

# The Voice

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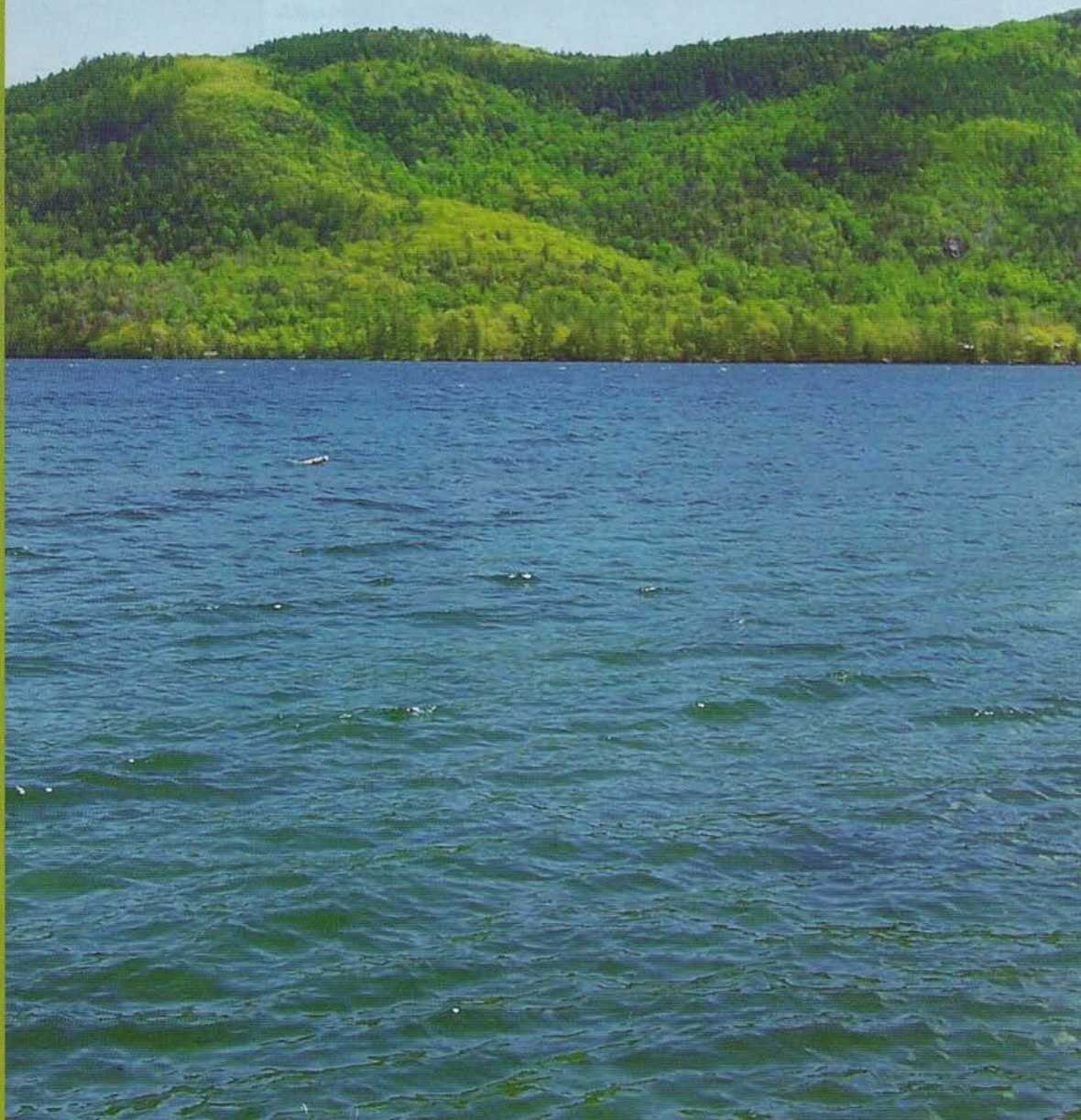
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## EXPANDING HORIZONS

