# **Day 2 Transcript: Panel Discussion**

**Alison:** Welcome back everyone. Our session this hour is a panel discussion on the conference theme: what are the major barriers that impact National Park accessibility for people with disabilities. On our panel today, we have Cedra Eichenauer, Ashley Olsen, Kristen Habermehl and Denise Vasquez. Cedra is the executive assistant and accessibility specialist at Inclusive by Design and has completed training with Access Now, the Rick Hanson foundation and has a level 3 certification in Universal Design from Access BC. Ashley started wheelchairtraveling.com in 2006 with a mission of making access to the outdoors possible through research, education, and advocacy. Kristen is the principal of Atlantic Accessibility and Lead Instructor in the East Coast for the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification Program and Denise is a published photographer, artist and author. She is also the founder of the Disabled Photographer Project and How Accessible is Accessible Series. So I'll just go through and have everyone introduce themselves for the audience. Uh Cedra if you want to go first.

**Cedra:** Hi my pronouns are she her and I'm joining you from the traditional unceded territory of the Interior Salish and Ktunaxa First Nation here in Southern British Columbia. I'm a pink person who's tanned from sun exposure I have dark brown hair pulled back into a braid slightly crooked front teeth and glasses and I'm wearing a dark blue T-shirt.

**Alison:** Thank you and Ashley.

**Ashley:** Hello my name is Ashley Olson and again I'm with wheelchairtraveling.com. My pronouns are she her. I am a Caucasian female. I am wearing a long sleeve black T-shirt. I also wear glasses and I have my hair in a bun uh with a little bit of hair coming off my face.

**Alison:** Thank you and Denise.

**Denise:** Hello my name is Denise Vasquez. I am a Puerto Rican uh published photographer, artist, author and also the founder of the Disabled Photographer Project coming to you from Yucca Valley, California. I'm wearing a bright orange hat that looks like a cowboy hat, floral colorful shirt, glasses and I have dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. I go by she her, we they and I'm so excited to be here today.

**Alison:** Thank you and Kristen.

**Kristen:** Hi my name is Kristen Habermehl. I apologize to everybody I'm recovering from an awful cold but do my best to keep my voice up. I am a white uh middle-aged woman, blue eyes, a blue shirt. I go by the pronouns she her and I have the privilege of living and assessing all over the beautiful end to end coast of Canada and I call Nova Scotia my home. Thanks for having me here.

**Alison:** Thank you. Alright, so let's get to it one of the barriers that seems to be coming up again and again in our research is the lack of information. We have heard from stakeholders and even speakers in this conference that a big challenge they face is they they can't find the information they need in order to feel confident visiting a park. They are not sure if the park will be accessible to them. So this question is twofold. Is this a barrier that you have come across personally or know people personally affected by this? And what are your thoughts around this as a potential universal barrier, one that impacts people with all disabilities? Uh Cedra, I know this is a topic of particular interest to you so let's have you start off the conversation.

**Cedra:** So the third I mean I guess there are a bunch of different aspects to this but one of them is safety and not just physical safety but social safety and accessible bathroom facilities are really key to that. If if you can't use the bathroom it's probably not safe to go and that's not solely confined to folks with disabilities. It's also a gender safety issue but there's also the matter of can I actually enjoy the experience? Can I get to what I want to see? Does the park offer what I'm interested in? As you mentioned some people want or need a fully universally designed trail. Some people want to challenge themselves and go places that maybe nobody thought about accessibility in designing them and that's part of the joy of it but those key facilities like bathrooms or resting areas are really really important. And if you don't have that information before you go you're far less likely to go in the first place.

**Alison:** Mm-hmm. Absolutely. Uh Denise I know that your project "How Accessible is Accessible," also touches on this. So let's hear from you.

