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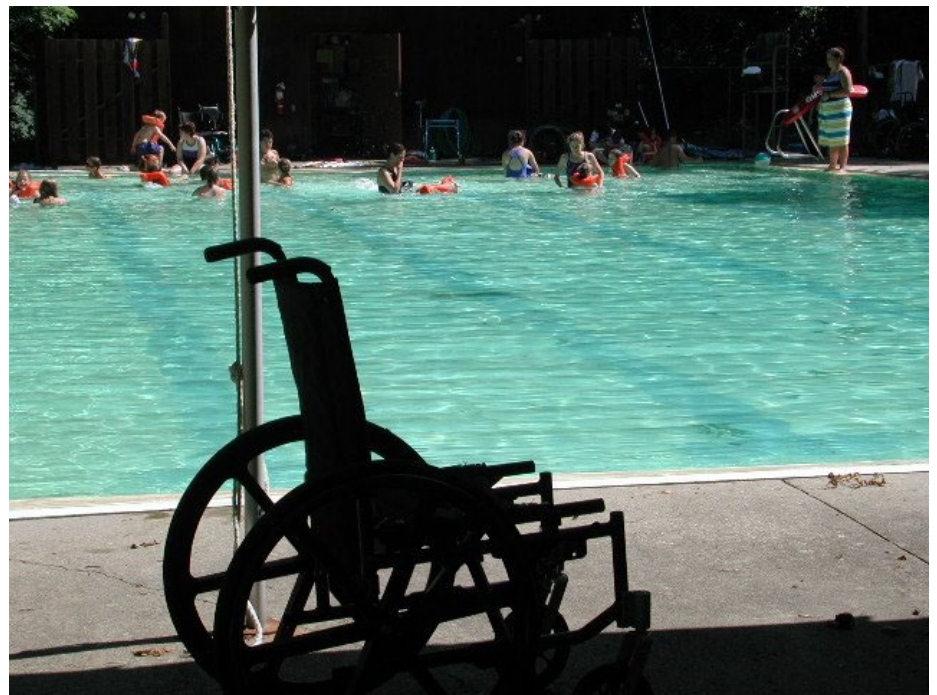
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Making A Splash: Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Aquatic Venues

by Susan Ostby and Jennifer Skulski

Swimming offers physical, mental, and social benefits to people of all ages and abilities. Consider the diversity the pool has to offer for people of all ages and abilities. A child can strengthen muscles and develop lung capacity with a game spent diving for coins or other sunken treasures. A CEO may use his lunch break to swim some laps for cardio benefits and as well as it being a refreshing break from the corporate jungle. A woman in her 50's or 60's may choose a water aerobics class for conditioning exercise that has little to no impact on her joints. A high school student may join the swim team for the competition, physical activity, and opportunity to build new friendships. No wonder, swimming consistently ranks as one of the more popular recreational activities in the United States.¹ The following monograph discusses some of the major considerations for the successful inclusion of people with disabilities at aquatic facilities including



A wheelchair sits empty next to a pool where people are swimming.

visitor expectations, accessibility guidelines for swimming pools, considerations for aquatic staff, policies and procedures, family restrooms, pool lifts, aquatic chairs and water slides.

The Benefits of Swimming

While swimming can be of great social, mental and

physical benefit to people without disabilities, it can have just as much, if not more, beneficial impact for people with disabilities. Research indicates that people with disabilities experience lower rates of social activity and leisure-time physical activity than people without disabilities and report sad feelings or depression four times more

often.² People with disabilities who are encouraged to participate in recreational activities such as swimming can achieve a greater sense of individual wellness and overall satisfaction with life.

At times, many people with disabilities only have contact with the water during aquatic therapy. Although aquatic therapy is a popular means of rehabilitation for many people with permanent and temporary disabilities, recreational swimming and aquatic activities are as attractive for people with disabilities as they are for people without disabilities.³ In the water, disabilities may be forgotten as a person enjoys the feeling of buoyancy, plays games and interacts with other swimmers. In the water, self-determination and strength are improved. In the water, we compete, we relax, and we have fun!

One example of the benefits of recreational swimming is found in the Arthritis Aquatics BASIC class at the Monroe County (IN)YMCA. Class participants enjoy renewed interest in recreational swimming, increased balance and strength, and improved agility. Participants also experience social opportunities consisting of meeting new people and making new friends. Esther Lohrmann, a participant in the aquatics class does not have arthritis, but does have back trouble. "I have been with the aquatics arthritis class since last January and I enjoy it very much... my back feels much stronger. I have

made many friends in this class, it's a great group."

