

Focus on accessibility: Anatomy of a disability accommodation

by Heather Stelljes, Division of Extension Access Consultant

In February, Ozaukee County 4-H prepared to start its Dog Project at the Ozaukee County Fair Grounds. The building was reserved, and youth started signing up, including a youth that uses a wheelchair. While the building itself was wheelchair accessible, there were concerns about the gravel floor on which the training was to occur. What followed was a formal disability accommodation in practice. 4-H Program Educator **Jayna Hintz** and Access Consultant **Heather Stelljes** reflect on the process.

How did the accommodation request get started?

Heather: The parent contacted Jayna, and then Jayna reached out to me. The original question was how to determine if the location for the Dog Project was ADA-compliant, as the parent was asking for the project to take place in a location with all concrete or hard floors. (While there is an established online process for [requesting accommodations](#), it's far more common for participants to reach out directly to the Extension employee and ask for an accommodation to a program or event.)

Jayna: When the family enrolled, I checked the family's profile (including accommodations) in 4-H Online and then notified **Jason Heller**, the volunteer Dog Project leader, that the youth had joined the project. Jason immediately expressed concern about the space, as he had worked with the youth in the past.

The Dog Project meeting space is the enclosed and heated show arena at the fairgrounds. A soccer group normally uses the arena at this time of year and lays down turf. In the past, the turf smoothed out the dirt floors enough for the youth to be able navigate her wheelchair. However, due to COVID restrictions, the soccer team was not practicing in the arena so there was no turf. Jason was planning to use mats instead, but without turf, he was concerned the mats would not work with a wheelchair. He then inquired about reasonable accommodations.

I immediately reached out to the parent with the Jason's concern. She asked if I could find out if another building at the fairgrounds would offer a concrete or hard floor. That's when I reached out to Heather, as I knew to contact her from my onboarding sessions in 2019 and had connected previously with her regarding other questions.

What happened next?

Heather: My initial thought was to learn more about the youth's strength and skill in maneuvering the wheelchair as well as the type of wheelchair in determining accessibility. My second thought was about the actual space and ground/floor. Brilliantly, Jayna sent a picture of the indoor area in her original email, which provided a lot of information about the space.

I then looked more closely at ADA regulations and standards and confirmed my understanding with a colleague at UW-Madison. Top Tantivivat is the Facilities Access Specialist for the Division of Facilities Planning and Management. Top confirmed that gravel or dirt surfaces rarely offer a clear-cut answer on what is accessible. In asking him about using mats versus something like plywood, Top shared that plywood would likely be better, given stability and strength. Top also reminded me that the thickness would be a factor, so there wouldn't be much of a lip to go over.

I shared this information with Jayna and subsequently had a conversation with the family. That conversation was very helpful, and a key part of the interactive process outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. It became clear that a hard surface would be necessary, given the youth uses a manual wheelchair and that the ground was far too bumpy and would likely soften as spring approached.

Jayna: Prior to reaching out to Heather, I invited the parent and youth to meet with Jason and determine if the mats would work. I also reached out to the county to find out if a different space was available for the event. Additionally, I shared Jason's contact information with Heather for direct communication, as he had more specific information about the space.

Once it was determined that an accommodation was necessary, it was most efficient to have the youth and family meet with Jason at the space to determine the most appropriate material to put down. They decided that plywood might be a little too thick. Jason researched some alternative options and landed on 3/16" hardboard being a solution. He also changed the layout of the space and calculated how much was necessary to order.

How was the actual accommodation implemented?

Heather: A solution was in place, but now we needed to purchase the materials and implement the accommodation! General guidance is that whoever is hosting an event should also be budgeting for accommodations. In this case, however, I knew that Jayna was working with both budget and time constraints. So, I connected with Dominic to explore what options might exist for this situation. He agreed to support the accommodation request out of OAIC's operational budget. After we coordinated around this point, I worked with Kate Wodyn to purchase the materials from a store that was local to the area. The materials were then picked up by Jason.

Jayna: The hardest part for me was finding out how or who could help pay for the hardboard. The cost was around \$200, and I knew the Dog Project group did not have the funds and they were concerned they might not be able to meet or they would need to delay.

Heather: So many clubs and programs are already doing so much with so little. It was the highlight of my day to share that OAIC would be able to cover the cost.



Purchasing \$200 of hardboard panels allowed a youth in a wheelchair to participate in a 4-H program at the Ozaukee County fairgrounds.

Reflections

What would the process have been like without a supportive volunteer?

Jayna: Jason is an outstanding volunteer, a great communicator, open to ideas and discussion, and really wanted to find a solution. This could have had a much different outcome without the work and thoughtfulness provided by Jason and the youth's parent. Both worked together to create a positive experience for the youth.

Heather: To have somebody meet with the family and youth and check out the space and explore options made all the difference. It was also incredible that Jason took the initiative to find out where we could purchase the supplies. We would have been able to provide this accommodation without him, but it would have been very cumbersome, and much more time consuming.

Did anything about the accommodations process surprise you?

Jayna: How quickly everyone worked to find a solution. Everyone involved focused on a solution to accommodate and make the space wheelchair accessible. We focused on what we could do and did not create constraints.

Heather: One of the most interesting things about this request is that had another space been available, moving the location of the program may very well have been the recommended accommodation. Sometimes a change of venue is a reasonable request, and other times it is not. In this case, moving the venue would have been reasonable, but due to COVID and curling, no space was available, so we had to come up with a different accommodation.

This was the first time that I've worked with an accommodation that cost money outside of ASL interpreting. That accommodation has a long history of being covered by the Division of Extension as a whole; but the messaging for other accommodations is often to "budget for accommodations." This accommodation request has allowed OAIC to develop a budget and funding request process. It affirmed the commitment the Division of Extension has to access and inclusion for people with disabilities.

Did you learn anything that would be helpful for others to know?

Jayna: Open communication was key. Being proactive and reaching out immediately to the youth's parent with concerns about the event space and contacting Heather, our disability access consultant, made it possible for a solution to be found and implemented within 15 days. The youth joined 4-H on February 15 and started the dog training project on March 1.

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Heather: Accommodations can take some time and effort but working together makes it relatively smooth and easy. It also confirmed that the formal process can look a variety of ways. Colleagues may reach out with a question, but it can lead to a formal accommodation being put into place. Additionally, it crystallized the important role volunteers play in the Division of Extension's mission.