New and Innovative Ideas for the Changing World of Parks and Recreation



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# Expanding Horizons and a Single Point of Contact: Managing a Changing World in Parks and Recreation

*"The only constant is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be.*

*---Isaac Asimov, writer and scientist---*

We all know this to be true – the world around us is forever in a state of change. Some would argue, however, that the rate of change in the last 50 years has exceeded the rate over the last several centuries of civilized human existence. This dizzying rate of transformation makes it difficult to find the space and time to study and reflect on what is and what will be. As we are caught up in the frenetic pace of our everyday lives, we lose sight of the “sea changes” (those large, important, sometimes imperceptible fundamental shifts) which are taking place around us. We fail to adjust and change with these fundamental shifts because they are hard to discern, much like the frog in the pot of slowly heating water. Then one day we realize the work we are doing no longer aligns with the needs of our communities and constituents. Like the frog in the pot, we haven’t noticed the water is now boiling, and we need to make quick changes to survive. In this article, I would like to make a small attempt to step back and examine just a few of the major changes that affect parks and recreation, and offer just one concrete strategy on how to respond in one small way that helps us flourish, not just survive.

Out of the hundreds of major social changes affecting our everyday working lives, I would like to focus on just four I feel have profound implications for parks and recreation: the shift in demographics in the U.S., the shift in philosophy to a solution-focused strengths approach, the re-emergence of leisure as important to society, and the fundamental changes in how we communicate with each other.

## • Demographics

Ethnicity and race – according to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2050, those who are now in the minority in our country will be the majority, projected to be 54% of the population. Among

children, this shift will happen by 2023, and by 2050, 62% of U.S. children will be what is today considered minority groups. Overall, the Hispanic population is projected to triple, the black population will increase by 14%, and the Asian population by almost 10% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

**Age** – we are an aging country. By 2030, 1 in 5 people will be over 65 years old in the U.S. By 2050, there will be twice as many older adults in the U.S. as there are now. Of those, approximately 42% will have a disability of some sort.

**Ability level** – in the U.S., approximately 1 in 5 people has a disability, and 12% of the U.S. population has a significant disability. Obesity is another factor that affects people’s ability level. In the U.S., the obesity rate has continued to climb at an alarming rate. According to the CDC, the obesity rate in adults is now at 34% of the population. In children, the rate of overweight and obese children is 1 out of 3 and is triple the rate it was in 1980 for that age group. Obesity affects not only functional ability, but invites many other chronic health issues as well, such as diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems.

## • A Fundamental Philosophical Shift

Recent and emerging theories about what truly helps communities and individuals have shifted our focus from “fixing problems” to building strengths. This fundamental philosophical shift can be seen in the youth development area, with a focus on building resilience. It can be seen in the therapeutic recreation and other helping fields, with a focus on strengths-based approaches. It can be seen in the community development field, with a focus on community asset-building and community coaching. It can be seen in organizations and businesses with a focus on positive organizational culture and appreciative inquiry. What we have learned, with new knowledge from neuroscience, is that we can gain much more as human beings and social groups by focusing on our strengths. We learn more from excellence versus failure, and from building on what we do well and what we want to have happen in our lives and communities than we do on dwelling on problems and negative situations. This strengths-based approach has changed individual, organizational, and community approaches to services. We no longer say, “What’s wrong and how do we fix it?” Instead, we say, “What do we want, and how do we make it happen using our strengths and resources?” This simple shift in thinking mobilizes a whole different part of our brains, and leads to creative and hopeful change.

## • The Importance of Leisure

We are experiencing a renaissance in terms of the importance of leisure in our lives. With movements like Take Back Your Time, Slow Living, Simple Living, and the Right 2 Vacation, many Americans are realizing that leisure is extremely important to quality of life. They are giving up raises, promotions, and even



full-time work to have more daily enjoyment and leisure. Part of this movement is based on the idea that well-being is more about doing the things you love with the people you love, than it is about money, consumer products, and status. People are changing their everyday lives to incorporate quality leisure and they want quality parks, facilities, program, and services available to them.

