amplify accessible programs and events













## The Problems:

**Consider that these are totally visual platforms**

**E.G. Screenreaders do not work on Instagram stories**

# Website Example: Smithsonian Festival Program

\*\* Events marked with asterisks have selected accessibility services by request only. Please review the accessibility offerings in the event listing and be sure to indicate your request when you register.

Time	Session	Type	Registration	Accessibility
<b>Friday, June 25</b>				
6-7 p.m.	Encuentro en el Smithsonian: Telmary Díaz	Story Circle	Streaming online	 
<b>Saturday, June 26</b>				
10-11:30 a.m.	Quechua Pom-Poms + Tassels	Community Workshop	SOLD OUT	  **
12-1 p.m.	Placemaking, Collective Care, and Culture: A Conversation with Global Practitioners	Story Circle	Streaming online	 
1-4 p.m.	Backstrap Weaving with Nilda Callañaupa, Part 1	Master Workshop	SOLD OUT	  **
2-3 p.m.	Languages of Home and Diaspora: Nourishing Palestine in Food and Verse	Story Circle	Streaming online	 
4-5 p.m.	Stories in Stone: Master Artisans on Tools, Technique, and Meaning	Story Circle	Streaming online	 

# Website example: Sundance Website Accessibility Page



MERCH HIGHLIGHTS LODGING VENUES MAP

Program Tickets How to Fest Sign In / Register



## How to Fest

At a Glance

Ticketing

Attend in Person

Maps

Watch Online

Accessibility

### Accessibility Commitment & Requests

### Festival Accessibility & Assistive Technology

### Film Accessibility Features Quick List

### Accessible Parking, Shuttles, & Paratransit Services

Please email [accessibility@sundance.org](mailto:accessibility@sundance.org) or call (435) 776-7790 for accessibility inquiries and requests.

At Sundance Institute, we are committed to creating an environment where all community members feel valued and thrive. Inclusion, racial equity, and accessibility drive our institutional excellence, and we aim to reflect these across our organization and in all our programs and platforms. Our goal is to make all experiences, both in-person and online, as accessible as possible.

We are committed to providing:

- Audio description whenever possible.
- ADA compliant venues for Institute events.
- Minimum of one open caption in-person screening per title (when available).
- American Sign Language – English interpretation at Institute events upon reasonable request.
- CART transcription at Institute events upon reasonable request.
- Easy access to request accommodations, meeting requests as best we can.
- Easy access to offer feedback and recommendations to the Accessibility Team.
- Ongoing accessibility assessments of all Institute and Festival in-person and online venues in partnership with the disability community.

## How to Reach Our Accessibility Team

### Accessibility Requests

If you have an accessibility request or questions for the Accessibility team, please contact [accessibility@sundance.org](mailto:accessibility@sundance.org) or use the accessibility hotline at (435) 776-7790. Every effort will be made to accommodate requests made in advance; requests made within seven days of the event are not

# Website Example: ASL Welcome Video



# Comms Example: E-newsletter



Washington State  
Nonprofit Conference

## Welcoming All: NAWA's Dedication to Accessibility

Virtual Conference

May 14-16

Tri-Cities | May 17

Spokane | May 20

Seattle | May 22



Hi Elizabeth,

NAWA is committed to making our learning spaces welcoming and inclusive to people of all abilities. As Director of Learning, I am on a continuous journey to build my skills and practices to create supportive learning spaces for everyone including at the Washington State Nonprofit Conference. Read on to learn about steps we are taking and [visit the Conference accessibility webpage for more details](#).



### Captioning

Captioning helps people with hearing loss or deafness and can also be helpful for people for whom English is not their first language. Captions also support people with normal hearing who may be participating from a noisy space.

- Online: The Conference will have live captioning for our online keynote sessions and automated captioning for workshops.
- In-Person: Automated captions will be available through [Wordly](#) for the featured speakers at the Regional Celebration. Captions will be displayed on a screen, but you also have the option of accessing them on your personal smart device.

### Interpretation and Translation

We are pleased to offer live Spanish interpretation during the online keynote sessions. For online workshops and in-person Regional Celebrations, automated translation services will be offered through [Wordly](#).

Wordly is available in over 30 languages and can be accessed by QR code or by going directly to the Wordly website in a browser while at the conference. You can read the transcript in the language of your choice on your device, but if you would like to listen to the translated transcript, you

# Print collateral

What is missing from this postcard?