**Denise:** So I was in a wheelchair for three years and I've also used a rolling walker, walking sticks, and now I'm able to walk a little bit more and one of the reasons why I started the How Accessible is Accessible series is because of lack of information. I would travel and spend a lot of money to go to visit a lot of parks and um affordability I know you're going to talk about that later but a big issue that I found is that when you travel to a park and they say that they're accessible and they're not. There's a lot of issues with that as far as costs, travel time. Um a lot of things. So um we, I can go on and on for a long time but I just wanted to um touch on those issues. And a lot of parks you know on their websites there's barely any information on the national park app. The information I found to be on some of the parks to be incorrect and I found out the hard way by visiting some parks and realizing that again with the bathrooms, with the trails, with the you know visitor centers, that some places aren't as accessible as they say they are.

**Alison:** Absolutely Ashley I can see you nodding along.

**Ashley:** Yes definitely. Um I I feel the same way in so many aspects and I actually started my website wheelchairtraveling.com because I couldn't find the information that I was looking for and I would go to visitor centers and I would ask questions and I would call and I would email and I would just not get the information that I wanted. So I decided just to take matters into my own hands go to these parks myself and you know and describe what is the trail made up of you know. How far is it, where's the nearest bathroom because my whole thing is is that going to a park and not knowing about any accessibility is like traveling anywhere without a map. You're just, you're just blind. You're you know you're just you're wandering around. So people of course yeah they need to know you know where the where the accessible bathrooms are and where the accessible trails are. They may not be located right next to each other so being able to plan that will save just loads and loads of time and energy. Getting in and out of the car you know just to find out that oh this bathroom isn't accessible or this particular area is not going to work. Um like another example is uh you know if there's a bunch of overlooks but only some that are accessible you know. That's fine that's perfectly fine but at least have road signs to distinguish you know what's accessible and what's not. So people aren't just spending you know like time and gas and money and again like energy getting in and out of the car to, you know experience something at a park because that's what we're here to do. We're here to go to a park and have an experience. I'm not going to a park to go to Museum and you know read about information, look at pictures. I can do that online sure. I know parks will have information you know, that's a little bit different and valuable but I'm there to be outside. I'm not there to use the restroom. Um these things are basic features that I need but people want their people want an experience and we need to be able to know how to get around and to make that happen.

**Alison:** Absolutely thank you for that. Uh Kristen. Did you want to to speak to this topic?

**Kristen:** Yeah I'd love to. I've had the privilege of working with different um national parks as a consultant and one of the things that I've noticed that happens again and again is there's this desire to find out where can we put the mobility um icon on our maps or on our signs so we can let people know what's accessible and what's not because they see that as a type of information providing and I think what's so important is that the lack of information really can even happen within trying to assign an icon or not assign an icon on information. And so any time that we can provide the detail of what's present, we're giving people the opportunity to make choices based on what they know they can handle because we all know and it's been spoken so well over and over in the last day and a half, how many people have such diverse abilities. And you know I have a very close friend and colleague who is a paraplegic and he always says don't you dare tell me where I can't go. You'll see him out on the black rocks in Peggy's Cove, places that most people with full ability wouldn't go. So again it's not about labeling things with icons and thinking that that's going to meet that information barrier. It's really making sure that we provide the details of what's present so that people can have the information they need to make their own personal decisions.

**Alison:** Well absolutely. Uh Ashley I can see you've got something else to add here.

**Ashley:** Um yeah just just to add to that um 100 percent um agree and I I didn't actually mention earlier that I am actually a paraplegic. I've been paralyzed for for over 20 years and I go on all sorts of different trails. It just depends on what the trail makeup is, if I'm in my manual chair. For my power chair how much strength I have, how much energy I have you know at that given point of the day. Um but yeah I don't want anybody to tell me what I can and cannot do. I just want to know okay how wide is the trail what is the what is the makeup of the trail you know. Is there any you know cross slopes or you know big caution uh caution barriers that I should look out for. Just give me the information that I need to know about the trail and I can make my own decisions.