#### • **Viral Communication**

Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Skype, Flickr, Google, Instant Messenger... as I type this list, a new technology or social networking tool has likely been introduced. Google announced in 2008 that it had indexed over one trillion unique websites and that number changes by the minute. Widespread wireless internet access, personal digital assistants, satellite phones, and the like make it possible to be connected and have access to instant communication at all times in all places. Sometimes called viral communication, these new platforms and technologies give people the power to connect with others, or learn breaking news and ideas, with no organization or agency involved.



These four major changes truly impact and expand our horizons in parks and recreation. At the same time they challenge us to change.

- Because of the shift in demographics, we serve a much broader and more diverse constituency in our parks, facilities, programs, and services. We know from research that the more diverse our communities are, the more they thrive. In parks and recreation, we need to be ready to serve our diverse communities to contribute to this flourishing. How can we do this?
- Instead of seeing differences in people as problems or as "special needs," we will use a lens that sees differences as variations in the human condition. Our goal as providers of valuable services and valued spaces becomes one of inclusion and accommodation. We will routinely expect to vary our places, spaces, and practices to align with the variations in our constituency. No longer do we expect one size to fit all, as there is no "majority" one size. How can we proactively respond, include, and accommodate all the variations in our community?
- The diverse constituencies in our communities increasingly want more meaningful leisure and recreation experiences based on what they aspire to for quality of life, health, and well-being. The people we serve will want to fully participate, not "sit on the bench." They will want to have equal access to the

facilities, parks, programs, and services you offer. How will we meet this need? How will we assure that people, especially those with differences, are experiencing quality leisure?

- Because they can instantly communicate with or without us, the people we serve in our agencies will be more and more demanding of having their needs met. They will have already talked with ten other people about your program or park in the five minutes before they talk to you. They will have tweeted, facebooked, surfed, texted, blogged, and IMed about what they need and what they expect from you. On the other hand, you have tools to communicate just as rapidly and effectively. Information-sharing will become easier, but harder. How can we manage this heightened level of communication, especially when it is often full of requests for assistance to access your facilities and services or is critical of your lack of responsiveness?

Interestingly, twenty years ago, when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, one important key to meeting the above needs was actually a part of this law. Although the law stipulates that only agencies employing 50 or more people were required to do this, it has become an increasingly important practice for all agencies, even with a small staff. And it has become a vital practice not just in terms of working with people with disabilities, but with people of all types of differences. What is this best practice? It is having an **inclusion point of contact**.

So what is an inclusion point of contact and why is it a best practice that can help meet the challenges I described? First, a little history lesson. The ADA calls the inclusion point of contact an *ADA Coordinator*, and more narrowly defines this person's role as ensuring compliance with the ADA. Although the roots of this best practice are in the ADA, and actually even earlier from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, I mean something much broader and more proactive when referring to an inclusion point of contact.

#### **The Go-To Person, the Place to Start, the Champion**

An inclusion point of contact is the "go-to" person at your agency or facility when requests for services, accommodations, or other differences from your normal practices are needed. An inclusion point of contact is the easily identified place to start. When someone from your community calls or emails to request some form of accommodation or service, the inclusion point of contact is able to help them without bouncing them around to other departments, offices, or staff. The inclusion point of contact is the one-stop shop.

But more than that, the inclusion point of contact is the champion for meeting the diverse needs of your constituency, for communicating your agency's eagerness to serve all, and for learning the nuances and cultures of your constituency groups. The inclusion point of contact takes a leadership role in assuring that all your staff, even seasonal and part-time, are trained in disability awareness, cultural diversity, and accessibility. One of the main elements of the inclusion point of contact job description is to increase the human resource infrastructure of your agency to be more able to meet your community's diverse and ever changing needs. The inclusion point of contact is vigilant of the communication you send out from your agency, from program brochures to websites to press releases, to be sure it reflects