**Maggie Smith**  
Poet // *Good Bones Keep Moving*

**Madeline Miller** WED 3/27  
Novelist // *Circe* // *The Song of Achilles*

**Gabrielle Hamilton** FRI 3/7  
Prune chef & essayist

**Lawrence Wright** TUE 2/7  
Investigative journalist  
*The End of October*

**Bill Gates: In Conversation** THU 2/13  
On climate change

**Bill Bryson** SUN 2/23  
Travel & non-fiction writer

**Toi Derricotte** FRI 2/26  
Poet & Cave Canem co-founder

**Maïra Kalman** MON 3/15  
Artist & writer

**A Talk by Douglas Kearney** WED 3/21  
Poet, mixed-media performer

**Ibram X. Kendi** WED 4/7  
Historian & National Book Award Winner

**Robin Wall Kimmerer** WED 4/23  
Botanist  
*Gathering Moss*

**Words Matter Literary Auction & Gala** FRI 4/23

**Natalie Diaz** FRI 4/30  
Poet, essayist, linguist

**Mary Roach** SUN 5/9  
Popular science & humorist

**Patrick Radden Keefe** MON 5/10  
Investigative journalist  
*Wind of Change*

**The Moth Mainstage** FRI 5/21  
True stories told live  
Book Bingo Launch!

**Alberto Rios** FRI 5/28  
Poet & National Book Award Finalist

**A Talk by Ocean Vuong** WED 6/9  
Poet & novelist

**Local Voices**  
WITS writers read their works-in-progress **FREE**

WED 1/13 Daemond Arrindel, Matt Gano, Evelin Garcia, Rachel Kessler, Gary Lilley, & Ann Teplick

TUE 3/23 Sara Brickman, Laura Da', Karen Finneybrock, Ramon Isao, David Lasky, & Raúl Sánchez

WED 5/12 Samar Abulhassan, Jourdan Keith, Arlene Naganawa, & Greg Stump

105

WITS

# Postcard with accessibility information

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
APR 21 – MAY 14				21 7:30	22 7:30	23 7:30
24 2:00	25	26	27	28 7:30	<b>C</b> 29 7:30	<b>A</b> 30 7:30
<b>A</b> 1 2:00	2 7:30	3	4	5 7:30	6 7:30	7 7:30
<b>S</b> 8 2:00	9	10	11	12 7:30	13 7:30	14 7:30

**A** ASL-interpreted performances.

**C** Captioned performance.

**S** Sensory Friendly Performance

# Strategies for communicating about accessibility features

## SIGNAGE

Hearing Loop or Assistive Listening Device (ALD) symbols, wheelchair accessible symbol, restrooms, accessible entrances, accessibility booth, quiet space

## BUTTONS/ TSHIRTS/VESTS

Like “Ask me” or “Access Qs” for volunteers, ushers, staff, point people

## VIDEOS OF THE SPACE

Develop a virtual tour of your space to explain the physical accessibility features

See Levitt site example:  
<https://www.facebook.com/reel/763225082832468>

**Accessibility is everyone's job!**

# Summary

**There is no  
perfect  
outdoor  
event!**

**Step-by-  
step  
instead of  
all at once**

**Set tangible  
goals and  
make a  
plan**

**Involve the  
disability  
community**

**Put  
together an  
accessibility  
team**

# Quotes

“This was my first big festival experience since before the pandemic, and my first time accompanying someone with special access needs, so you can imagine that I had a little anxiety about how things were going to go. I can't even begin to express what a relief it was to find services that far exceeded my expectations, and to observe a general run of show that was so well-oiled that I can't wait to return for future festival weekends.” **Patron**

“Thank you and your team from the bottom of my heart for making one of the most accessibility-friendly festivals I've ever been to. My family and I had a fantastic time yesterday and we're heading back today for even more fun. Bumbershoot is back and y'all have absolutely hit the mark so far.” **Patron with medical condition requiring them to leave/reenter several times**





# Resources

- [Planning Guide for Making Temporary Events Accessible \(ADA National Network\)](#)
- [Guide to Accessible Outdoor Events \(Accessibility Directorate of Ontario\) – based on Ontario standards](#)
- [American Society of Landscape Architects Universal Design Guide](#)
- [Smithsonian Folklife Festival Accessibility Information](#)

## Wayfinding resource

- [University of Washington campus](#)
- **Captioners:** National Court Reporters Association's Online Sourcebook at ncrasourcebook.com
- **Interpreters:** Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf: <https://rid.org/>
- [Food trucks for disability inclusion](#)
- Arts Access Hub: [Free self assessment tools](#)

# Resources

**Website accessibility:** <https://webaim.org/>

## **Digital Accessibility:**

- Rooted in Rights: <https://rootedinrights.org/resources/accessthat/digital-accessibility/>
- Social Media: [Accessible Social](#): Accessible best practices for social media content
  - Social Media Best Practices: <https://www.elizabethralston.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Social-Media-Best-Practices-FINAL.pdf>
  - Alt-text Resources and Articles: <https://www.elizabethralston.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Alt-Text-Resources-and-Articles-FINAL.pdf>

# Sources

- Diane Nutting, Smithsonian Festival
- Cathy Rajcan, Realtime captioner
- Bridget Melton, Audio describer

# Thank you!

## Contact information:

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[elizabeth@elizabethralston.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethralston.com)

[www.elizabethralston.com](http://www.elizabethralston.com)