**Alison:** Absolutely, absolutely. Denise, did you have anything you wanted to add?

**Denise:** I think everything's been covered in this and I know time's flying so I'm I'm good with uh I'm just nodding because I agree with what everybody just said. Um there's so many issues as far as um again uh you know accessibility and how much information is out there, what we're being informed and um you know the line of what is considered ABA accessible to a lot of parts. When they say it's ADA accessible it really isn't but I I think Ashley touched on a lot of um big points as far as just gives the information so that we can determine on how we're feeling that day too is a big issue. Sometimes I have flare-ups. I might need to use a wheelchair one day and I might use walking sticks another day. So if the information is there I can determine um how I'm feeling and what trail I'm gonna do on that day. What's accessible to for me to do photography and um yeah I'll just go leave it at that.

**Alison:** Yeah wonderful. Thank you guys. Um my next question is around different types of barriers like I think a lot of people who are not familiar with accessibility challenges often think of barriers as purely physical you know, a set of stairs, a lack of accessible washrooms, a lack of Braille text, um but another class of barriers are social barriers. A lack of representation in outdoor recreational community, lack of staff training to understand the needs of disabled visitors at the parks and attitudes of ableism either from visitors or staff. So how impactful are these less visible barriers in limiting your comfort and visiting parks? Denise, let's have you start off this discussion.

**Denise:** Well I personally had an experience at a state park in Las Vegas where I asked the ranger at the booth um you know about accessible trails and about accessible areas in the park and I was I was very insulted because he gave me an attitude from the start. Told me that the park would never be accessible and that it's not going to be a place for disabled people to come and so I ventured into the park anyway paid my ten dollars because I wanted to see for myself. I wanted to explore. I wanted to be outdoors and I was shocked to find that there were accessible picnic areas that places where wheelchairs can go and sit and have a picnic but the restrooms weren't accessible and some of the trails were doable. I wouldn't say they were ADA compliant but I felt that I don't know if it was the staff not being trained or or if this person had a I don't know prejudice against disabled people. Um but I felt like there was definitely a need for all of the parks to have training because when you know even working in customer service my whole life we go through a training series of at least two weeks on how to deal with customers how to deal with people. Um you know what every job is different but customer service is like basic training that every job that I've ever had in my life you know that you learn how to approach people, how to welcome people, how to deal with people. And I feel like it's a it's a big issue that a lot of parks don't train their staff on. Number one, how to deal with people in general but number two, how to handle a question like that where somebody asks you know if there are accessible trails. Even if there isn't you can say well you know here's what we do have, here's where you can explore here's you know um things like that. Yeah absolutely. I'm so sorry that you had that experience. I mean we know that they do happen. I wrote a blog about it if anybody's interested go to my blog on my website and read about my experience at the Valley of Fire.

**Alison:** Thank you. Um Ashley let's hear from you next.

**Ashley:** Um so definitely I've had all sorts of experiences at visitor centers you know, talking to rangers and whatnot. Um 99.9 percent of the time um I get some kind of reaction of fear in in different different ways. Um people just don't know how to respond. Um they're trying to figure me out uh you know? What I might be capable of um you know. They don't want to get themselves in trouble or the park in trouble. Um so they just backpedal. There's a lot of backpedaling um unless there's something that's super super obvious then you know it's very clear but every everything else all the other little details or if a park isn't clear. Um it's it's very very unknown um experienced things where going to a park uh with somebody else where um they're an able-bodied person and if we both go I actually go to the desk and I'm not asking the questions but yet then the person directs the answers just only to the able-bodied person as if I don't really exist. Um that's definitely um has occurred. Um I like to suggest that if somebody is you know tall behind a desk, I have actually really enjoyed um situations where a ranger actually has actually come around the desk and okay I'm gonna get like in front of you get a little close to you. Not have this barrier in front of us and maybe even get down to your level you know or if I'm gonna find a seat somewhere so we can just you know talk one-on-one and really hash us out and kind of figure out what's going to be best and you know what what might be possible. I love that. I love that. Um enthusiasm to to figure out to you know what's going to make things what's going to make um it possible you know. What's what's going to work. Um fearing is just super it's just awkward, there's nothing to fear. Um and nobody's expecting you to fully understand what it's like to be paralyzed for example or to have MS or to have anything else nobody is expecting you but we're just looking to get some again basic information about the possibilities of what a trail is and I'll again allow us to to decide. Um I also like to say um you can be compassionate compassion. There's not enough compassion in the world. Um but you know any kind of pity I mean oh my goodness just throw that out the window. We're here at a park you know like we're here to play and enjoy ourselves you know, like there's no need to you know oh I'm sorry that you're in a wheelchair. Oh I'm sorry you're a disabled. There's none of that is is needed. Um along with that never make assumptions again like on what a person can and cannot do to something very clear that we've definitely talked about before. Um something that's really good is again like not not to assume but ask you know. May I help you like you know. Don't assume I'm like oh can I help you like you know let me just you know do this and this for you but just ask them. Would you like some help you know may I help you but that goes along for for any human being.

