

Outdoors for Everyone: Water Accessibility Checklist



The Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation is dedicated to improving the quality of life for individuals and families impacted by paralysis. Part of that mission is ensuring everyone of all abilities can experience what nature has to offer. This summer, as local and state beaches, pools, and lakes become a go-to for residents and visitors alike, the Reeve Foundation will be launching the 2024 'Outdoors for Everyone' initiative on water accessibility, educating the community and public on various water accessibility tips and ways to ensure everyone is in on the fun this summer and beyond.

Navigating the great outdoors and water environments presents unique challenges for the **nearly 5.4 million people living with paralysis** in the U.S. The picturesque beauty of beaches and lakes can be overshadowed by the difficulties posed by rocky or sandy terrains, which can be challenging to maneuver on manual and motorized wheelchairs. Additionally, sun exposure can be hazardous for those living with paralysis, as they often face challenges in regulating their body temperature.

The Reeve Foundation's new 'Water Accessibility Outdoor Checklist' is tailored to beaches, public pools, and other bodies of water to ensure people living with disabilities can enjoy these spaces. For additional support, individuals can also reach out to our Information Specialist team or use the Foundation's Resource Map to help plan their next outdoor trip near the water.

BEFORE ARRIVAL

For people living with disabilities such as paralysis or those who require mobility devices, planning ahead is key when it comes to spending time in the sun and water. This is why it is important for beaches, pools, lakes, rivers, water parks, and other water areas to provide the most up-to-date information to the public. Here are items to consider as you plan to visit or work with partners in this space.



WEBSITE AND MAP INFORMATION:

- Ensuring water spaces — such as beaches or pools — have accessible information readily available to users can make or break their experience. Websites and other resources should include:
 - Maps of accessible features (e.g. boardwalks/ramps, beach mats, restrooms, changing stations, information on drinking water access, etc.)
 - Detailed information about accessible equipment that is available to reserve or use onsite (e.g. beach wheelchairs, pool lifts, accessible canoes, etc.) and the process to obtain and use that equipment.
 - Photos and user reviews to inform visitors of what to expect.
- Maps should also indicate any cooling spaces if available onsite. People with paralysis do not always have the ability to self-regulate their temperature. Dehydration and heat stroke can come on quickly and suddenly, so having spaces in the shade or even in a cooled area indoors is helpful for those with paralysis to take breaks.



TRAINED PROFESSIONALS:

- Lifeguards and other staff onsite should be trained on inclusivity and accessibility measures. Some lifeguard training requires inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, but there is no nationwide mandate.
- Take a look at your location's requirements and make sure there is required training for people living with a disability. This will ensure the safety of those with paralysis in case of an emergency.
- All pools are mandated to have pool lifts by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). However, many people (sometimes even staff at the pool) don't know how to use them. Including staff training on how to use these pool lifts is needed to create a safe and accessible environment.

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

Throughout the summer, parking spaces, drop-off areas, and device/physical transfers at a beach or pool can be a challenge to navigate. Location and layout of facilities should, at a minimum, meet ADA compliance. Here are some items to consider if you plan to visit or work with beaches, public pools, national parks, water parks, and other water locations:



DROP-OFF AREAS/PARKING SPACES:

- For sites that are able to assess how many visitors with disabilities there are, pay attention to those numbers. If there is high visitation of people within the community or a special event that will be bringing in members of the community, additional accessible parking is recommended.
- Ensure that signs and paint markings indicate accessible parking and passenger drop-off/pick-up areas (e.g., clearly marked access aisles, and parking space dimensions).
- By the numbers:
 - Standard accessible parking spaces must be at least eight feet wide.
 - Accessible van parking spaces must be at least eleven feet wide.
 - The access aisle for both accessible car and van spaces is required to be a minimum of five feet.
- At bare minimum, the number of accessible parking spaces required by the ADA depends on the total number of parking spaces in the lot. For example:
 - Lots with 1-25 parking spots require one accessible parking spot that also works for vans. Lots with 26-50 require two accessible parking spaces and one that is a van-accessible parking space.
- Consider increasing the number of accessible spaces beyond the ADA-required amount. Without parking, there is no access.



DEVICE/PHYSICAL TRANSFERS AND BEACH MATS:

- Make sure to have transfer devices available for those living with paralysis or using a wheelchair. Different transfer devices can be used for different scenarios and purposes, and some can be used in the sand while others cannot. Having a general understanding of these is helpful.
 - A temporary portable Hoyer lift or transfer sling can be used to assist in surface-to-surface transfers, moving one from a wheelchair to a beach wheelchair.
 - The edges of a dock or a pool often consist of a rough material or granular surface. Another material should be put down on the surface if any transfers are occurring, so no one scrapes a leg or gets hurt.
- Thinking through where a transfer is done is also important. All transfers should be done on level ground, which is better to do on cement than in the sand.
- There should be an area for wheelchair users to leave their everyday wheelchairs while they're in their beach wheelchairs. This area should not be in the sand or near salt water, as these can damage one's wheelchair.
- Beach access mats make entering a beach much easier for wheelchair users and their caregivers. A beach should have at least one mat for use. Please check a beach's website or onsite signage to see if they offer access mats.

