

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Innovation in Arts Access

JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Washington, DC

Contact

Betty R. Siegel

brsiegel@kennedy-center.org

202-416-8727

TTY: 202-416-8728

www.kennedy-center.org

www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility

Contents

Click a link below to jump to a section.

[Contact](#) | [Take Note](#) | [Overview](#) | [Commitment](#)

[Effective Practices](#) | [Challenges](#) | [Advice](#)

Take Note

- The newly renovated Family Theater has a ramp between the stage and the audience.
- The Kennedy Center created an internship program for people with developmental disabilities.
- The Kennedy Center has created a national network for accessibility managers of arts institutions.
- The center has a long-tenured accessibility director who is committed to accessibility, and her experience has enabled the center to be a leader.

Overview

Since opening in 1971, the Kennedy Center continues to present the greatest performers and performances from across America and around the world, nurturing new works and young artists and serving the nation as a leader in arts education.

The Kennedy Center is America's living memorial to President Kennedy as well as the nation's busiest arts facility, presenting more than 2,000 performances each year to two million audience members. More than 7 million people nationwide take part annually in innovative and effective education programs initiated by the center including performances, lecture/demonstrations, open rehearsals, dance and music residencies, master classes, competitions for young actors and musicians, backstage tours and workshops for teachers.

With an annual budget of approximately \$128 million, the center includes the:

Concert Hall seating 2,442
Opera House seating 2,350
Eisenhower Theater seating 1,100
Terrace Theater seating 513
Theater Lab seating 399
Family Theater
KC Jazz Club

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

The Kennedy Center's commitment to access and inclusion is inextricably linked with its creation as a living memorial to President Kennedy and the Kennedy family's ongoing leadership and financial support. *The Kennedy Center welcomes people with disabilities.* This one sentence pervades the center's accessibility policy, commitment, strategy, goals and institutional culture through the dedicated commitment of the top management (board and president), all departments and offices.

The goal of its arts access program is "to be reflective of the diversity in our community and inclusive of people with disabilities at all levels—in the audience, as employees, interns and volunteers, and as performers and artistic staff." Strategies are:

- A commitment to access is pervasive in all departments and through all staff.
- Policies, procedures and practices address equal access for people with disabilities.
- People with disabilities participate in the decision making processes and implementation of arts access programs.

- Staff focus on being responsive to the needs of the disability community and to changing technologies and attitudes.
- Services and accommodations are provided that reflect the center's over-all commitment to quality.
- The center takes leadership by modeling best practices in the field of arts and accessibility.

Professional Development

The director of accessibility, with more than 25 years of experience, trains staff and interns at the Kennedy Center. She focuses primarily on front-of-house staff. Other staff members are invited to attend these trainings, as well as the annual LEAD (Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability) conference when it is held at the center.

Leadership in the Community

The Kennedy Center is a national leader in access and inclusion. Services include:

- Establishing the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) network for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)/504 coordinators and accessibility managers in the arts, consisting of an annual conference and an ongoing listserv for information sharing.
- Publishing the *Opening Stages* newsletter for people with disabilities pursuing careers in the arts.
- Creating the Experiential Education Initiative (EEI) internship for people with developmental disabilities.
- Being a founding member in 1994 of [Audio Description International](#)
- Hosting in 1998 and 2009 national forums on [Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities](#).
- Publishing *Assistive Listening Devices for People with Hearing Loss: A Guide for Performing Arts Settings* and tip sheets on a variety of topics for ADA/504 coordinators, accessibility managers or other cultural arts professionals interested in making their facilities and programming more accessible to people with disabilities.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

The Kennedy Center relies primarily on ad hoc focus groups composed of members of the disability community, disability organizations and audience members with disabilities to provide community input; for example, when the center renovated the Eisenhower Theater, the director of accessibility consulted with an architect and audience members who have disabilities. For the Concert Hall renovation, she consulted with universal design experts. She also has a “circle of advisors” that is available by phone or e-mail as needed. Similar to other performing arts organizations, audience members and visitors share their suggestions and criticisms informally with staff.

The center also engages the disability community through collaborations with the [Christopher Reeve Foundation](#), the [National Spinal Cord Injury Association](#) and the [National Council on Independent Living](#) among others. Staff in the accessibility office work closely with the [Smithsonian Institution](#). In 1998, the center partnered with the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) and several other federal agencies to plan and execute the first [National Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities](#).

Implementation

Beginning with the creation of the *Specially Priced Ticket* program in 1971 and the *Committee for Handicapped Children* (now VSA arts) later in the decade, the Kennedy Center has always provided services to people with disabilities. Today, it is accessible to audience members and artists. In addition to the aforementioned, services include:

- Touch tours of the Kennedy Center are available upon request with two weeks advance notice.
- American Sign Language interpretation, cued-speech transliteration or oral interpretation are available upon request with at least two weeks notice for non-scheduled events.
- Open captioning is available upon request with at least two weeks notice for non-scheduled events.
- Courtesy wheelchairs are available for audience members and visitors while they are at the center.
- One hour before show time, Kennedy Center doormen are available to assist audience members with disabilities from the front of the building to the theaters.
- All tours are wheelchair accessible. American Sign Language-interpreted and touch tours are offered upon request with two weeks prior notice.
- People with permanent disabilities may purchase specially priced tickets (SPT)—up to two tickets per person at half price—by obtaining an SPT card.
- The backstage areas of all theaters are accessible to artists.

- The Concert Hall includes cross aisles to enhance wheelchair access; in the Family Theater there is a ramp between the stage and the audience to facilitate access when artists need volunteers from the audience.

Evaluation

The Kennedy Center evaluates its accessibility services through assessing the number of complaints, amount of ticket sales and number of subscribers to its e-mail alerts and newsletter.

Challenges

- Marketing to older adults because some don't self-identify as having a disability.
- Marketing to people with disabilities because an increasing number are not affiliated with any service organization.
- Communicating within a large organization about the importance of access and inclusion because of the number of staff members and the percentage of turnover.
- Keeping up with the technology that could improve accessibility services such as open captioning and Web-based communication.
- Maintaining support for access and inclusion throughout the center.

Advice

- Be persistent, patient and passionate.
- Try to instill the importance of access and inclusion in students attending arts administration programs.



Association of Performing Arts Presenters

MetLife
Foundation



The Kennedy Center