

Web Portal Under Construction to Tell Special-Needs Guests About Area Attractions

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For a family with a special-needs member, important questions must be answered before visiting a museum, zoo, aquarium or other area attraction. Is it loud? Are there a lot of stairs? Is staff trained to anticipate and respond? Are there any days adjusted for special-needs guests?

Finding those answers can be hard, because every attraction's website is different.

So The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk will use a \$25,000 grant from Fairfield County's Community Foundation to create a "one-stop" portal providing information about area attractions that is useful to special-needs guests.

— *an announcement from the Maritime Aquarium*

In addition, the Aquarium will host trainings for staffs of attractions and also establish a way for institutions to share and discuss best practices and new challenges in serving this important customer group.

"We are very grateful to Fairfield County's Community Foundation for understanding the need and supporting this project, which we are calling 'Accessibility for All,'" said Tom Naiman, the Aquarium's director of Education.

"We want special-needs guests and their families and caregivers to know that they are welcome, and that we are all working to ensure they will have a positive experience whenever and wherever they visit," he said.

Naiman said the grant will allow the Aquarium to gather and survey 10 to 15 other Fairfield County attractions — museums, nature centers, etc. — to compile a database on how each addresses the requirements of special-needs guests.

The survey results will be used in two ways. The first is to compile the results and place them online, on a new standalone “one-stop” website and also in a consistent way on each attraction’s website.

“The goal will be: if you are a parent or caregiver of a special-needs child, you can go to one place online that will allow you to access lots of relevant information about nature-based and cultural institutions in Fairfield County,” he said.

The other purpose of the survey will be to identify additional staff training and material needs at each attraction.

“These trainings will invite in experts to walk participants through what the museum/zoo/nature-center experience is like for individuals with intellectual, sensory or processing challenges,” Naiman said. “The purpose is to help everyone understand the positive impact that small, uncomplicated adjustments to light, noise and speech patterns can have on a guest’s experience — as well as to those of the care-giver.”

Additionally, a “tool kit” will be developed that participating institutions can use to train future new staff about accommodating special-needs guests.

“We were excited to support this project proposed by the Maritime Aquarium, as it represents an important regional initiative acknowledging the importance of this special visitor population,” said Karen R. Brown, the Community Foundation's Vice President of Innovation and Strategic Learning.

“Fairfield County is blessed with a large number of amazing nonprofit visitor attractions — our nature centers, museums, and arts and culture venues — and this project will strengthen their capacity to better serve families of children and youth with special needs,” Brown said. “We also see this project as a potentially replicable model for other parts of Connecticut.”

The Maritime Aquarium is partnering with Cooperative Education Services (CES) and Easter Seals Coastal Fairfield County for expert guidance in the “Accessibility for All” project.

The Aquarium previously partnered with CES and Easter Seals to create its “Sensory-Friendly Mornings,” which are special days when the Aquarium opens early and reduces stressors for guests with sensory-processing differences.

“There currently are venues in Fairfield County that hold specific events — like our ‘Sensory-Friendly Mornings’ — for the special-needs audience,” Naiman said. “But there have been no coordinated efforts to ensure that information about destinations is readily available, or that the administrations and staffs have been trained on making the experiences more enjoyable.”

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