THINGS TO DO

Aside from enjoying the beautiful views of water and nature, there are many different water activities to participate in for the community living with paralysis. Each activity may require a different process for those living with paralysis or wheelchair users. Here are tips that offer a starting point for accessible activities such as using beach wheelchairs, boating, and more.



ENJOYING THE VIEWS AND WATER:

- Those living with paralysis and wheelchair users are able to get close to bodies of water such as beaches, pools, and other bodies of water on accessible pathways and mats.
 - To note, wheelchairs are able to move on beach mats but can become damaged from the sand or salt water. If someone is unable to transfer into a beach wheelchair or get into the water, it is recommended to stay in a safe area.
- Consider coming to outdoor spaces with friends, family, or a caregiver so that they can enjoy the outdoors as well and provide assistance if needed.
- Please note: Individuals with a ventilator that is not closed should not be transferred or go into the water.



ACCESSIBLE BOATING AND WATER SPORTS:

- Various outdoor water organizations may have water programs and equipment available, including accessible boats, canoes, kayaks, and much more.
 - For an activity such as kayaking, one could pull the kayak out to the end of the dock, take the wheelchair down the boatlift, and do a transfer over to the kayak with minimal assistance.
 - For an activity such as water skiing, one could go down to the edge of the lake or a body of water and get in the water in that area.
- Boat slips should provide clear pier space 60 inches wide at minimum and at least as long as the boat slips.
 - Each 10 feet maximum of linear pier edge serving boat slips should have at least one continuous clear opening 60 inches wide minimum.
 - Although the minimum width of the clear pier space is 60 inches, it is recommended that piers be wider to improve the safety for those living with disabilities, particularly on floating piers.
- Boarding piers at boat launch ramps should provide clear pier space of 60 inches at a minimum and should extend the full length of the boarding pier.



LIFE VESTS AND FLOTATION DEVICES:

- Life vests or flotation devices should be available for all activities and levels of flotation support and vary depending on the activity, such as kayaking and surfing. Some water programs will mandate a custom life vest. This should be taken into consideration.
- People living with paralysis may slip out of certain types of life vests easily. However, various life vests are better suited for people with disabilities, including ones that snap at the bottom of the life vest to prevent riding up the neck or have Velcro and are worn as one piece.
 - Some life vests have collars around the neck, which are recommended by the Coast Guard, and those collars help to flip a person with paralysis back over if they fall forward on their face.
- The level of function of the person is an important factor and plays into the type of life vest that should be worn.

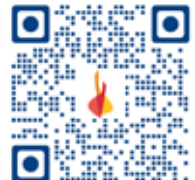


FISHING PIER AND PLATFORM ACCESS:

- Accessible routes for fishing piers and platforms should include gangways and floating piers. The total length of the gangway/series of gangways should be 30 feet at minimum.
 - At least 25 percent of the railings, guards, or handrails should be 34 inches maximum above the ground or deck surface.
- Portions of the railings that are lowered to provide fishing opportunities for people living with disabilities should be located in a variety of locations on the pier or platform to give people a variety of locations from which to fish.
- Where railings, guards, or handrails are present, edge protection is required to prevent wheelchairs from slipping off the fishing pier or platform. At least one turning space should be provided.
 - Extending the deck of the fishing pier or platform by 12 inches where the 34-inch-high railing provided is an alternative design, allowing wheelchair users to pull into a clear space and move beyond the face of the railing.
 - A clear floor or ground space should also be provided at the location where a railing, guard, or handrail is present.
- Curbs or barriers should extend 2 inches at minimum above the surface of the fishing pier or platform.
- The ground or deck surface should extend 12 inches at minimum beyond the inside face of the railing. Toe clearance should be provided.

For more information, visit [ChristopherReeve.org](https://www.ChristopherReeve.org) or call our Information Specialists at 1-800-539-7309.

Our Information Specialists are available
Mondays through Fridays from 7 a.m. ET - 12 a.m. ET.
You can also leave a message if you are calling after hours.



OUTSIDE SOURCES

Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards **Fishing Piers and Platforms**

U.S. Access Board's **Recreational Boating Facilities**

SAFETY AND HEALTH TIPS

- From a health and safety perspective, there are a few items to keep in mind for those living with disabilities if visiting a beach, pool, or other water location.
 - Many people don't think of pressure injuries as open wounds. Pressure injuries are prevalent in people with paralysis, and they should not go into a pool with one.
 - During a water activity, people with paralysis may get fatigued much faster than they are accustomed to. Heat stroke and hypothermia can come on quickly, and staff should be aware of the signs and symptoms of each.
 - It is important to find a sunscreen and deodorant that allows your skin to breathe. Sometimes people with paralysis can't regulate their temperature or sweat.
- General Safety
 - Always be aware of your surroundings.
 - Do not drink alcohol while swimming, operating a jet ski, or boating.
 - Always make sure someone is with you or knows where you are in case of emergencies.
- At the Pool or Beach
 - Be aware of sandbars.
 - Be aware of signs at the beach signaling rough waters or other dangers.
 - When body surfing, hold the board so it extends past your head.
- On a Boat
 - Keep your distance from other boats.
 - Obey speed limits.

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