

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

STRAZ CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Tampa, FL

Contact

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[Accessibility Information](#)

Contents

Click a link below to jump to a section.

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

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

Take Note

- The Straz Center works to achieve a barrier-free facility and highly accessible program using a combination of strategic planning, civic leadership, and community partnerships.
- In 2007, the Straz Center partnered with the MetLife Foundation and the Arts Council of Hillsborough County to host a “JumpStart the Conversation” workshop with support from Partners for Livable Communities. Seniors who actively volunteer at arts and cultural organizations throughout the region were invited to discuss perceived barriers to older adult participation in arts and cultural offerings. Findings were compiled into a final report posted publicly on the ACHC website and distributed to Tampa Bay area arts and cultural organizations and public officials.

Overview

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According to its website, the Straz Center is a presenter, a producer, an educator, a community partner and an economic engine for the Tampa Bay area, with a regional impact of more than \$100 million a year. The center provides access to more than 700,000 people of all ages, abilities and cultures each year.

The Straz Center boasts five theaters, a rehearsal hall and a riverwalk. Each venue has a unique personality and hosts different kinds of events, including Broadway tours, grand opera, jazz concerts, performance art, and a free movie series on the lawn.

Commitment |

Strategic Concepts

The Open Doors Program was launched in 2001 with support from the MetLife Foundation's Access to the Arts Initiative. As part of the program, the Straz Center developed an innovative and comprehensive strategy for providing access to the performing arts for participants, audiences and artists in the senior and disability communities. Over the years, this initiative has grown from basic accommodations to an organized program led by committee. The committee includes representation from all areas of operation and encourages and utilizes input from community partners.

The Straz Center recognizes that accessibility is an ongoing effort and is actively working toward creating a barrier-free facility. To ensure that arts accessibility grows and remains strong, the Open Doors Committee continues to work with the Community Advisory Committee to prioritize, plan and implement or expand accessibility based on community need.

Professional Development

Quarterly training and refresher courses for volunteers and staff include an orientation of Open Doors services and ADA building features.

Staff also solicited information from other arts organizations, including the Kennedy Center and the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, in order to benefit from other providers' experiences before implementing new services or purchasing additional technology.

Leadership in the Community

- When renting facilities to community partners, the Straz Center offers them access to open captioning and audio description services.

Community Engagement

The Straz Center is committed to developing programs and services through community partnerships:

- The Open Doors Program began with input from partner organizations such as VSA Florida, Tampa Lighthouse for the Blind, and Deaf Services Center.
- Since 2002, the Straz Center has significantly expanded its network of community partnerships by establishing a Community Advisory Committee and proactively seeking new community partners to work with the Open Doors Committee to develop access services.

By continuing to engage and serve partners such as Hillsborough County ADA Liaison, University of South Florida's Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorders Center, St. Joseph's Children's Hospital, Children's Cancer Center, LaVoy Exceptional Education Center, Weinberg Assisted Living Facility, MacDonald Training Center for disabled adults, Florida Institute for Community Studies, Hillsborough County Department of Aging Services and many more, the Straz Center believes it can continue and grow services for adults and children with disabilities.

Implementation

The Straz Center's access services include an accessibility services phone line, accessible and valet parking, accessible seating for wheelchair users and people with mobility disabilities, loaner wheelchairs, a designated TTY phone line in the ticket office, Braille, large print and Spanish-language signage, and a large print *Guide to Accessibility Services* brochure complete with Braille contact information. In 2009, the Straz Center implemented open captioning, audio description services and training for audio describers.

The Center conducts usher training for 600 senior citizen volunteers and allows access for guide dog training.

The Straz Center also presents mainstage performances by artists with disabilities, including Dancing Wheels, an educational youth program.

Evaluation

The Straz evaluates its access services by soliciting patron comments and feedback online via the following statement: "We hope you find our theaters and complex comfortable and accessible. Your opinion is important. For more information about our services for persons with disabilities, please call the Straz Center at 813.222.6402 and ask for the Disabilities Services Coordinator."

Challenges

The Straz Center continues to explore new platforms for accessible distance learning for the performing arts, using emerging technologies to connect isolated and underserved populations to high quality performing arts experiences.

In order to serve all of its venues and programs, the Center plans to purchase a portable captioning system and transmitters and enough headsets to extend audio description service into three more theater spaces.

Advice

- Ensure a commitment to access. Institutional buy-in, marketing, staff and volunteer training, and community engagement are essential to the success of any accessibility program.
- Create community partnerships. They enable organizations to learn more about specific community needs so that actions can be prioritized.



Association of Performing Arts Presenters

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