

Beyond Accessibility

Adaptive Recreation Opportunities Go a Long Way Toward Healing People with Disabilities

by Alaina Brandenburger



Photo courtesy of Flickr user Army Medicine via Creative Commons

With new ADA rules and regulations making their way toward full implementation (the new regulations must be implemented by March 2015), many agencies are focusing on accessibility with regard to their facilities. However, many agencies may be overlooking opportunities in adaptive recreation programming – programs and classes specifically designed for people with disabilities. One of the more notable examples of adaptive recreation in the past decade was demonstrated in the 2005 documentary, ‘Murderball,’ which followed the U.S. Wheelchair Rugby team on its quest to win a medal at the 2004 Paralympic games in Athens.

Over the past 10 years, programming for people with disabilities has achieved a heightened awareness with an increase in the number of veterans with disabilities returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. These veterans, along with a U.S. Census estimate of about 19% of Americans as a whole, want to participate in sports and recreational activities; they may even help people with new disabilities adapt to their change in circumstances. Preliminary research suggests that participation in competitive sports and other activities can go a long way toward assisting people with disabilities on their road to recovery by allowing them to participate in similar activities to what they did before, and helping them focus on something other than their disability – a hypothesis that is currently being tested by students at the University of Arizona. Though their ability to participate in some traditional activities is limited, they are very adept at participating in sports-based programs.

“None of the challenges to implementing and maintaining adaptive sports programs are insurmountable.”

However, adaptive recreation programs are not always affordable or available to those who need them. Many of the agencies for which GreenPlay has completed Parks and Recreation Master Plans offer some form of adaptive or therapeutic recreation to people with disabilities of all types – physical, mental, developmental, or otherwise. As a condition of the Americans with Disabilities Act, these agencies must make recreational activities accessible to those who wish to participate, but some agencies go above and beyond this requirement, offering adaptive sports teams, specialized classes, and tournaments, among other provisions. Examples of such programs include

modified swimming lessons, wheelchair tennis, adaptive ice skating, adaptive skiing, and much more.

One obstacle to providing these services is that the equipment can be costly to purchase, and this may be cost-prohibitive when there isn't enough need in the community to offset the costs. Another barrier is that many agencies – especially those with college and university-provided recreation services – already have alternative providers filling this need in the community. In an October 2013 article in Recreation Management magazine, Betsy Clark, Ph.D., president and founder of the National Alliance for Accessible Golf and an adjunct professor of sports management at Stetson University in Central Florida, is quoted as saying, “None of the challenges to implementing and maintaining adaptive sports programs are insurmountable. Education and awareness for the general population—and particularly among other athletes and those who administer athletics programs and facilities—are important tools for overcoming these obstacles.”

If your agency sees a potential need for adaptive recreation, some background research may be in order. By conducting a Needs Assessment along with a detailed Services Assessment and an Alternative Provider Analysis, your community can realistically evaluate its accessible recreation needs and begin considering partnerships – the most obvious being Paralympics and Wounded Warrior programs. You can also evaluate the potential return on investment for these programs and activities. If your agency already has similar programs in place, it may be helpful to conduct a Marketing Assessment to ensure that the part of the community that is most likely to use them is aware that they are out there.

Adding adaptive recreation to your agency's service portfolio, or more actively promoting what is available is a great way to supplement goals set forth in your agency's ADA plan. By providing a truly inclusive array of programs and services, your community will stand out as one that acts upon its caring for its citizens and their quality of life.