Aquatic Facility Trends and Visitor Expectations

There are a wide variety of aquatic facilities that provide recreational swimming opportunities:

- Indoor and outdoor pools at community centers, recreational sports complexes, hotels and fitness centers
- Neighborhood pools operated through the local park and recreation departments
- Membership-oriented swim clubs
- Aquatic theme parks with wave action pools, specialty pools, lazy river rides and water slide attractions
- Outdoor recreation areas including designated swimming areas at rivers and lakeshores

These types of public aquatic facilities are required to be accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Bill Ramos, Faculty Lecturer in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at Indiana University, identifies current construction trends in aquatic facilities as indicative of the popularity of swimming as a recreational activity "Recently, the construction of traditional competitive environments is down while community water parks and aquatic centers are up." Increasingly common in these community aquatic facilities are splash parks,



The National Center on Accessibility is a program of Indiana University's Department of

Recreation and Park Administration and is funded in part by the U.S. Congress through the National Park Service. NCA focuses primarily on accessibility as it relates to parks, recreation, and tourism industries. Major objectives include: conducting research, providing technical assistance, developing resources and training materials, and conducting educational programs.

Access Today is a publication of the National Center on Accessibility. As a continuing service of technical assistance, the National Center on Accessibility has published a series of tech sheets on access to outdoor recreation environments. These tech sheets are intended to be used only a resource. They are not intended to be used as a design guide. As a result of evolving accessibility guidelines, some technical specifications presented herein may change as new accessibility guidelines are released. This publication is available in alternate format upon request.

National Center on Accessibility
501 North Morton Street,
Suite 109
Bloomington, IN 47404
(812) 856-4422 Voice
(812) 856-4421 TTY
(812) 856-4480 Fax
nca@indiana.edu
www.ncaonline.org

such as the one found at Riverside Aquatic Center in Indianapolis, Indiana. Splash

Many splash parks are designed with a zero depth entry enabling people with mobility impairments to use the same entrance as other visitors.

parks are less expensive to build and operate than traditional pools and bright colors and themes make the splash park fun and enticing. Many splash parks are designed with a zero depth entry enabling people with mobility impairments to use the same entrance as other visitors. The lack of pooling water also encourages people of all ages and abilities to experience the fun.

With the increase of newly constructed community aquatic centers, it is critical for facility staff to be aware of the needs and

expectations of their guests with disabilities. People with disabilities want to be able to access aquatic facilities to swim. They also have very specific expectations for their visit including:

- Accessible facilities and amenities from the parking area and main entry, to the reception desk, locker rooms, pools and concessions;
- Quality customer service from aquatic facility staff that are sensitive and knowledgeable about the needs of people with disabilities;
- Opportunities for physical activity and exercise promoting wellness and improved fitness;
- Modification of aquatic facility policies to permit accommodations for disability-related needs such as adapted equipment and assistive devices; and
- Opportunities to socialize and recreate with family and friends.

Accessibility Guidelines for Swimming Pools

In September 2002, the U.S. Access Board, the federal agency designated with developing accessibility guidelines under the Americans with Disabilities Act, released accessibility guidelines for recreation facilities, specifically swimming pools. The new guidelines will be incorporated into the existing Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) once they are adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice. Highlights of the new accessibility requirements for swimming pools include:

- Accessible routes linking the swimming pool to the amenities within the facility such as the locker rooms or restrooms, sunbathing areas, concessions, phones, and first aid stations.
- A primary means of entry into a swimming pool is required and can include a sloped entry or a pool lift.
- Where pool lifts are provided, they are required to be operable independently by swimmers with disabilities. Additional technical provisions for the pool lift also address the seat width, height above the deck and location to swing over the deck and away from the water, lifting capacity and depth for submersion.
- For larger pools, a secondary means of entry is required. The secondary means of entry can include a sloped entry, pool lift, transfer wall, transfer



The Aquatic Spray Pool at Riverside Park in Indianapolis.

system or stairs. Large pools are defined as having more than 300 linear feet of pool wall.

The U.S. Access Board has created a guide, "Accessible Swimming Pools and Spas," on the new technical provisions. The guide provides the specific requirements for the operation of the pool lifts and the dimensions for sloped entries, transfer systems, and stairs.