### Inclusion Point of Contact Typical Duties

- Ensures inclusion point of contact information is well-publicized on all agency communication
- Responds to and consistently addresses the unique concerns of constituents, especially those who need support or accommodation to participate in programs and services or to access areas and facilities
- Oversees plans for special events so that accessibility to events is barrier-free
- Serves as the central resource on disability and other differences to staff and the public
- Leads the agency's efforts at self-evaluation and planning for improved physical accessibility, administrative and programmatic inclusion
- Provides staff training on accommodations, supports, and strategies for inclusion, as well as disability awareness and other sensitivity training
- Serves as a resource on ADA and other pertinent legislation
- Establishes and maintains positive relationships with community groups, such as self-advocacy groups, parent groups, and cultural groups to improve services
- Coordinates and monitors agency communication to ensure sensitivity, inclusiveness, and access (alternative forms of communication)
- Serves as an advocate for inclusion and accessibility at the agency; forms and uses an advisory committee to assist
- Monitors and evaluates agency's inclusion efforts

#### Inclusion Point of Contact Information Disseminated to the Public

- Name
- Office Address
- Telephone Number
- Email Address



#### A Sample Statement to Include in all Materials Disseminated to the Public

At Hometown Parks and Recreation, we welcome the participation of people with disabilities or other differences in all our services, activities and programs. If you call ahead to let us know your specific needs, we will be happy to learn how we can best serve you. Please contact our inclusion point of contact:  
 John Smith (518) 123-4455 or (518) 123-4933 TTY or [jsmith@hometown.org](mailto:jsmith@hometown.org).  
 Office address: 555 Main Street, Hometown, NY

the diversity of your community and invites all to come and play. The inclusion point of contact plays a leadership role in monitoring the communication that happens within constituency groups, such as self-advocacy groups, parent groups, or cultural groups, and invites an open dialogue about how your agency can better meet their needs.

The inclusion point of contact is also an advocate. When your facility is slow to change the ramp into the visitor center, or the weight of the entrance door, the inclusion point of contact stays on it until it is done. The inclusion point of contact pays special attention to your agency's policies and procedures, making sure they are inclusive and accommodating to all people. In sum, the inclusion point of contact is the watchdog for physical accessibility, administrative inclusion, and programmatic inclusion for all people. A typical list of duties for an inclusion point of contact, as well what information your agency should make readily available about the point of contact, is offered in **Figure I**.

What qualifications should the inclusion point of contact have? First, an eagerness and authentic desire to serve all constituents from a strengths-based approach is fundamental. With that positive attitude, knowledge of accommodations, supports, alternative forms of communication, adapted and auxiliary equipment, positive behavioral strategies, disability, aging, and other differences is essential. Knowledge of legislation such as ADA is also important. Therapeutic recreation specialists are a natural fit to serve as an inclusion point of contact, given their

academic preparation, but other recreation professionals with additional training are qualified as well.

Will designating and effectively using an inclusion point of contact help you meet the all the challenges of the large scale changes we are experiencing? No one action will do that. But it is one small step in the right direction, and one that an agency can easily take. An inclusion point of contact can help your agency meet the broad and varied needs of your increasingly diverse community in a proactive and positive way. The point of contact can help improve the quality of the recreation experience, and can help communicate more effectively your agency's commitment to the quality of life of ALL community members. If you would like assistance developing the role and function of an inclusion point of contact at your agency, the New York State Inclusive Recreation Resource Center (NYS IRRRC) can help you. Our mission is to help ALL people play wherever they choose, and helping you make this step will help us achieve our mission. Contact us at [InclusiveRec@cortland.edu](mailto:InclusiveRec@cortland.edu) or visit our web site listed below.

#### Resources

- New York State Inclusive Recreation Resource Center [www.nysirrc.org](http://www.nysirrc.org).
- ADA Coordinator Tool Kit: [www.dbtacnorthwest.org/tools/tool-kits/ada-coordinators](http://www.dbtacnorthwest.org/tools/tool-kits/ada-coordinators)

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