

My first real exposure to accessible interpretation occurred when a colleague and I went on a group tour that required traveling from a parking lot to the visitor center tour. School buses were on-site for us to board. My companion had requested accessible transportation for his wheelchair. The transportation arrived and my friend waited as a hydraulic lift on a tractor transferred him and his chair onto a platform. As our bus took off, I watched him riding in the open air and was glad he had his jacket and gloves. During those six hours, I got a first hand look at what my friend navigates daily.

#### Why is accessibility important in interpretive planning?

In the US today, over 55 million people have a disability—and that disability affects the person's family and friends. The aging population means that all of us are either temporarily able-bodied, or disabled. And the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 states that no federal agency is to build, buy, lease, or rent a facility that is not accessible. The Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) of 1988 and Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) of 1990 require that facilities meet accessible standards.

How do we apply these questions to interpretive planning efforts? Thoughtfully. There is no one-size-fits-all. There are generally accepted practices known as universal design principles. Municipalities and numerous levels of government now use universal design principles.

Let's begin with the language of accessibility. Handicapped is not an appropriate term; instead use terminology that protects an individual's independence, dignity, and integration into activities. Terms like "persons with disabilities" or "accessible" are more fitting. There are four how-to questions to keep asking:

How would a person with a mobility impairment participate in this facility/

## Planning and Design



### Integrating Accessibility into Interpretation

program/exhibit—along with everyone else?

How would a person who is blind or has low vision participate in this facility/program/exhibit—along with everyone else?

How would a person who is deaf or hard of hearing participate in this facility/program/exhibit—along with everyone else?

How would a person who has a learning disability participate in this facility/program/exhibit—along with everyone else?

**Resource Driven Design:** When a scenic overlook is located at the top of a steep half-mile climb at 11,000 feet of elevation, the resource dictates that a rampway is not a feasible option, but building low steps, with resting platforms and benches can make the path accessible to many people who cannot climb a steep half-mile incline.

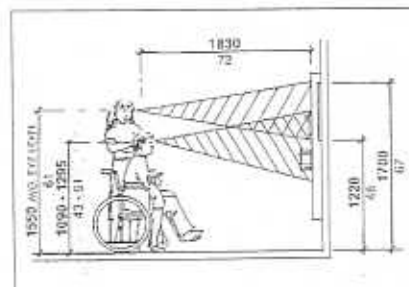
#### Other Considerations for Planning and Design Accessibility Issues

Designers and planners can now run electronic checks for color blindness problems to determine if the colors selected will be legible to those with the primary forms of color blindness by using the color checking software at [www.vischeck.com](http://www.vischeck.com).

When it comes to using Braille, the latest research indicates that 11 to 13 million people in the United States are legally blind or have low vision. Only about five percent of that number (550,000 people) are blind, and only about five percent of people who are blind read Braille. While Braille is legally required on signs that designate permanent rooms, the majority of people with low vision can make use of large print materials (items in 18 point type or larger).

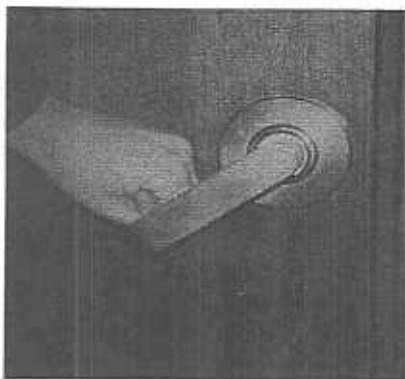
#### Rules to Remember

- Make use of high contrast colors.
- Emphasize use of graphics over text.
- Use text in upper and lower case. Sans, slab, or simple serif fonts work best.
- Use a maximum center line height of 48 inches. Exhibits, signs, and other visuals should maintain a maximum center line of 48 inches creating a cone of vision (see figure below) for both seated (or very short) and standing individuals.



- Make visuals approachable within two inches.

- All controls must be operable with a closed fist.



- Use tactile change underfoot to alert the visitor to a transition in the setting.
- Make sure the International Symbol of Accessibility (ISA) is used regularly.



#### Audio Descriptions, Assistive Listening, and Audio Tours: Not the Same!

All people with diminished vision are served well by audio description, which is different from an audio tour.

Used in interior settings, audio description is a scripted narrative of the facility. It serves to create a visual image in the user's mind. Audio description specialists develop scripts and do tapings with paced narration, sound, and exhibit information. Exhibits would be part of the narrative, along with furniture placement, wall color, and flooring. Audio descriptions are required in most visitor center facilities.

Assistive listening systems are devices used to assist hearing or sight-impaired people. They are

required in auditoriums with fixed seating, but there are no guidelines for outdoor use. Many sites now use portable FM units to broadcast, which are low cost and extremely helpful to many people.

Audio tours that are created for driving tours, or exhibit enhancements still serve a purpose, but generally have a specific interpretive theme and content based around an identified interpretive experience, be it geology, history, or botany. These tours do not include additional information that could guide someone through a space.

Plan a budget and schedule that includes reviewing accessibility at every stage. When we use principles of universal design for sites, facilities, and exhibits, we implement designs that are better for everyone.

#### References

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Heritage & Wilderness Programs.  
[www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/  
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- USDA Forest Service Exhibit  
Accessibility Checklist, based on  
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[www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/  
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## idea implementation

Planning, design, and production to  
support outreach, interpretation,  
and heritage tourism

Cremer's Field, Alaska

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