Accessibility guidelines for recreation facilities and swimming pools have been several years in development. In 1995, the U.S. Access Board contracted the National Center on Accessibility to conduct research on the needs and preferences of people with disabilities as they enter and exit swimming pools. NCA surveyed pool operators to examine the prevalence of

designs and devices used to provide pool access, related policies and procedures, as well as safety and maintenance concerns. In addition, NCA tested a variety of equipment and designs including swimming pool lifts, transfer systems, ramps, moveable floors and zero depth entries to measure the appropriateness, independent use and safety of each. NCA's research findings serve as the basis for the new accessibility guidelines.



Sloped Entry. A woman using a wheelchair uses the zero-depth entry at a water theme park.



Pool Lift. A lifeguard demonstrates the operation of a pool lift.



Transfer System. A man uses a transfer system, scooting down the steps, to enter the pool.



Steps. A young woman grips the handrail while using the steps to exit a pool. She receives assistance from a friend to sustain her balance and footing.

Table 1 further illustrates the permitted means of access needed for each type of pool.

Table 1: Permitted Means of Pool Access					
Pool Type	Sloped Entry	Lift	Transfer Walls	Transfer Systems	Stairs
Swimming pool (less than 300 linear feet of pool wall)	X	X			
Swimming pool (300 or more linear feet of pool wall) two means of entry required	X*	X*	X	X	X
Wave action, leisure river, and other pools where use entry is limited to one area	X	X		X	
Wading Pools	X				
Spas		X	X	X	

*Table 1: *Primary means must be sloped entry or lift, secondary means can be any of the permitted types. Reprinted from "Accessible Swimming Pools and Spas," U.S. Access Board, June 2003.*

The new accessibility guidelines for swimming pools balance the diverse needs of people with mobility impairments and other functional limitations. Through the NCA research, it was discovered that not one single means of access would be effective for every single user. For example, Bradford Woods, Indiana University's Outdoor Center, offers campers a variety of pool entry methods including a sloped entry, a pool lift, and traditional stairs. The many entry methods enable campers to choose which method best fit their needs. While the ADAAG guidelines require specific entry methods, a person with a disability may elect to enter the pool without using these methods.

Water Slides

An area of concern for aquatic facility managers is whether or not access needs to be provided to water slides. The new Accessibility Guidelines for Recreation Facilities provides an exemption for water slides. According to the U.S. Access Board's final rule, "Providing access to water slides would require extensive ramping or elevators which would make the slides cost prohibitive. Designers and operators are encouraged to provide access to smaller water slides, where possible. Recent designs for "leisure pools" have incorporated an accessible route to the top of water slides using the different elevations on a site. These designs provide increased access for individuals with

disabilities."⁵

Sometimes in the absence of structural access, life guard or pool staff will take it upon themselves to facilitate access by carrying a patron up to the slide. **THIS IS NOT ADVISED.** Carrying a person can be a safety risk and create a position of liability for the facility owner. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Justice clarifies in the Title II regulations that "consistent with longstanding interpretation of Section 504, carrying an individual with a disability is considered an ineffective and therefore an unacceptable method for achieving program accessibility."⁶

Family Restrooms

People with disabilities may

visit an aquatic facility with family, friends or caregivers. An emerging best practice for these and other types of recreation and entertainment facilities is the provision of family or



An Indianapolis Parks and Recreation employee.

unisex restrooms. Essentially the design calls for a single user restroom with door, toilet, lavatory, and changing space to accommodate a person with a disability and their caregiver or a child and parental guardian. Neither ADAAG or the new Accessibility Guidelines for Recreation Facilities require the family/unisex restroom. However, where they are provided, they are required to be accessible. Overall, the provision of a family/unisex restroom permits a person with a disability or child to be cared for and assisted in changing clothes by a caregiver of the same or opposite sex. It instills more privacy than that available in the open locker room.

Considerations for Aquatic Facility Staff

As discussed, people with disabilities may want to

participate in any one of the recreational aquatic activities a facility offers. For that reason, facility personnel and instructors should be well-trained in the needs of guests with disabilities. All staff should be trained seasonally on:

An emerging best practice for these and other types of recreation and entertainment facilities is the provision of family or unisex restrooms.

- the principles of good customer service;
- facility accessibility features and accommodations for guests with disabilities;
- program adaptations and policy modifications to facilitate inclusion of participants with disabilities;
- guidelines for communicating and interacting with people with disabilities, including disability awareness and sensitivity training; and
- intake procedures for accessibility and/or disability-related requests and protocol for implementation and evaluation.

