

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Exemplar, Engaging Individuals with Disabilities

FLYNN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Burlington, VT

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Take Note

- Through one initiative—a regional, multi-city tour and residency of [AXIS Dance Company](#)—the Flynn reinvigorated its commitment to access and inclusion; catalyzed new artistic initiatives focusing on disability issues; developed a strong, reciprocal relationship with the disability community; increased awareness and sensitivity in local communities; and cemented its regional and national reputation as a leader in accessibility.
- The Flynn presents productions about disability issues by companies that include artists with disabilities.

- The executive director of [VSA arts Vermont](#) serves on the Flynn’s programming committee.
- The Flynn has an *Access Transition Plan* that a staff access taskforce continuously monitors and revises.
- The Flynn collaborates or partners with a large number and wide variety of organizations in the disability community.

Overview

The mission of the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts is to foster the enjoyment, understanding, and development of the performing arts in Vermont and the region. The Flynn fulfills its mission through the following goals:

- Develop, maintain and manage the historic Flynn Theatre and Flynn Center properties to meet current and evolving performing arts needs in the region.
- Present a diverse range of high quality performances by established and emerging artists that expand and enrich the community's cultural experiences.
- Provide educational programs that engage children, teens and adults in the artistic process; cultivate appreciation of the performing arts; and make the performing arts an integral part of school and community life.
- Support local, national and international artists in the development and presentation of their work.

The Flynn Theatre first opened as a vaudeville and movie house in 1930. In 2000, the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts reopened as a comprehensive performing arts center. The Flynn includes the restored, Art Deco theatre that seats 1453, and Flynn Space—home to the [Vermont Stage Company](#)—that seats 110 to 200. The Flynn also has education and dance studios, and a visual arts gallery. Annual attendance is more than 150,000 with an additional 45,000 young people attending more than 30 student matinee performances. The annual budget is approximately \$4.2 million.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

The Flynn states on its Web site: “As the region's premiere performing arts venue, the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts is committed to making our facility and programs accessible to all in our community.” Since 1996, the Flynn has had an *Access Transition Plan*, so named because one is never “done” with accessibility; one is always in “transition.”

The current iteration of the Flynn's *Access Transition Plan* focuses on

- increasing public awareness of available access accommodations;
- increasing Flynn staff and board awareness of available access accommodations;
- maintaining active liaison with disability community organizations and individuals to update trainings, services and outreach opportunities;
- developing more inclusive, universally designed marketing materials;
- increasing programming and educational collaborations with disability community organizations and individuals; and
- increasing performance/residency opportunities for artists with disabilities and inclusive performance troupes.

Professional Development

Flynn staff members have participated in Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and disability awareness workshops. Staff members from relevant departments have also formed an access task force. Taskforce members participate in ongoing training, respond to accessibility services requests and questions, and provide oversight of the Flynn's *Access Transition Plan*.

In addition, the [AXIS Dance Company](#) conducted "sensitivity" training sessions for Flynn staff, board members and community partners. The company also led a panel discussion and workshop for the association of businesses in downtown Burlington, VT.

Leadership in the Community

As lead presenter and project manager, the Flynn Center initiated, organized and guided a six-and-a-half week, six site New England tour for [AXIS Dance Company](#) of Oakland, CA, fostering intensive residencies in each community; overseeing access initiatives across the tour; and convening meetings and discussions between regional presenters, the artists, and representatives from the disability community to plan the tour and respective residencies, discuss best practices, and share resources. Examples of specific activities are:

- A day of integrated dance with AXIS, featuring a video/lecture/discussion with company members, a "Fundamentals of Physically Integrated Dance" class for movers of all abilities and experience, and a master class for dance teachers, choreographers and professional-level dancers to learn about ways to be more inclusive in their own teaching and choreography.
- Day-long residencies in area schools plus student and teacher training workshops.

- University of Vermont campus workshops in conjunction with “Deaf and Disability Awareness Month.”
- Workshops by AXIS for recreational, occupational and physical therapists to learn new movement-based exercises and philosophies to share with clients.

This tour was a first of its kind for both the region and the artists.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

The Flynn’s commitment to engaging the community about arts access began in earnest in 1996 with its first *Access Transition Plan*. In collaboration with the [Vermont Arts Council](#), the [Vermont Center for Independent Living](#), [VSA arts Vermont](#) and other Vermont cultural institutions, the Flynn participated in a series of site visits from ADA specialists and members of the disability community. These site visits identified specific physical access modifications that were begun in 1997 and incorporated into the major renovations when the Flynn expanded its site in 2000.

In 1997, the Flynn hosted a statewide arts access training in collaboration with the [Vermont State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation](#), [Vermont Arts Council](#), the [Vermont Center for Independent Living](#) and the [New England ADA Technical Assistance Center](#). In successive site visits in 2000 and 2003, the Flynn identified a series of effective communication and accessible programming initiatives.

As part of the Flynn’s revision of its *Access Transition Plan* following the [AXIS Dance Company](#) initiative, staff consulted with community organizations that serve people with disabilities and directly with people with disabilities. Their discussions included how people with disabilities could be part of the Flynn’s education and artistic programs. Flynn staff followed a similar process when they decided to be more intentional about providing American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation and audio description; they consulted with special education teachers and organized focus group discussions with community members on how they found out about productions; what they were interested in; and what the Flynn needed to provide.

In addition, starting in 2001, the Flynn began a multi-year collaboration with the [Awareness Theater Company](#), a local theater company made up of adults with developmental disabilities performing original works, as well as a multi-year collaboration with [VSA arts Vermont](#) to bring artists with disabilities to the Flynn stage. The executive director of [VSA arts Vermont](#) serves on the Flynn’s programming committee. For the 2007/2008 season, the Flynn worked with the Vermont Council of the Blind to double the number of audio-described events.

In order to communicate more effectively with people with disabilities, the Flynn has a brochure that outlines all of its accessibility services. Marketing materials are universally designed and available in multiple formats.

Implementation

The Flynn is committed to presenting disability issues on stage by companies that feature artists with disabilities. In May 2008, for example, the Flynn presented [Back to Back Theatre](#), an Australian ensemble of six actors considered to have intellectual disabilities. They performed *small metal objects* in the downtown pedestrian mall.

The Flynn is accessible to artists:

- Accessible dressing room with a roll-in shower.
- Accessible stage access via lift.

The Flynn is also accessible to audience members. In addition to the aforementioned basics, services include:

- Personal curbside assistance on request for MainStage events.
- The names of the scheduled ASL-interpreters and audio describers are provided in marketing materials.
- Automated doors at emergency exits and side doors.
- An accessible community ticket program that provides free tickets to disability service and disability community organizations.

Evaluation

The Flynn solicits written evaluations from each education program participant. Staff also sends evaluation forms to organizations that participate in the discount ticket program. For the AXIS Dance Company tour, assessment methods included digital photography, video and written evaluations designed to capture qualitative and quantitative data.

Challenges

- Finding the time to do everything that should be done to be completely accessible and inclusive.
- Getting everyone to understand how important access and inclusion are, and how many people could benefit.
- Locating excellent actors or performers with disabilities, and integrated companies or those comprised solely of performers with disabilities.

Advice

- Build partnerships with organizations that serve the disability community AND build direct relationships with people with disabilities.
- Find out the schedule for other events such as conferences that might be of interest to the disability community and schedule your ASL-interpreted or audio-described performances—or other events targeted to the disability community—accordingly.
- Don't overlook the importance of “family shows” to people with disabilities.
- Connect deeply and consistently with community members.



Association of Performing Arts Presenters

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