Indeed, program instructors and customer service representatives should be advocates for the benefits of recreation, while encouraging and facilitating

equal treatment and equal opportunities regardless of age or ability. All staff should have knowledge of the key features and benefits for each program and activity area along with the essential eligibility requirements. For example, customer service staff should be aware of the differences between a beginner swim lesson program and a water aerobic program along with the minimum skills required to participate in each program. This knowledge will enable them to better answer questions during the time of registration. Facility personnel should refrain from making program choices for the participant unless such guidance is sought. Enabling participants to select their own recreational aquatic activities has a positive influence on developing self-determination.⁷

Policies and Procedures

Aquatic facility staff should analyze and assess policies and procedures to ensure none discriminate against people with disabilities. This can be done through a self-evaluation, and if the facility is covered under Title II of the ADA, it should have been completed by January 26, 1993. If a self-evaluation has not been completed, or even if the facility is covered under Title III of the ADA and was not required to complete a self-evaluation, it is still a good idea to conduct one and make it a priority. A self-evaluation can identify if any barriers to

participation exist for people with disabilities. If any are identified, policies and procedures should be modified in order to facilitate equal opportunity to participate and benefit from the program along with ensuring a positive experience for customers of all abilities. This should come with some ease as parks and recreation departments, a frequent provider of aquatic facilities, generally focus on providing a positive experience for the user.

Pool Lifts: Temporary vs. Permanent Installation

When it comes to policies and procedures, one of the most frequently asked questions among aquatic facility operators is whether or not to design a pool lift for temporary or permanent installation. There has long been concern among facility operators that pool lifts in general may create an "attractive nuisance" among children drawn to using the seat as a diving board. The argue that this safety issue would be reduced if the lift was only installed upon request and removed when there is no pool supervision, such as a lifeguard on duty. Permanent installation also brings out concerns on the overall life cycle of the equipment if it is constantly exposed to the elements, be it pool chemicals, water or weather.

Pool lifts may be permanently or temporarily installed, depending on the



Life guard staff check the operation of the pool lift at Riverside Park Aquatic Center.

operating needs of the facility. It is common for aquatic facilities to have temporary installations so the lift equipment can be removed and stored when dictated by the weather or season. A temporary lift installation, while theoretically reduces exposure, maintenance and repair needs, will increase demands on personnel. Staff must be available to install the lift when the pool is in operation in order to ensure access to the aquatic facility. Staff will need to know how to install and remove the lift, as well as test it for proper function. Temporary lifts should be installed and functioning properly whenever the pool is open to the public. Waiting until someone requests the use of the lift to install it draws unwanted attention to the user, mitigates their independence, and forces the user to rely on pool staff to enter the water. Conversely, a permanently installed lift enables the

user to enter the water independently and without drawing attention.

It should be noted that the ADA requires facility operators to maintain accessible features and equipment in working, operable condition. Since a pool lift is a mechanical device, it should be tested regularly to verify that it is in good, safe working condition. As a best practice, some facility managers add inspecting the lift to the morning operational checklist before opening the pool to the public each day.

Aquatic Chairs and Other Equipment as Auxiliary Aids

The Accessibility Guidelines for Recreation Facilities (September 2002) only really address the built or structural environment. The Access Board frequently uses the analogy that if you were to take a building, or in this case an aquatic facility, turn it upside down, and shake everything out, the areas that were "fixed" or remaining in place, would be covered under ADAAG and the new Accessibility Guidelines for Recreation Facilities. Thus, features like the stairs, pool lift, ramp, zero depth entry, and transfer tier on the accessible route would remain in tact and therefore be required to follow the new guidelines. However, some other non-fixed equipment might fall out on that shake-out, and as such, the provision of aquatic equipment to facilitate access is

somewhat of a gray area.

Both Title II and Title III of the ADA require facility owners and operators to acquire auxiliary aids and equipment to ensure access. Under the "program accessibility" provision of Title II "a public entity shall operate each service, program, or activity so that the service, program, or activity, when viewed in its entirety, is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities."⁸ According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "nonstructural methods include acquisition or redesign of equipment, assignment of aides to beneficiaries, and provision of services at alternate accessible sites."⁹ Under Title III, "a public accommodation is required to provide auxiliary aids and services that are necessary to ensure equal access to the goods, services, facilities, privileges, or accommodations that it offers, unless an undue burden or a fundamental alteration would result."¹⁰ By DOJ guidance, it would be appropriate in many cases for a facility to acquire equipment that can improve access for people with disabilities.

Specifically, this may include the acquisition of aquatic wheelchairs and perhaps some floatation devices.

Aquatic wheelchairs are commonly fabricated from plastic or pvc pipe and are provided so a person needing an assistive device can avoid the damage water, chlorine and other

pool chemicals would inflict on their own personal metal wheelchair. The provision of aquatic wheelchairs enables a person with a mobility impairment to shower before swimming, to experience a splash park, or to utilize a sloped entry into a swimming pool. As the user descends into the pool, the user's body becomes buoyant and the user will leave the aquatic wheelchair to swim.

Floatation devices are used for buoyancy and stability and make the user feel more comfortable in the water. Common floatation devices include kick boards, platforms, arm rings, and life vests. The provision of assistive devices requires additional staff training and policy-making. Staff need to know how to use each device and keep it in proper working condition. Policies for reserving devices and storing aquatic wheelchairs while the user is swimming must be clearly developed to avoid potential use conflicts and safety concerns.

A Note for Consumers with Disabilities and Advocates

It is important for visitors with disabilities to be familiar with their rights and the accessibility guidelines for aquatic facilities. This knowledge will assist in selecting which facility and program to utilize; one facility or program may be more accessible than the next. Furthermore, the attitudes of staff towards inclusion may vary between

organizations and even between facilities within one organization. It is possible that aquatic staff have not been trained regarding the needs and expectations of people with disabilities. When these situations arise,



A pool lift.

the consumer with a disability has the opportunity to positively advocate and educate aquatic center staff on accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities.

Take the plunge!

The new accessibility guidelines for recreation facilities, best practices, proactive procedures and policies and emerging trends in aquatic facility design create a more welcoming environment for swimmers with disabilities. We all need physical activity and social interaction for healthy bodies and minds. Swimming is a great opportunity for physical activity and fun. Take the plunge!

Resources

American Red Cross -

<http://www.redcross.org/services/hss/aquatics/>

Count on the American Red Cross for the best training on how to be safe in, on,

The attitudes of staff towards inclusion may vary between organizations and even between facilities within one organization.

and around the water! The American Red Cross has been the leader in swimming and life guarding since 1914.

Aquatics International -

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

www.aquaticsintl.com/

Founded in 1989, Aquatics International is the only publication devoted exclusively to the commercial and public swimming pool industries. The magazine provides detailed information on designing, building, maintaining, promoting, managing, programming and outfitting aquatics facilities.

Disabled Sports USA -

<http://www.dsusa.org/>

A nation-wide network of community-based chapters offering a variety of recreation programs. Each chapter sets its own agenda and activities.

National Ability Center -

<http://www.nac1985.org/>

The National Ability Center is committed to the development of lifetime skills for people of all ages and abilities by providing affordable outdoor sports and recreational experiences in a nurturing environment.

United States Aquatic Association of the Deaf (USAAD) -

<http://memeber.tripod.com/USAAD/>

Fosters national and international aquatic competitions

USA Swimming: Adapted Programs -

<http://www.usa-swimming.org/programs/template.pl?opt=adapted>

Information on including a swimmer with a disability in your club, national and international meets, disabled sports

organizations, and a historical perspective of major competitions.

YMCA -

www.ymca.net
Working to meet the health and social service needs of people of all faiths, races abilities, ages and incomes.

Publications

Accessible Swimming Pools and Spas. Guide by the U.S. Access Board.

<http://www.access-board.gov/recreation/guides/pools.htm>

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities; Recreation Facilities.

[http://www.access-](http://www.access-board.gov/recreation/guides/pools.htm)

[board.gov/recreation/final.htm](http://www.access-board.gov/recreation/final.htm)

Organizations

National Center on Accessibility

2805 East 10th St, Suite 190

Bloomington, IN 47408

(812) 856-4422 (voice)

(812) 856-4421 (tty)

www.ncaonline.org

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability

1640 W. Roosevelt Road

Chicago, IL 60608-6904

(800) 900-8086 (voice and tty)

www.ncpad.org

U.S. Access Board

1331 F Street, NW, Suite 1000

Washington, DC 20004-1111

(800) 872-2253 (voice)

(800) 993-2822 (tty)

www.access-board.gov

U.S. Department of Justice

(800) 514-0301 (voice)

(800) 514-0383 (tty)

www.ada.gov

ADA & IT Centers

(800) 949-4232 (voice and tty)

www.adata.org

www.adaportal.org

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About the Authors

Susan Ostby is an Accessibility Specialist for the National Center on Accessibility. Jennifer K. Skulski is Director of Marketing and Special Projects for the National Center on Accessibility.

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