**Alison:** Um absolutely absolutely. I think it you know basic customer service compassion and and trying to meet people where you know where they're at and what their needs might be. I think it kind of like you said, it goes a long way. Uh Cedra, let's hear from you just a quick follow-up on what Ashley has said.

**Cedra:** I do not have the perspective of someone with a disability in this context but I do have a lot of experience in visitor services and the second half of what Ashley was saying ask those questions, listen to the answers. If somebody says no I'm good or please write it down or can you say that again or please speak up or can you tell my daughter so she can help me remember. Here are those answers and respond to what the needs are when they're stated.

**Alison:** Absolutely absolutely. Ashley did you want to add?

**Ashley:** I just had one one more thing that is it's kind of related but in more of it a general way. Show more people in wheelchairs with disabilities at your park and brochures on signs and commercials and not just the section about disability stuff but just in general you know, at the park enjoying the park like everybody else, a whole inclusive picture.

**Alison:** Absolutely, that representation piece is is so important. It's such a sort of non-verbal and and almost implicit cue of that people with disabilities are welcome here and and can are you know will enjoy their time here and stuff. Uh Kristen, did you have anything to add from your you know professional experience.

**Kristen:** Yeah I think one thing I just actually encountered this winter, I was doing an assessment of a national park here and what was interesting, we always take time to interview different staff in different roles and ask them what it was like for them. How do they feel they've been trained and equipped for the roles that they are responsible for. How long they've been at the park and what I found was unanimous in these interviews was we need more training. We want more training. One of the individuals I spoke with, she'd been there for almost 30 years, loved her job loved, every encounter with every visitor to the park but she said I'm not properly equipped. I'm nervous to approach people with a disability because no one's told me how to do it properly and so that was such you know obviously creating attitudinal barriers but in one in the other sense it's actually a really exciting discovery because it's such an easy fix. It's so effortless to offer you know introductions and disability awareness training that we so love doing for our clients because it gets everybody on the same page and just gives people that confidence to know how to approach somebody just like you were giving examples Cedra of you know listening and waiting for what they need and Ashley the way you've talked about you know your experiences. Don't give me pity just tell me to have a great time at your park because I'm so excited to be here. So it really is important to recognize I think our role as if we're employers of these staff of providing proper training in order that we can help break down those attitudinal barriers.

**Alison:** Absolutely uh Denise, why don't we just hear from you.

**Denise:** I just wanted to add one more thing. Um when we talk about disability also um as far as training goes to be aware that not all disabilities are visible because I have CRPS which is Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome and sometimes I don't use tools to help me get around. So when I ask questions about you know accessibility and people look at me like I'm strange because I'm not using a wheelchair, I'm not using my walking sticks, I'm not using my cane I think um that is an important discussion that needs to be had and incorporated into training when talking about accessibility.

**Alison:** Absolutely absolutely. Yeah Ashley.

**Ashley:** Um I just wanted to add um as much as I would love to always recommend uh you know hiring an advocate or somebody from the particular community to you know give you insight you know about uh you know training um for somebody who's in a wheelchair, I always like to recommend and I do this for hotels or for any anything um at a lot of these buildings especially government buildings. There's going to be a hospital style wheelchair you know available in case somebody has an emergency. Um get the manager, get everybody just go around in the wheelchair see what it's like to you know. Drink out of that drinking fountain. Open the door you know and get around and kind of get some kind of a feel for what it's like again it's not going to be 100 percent perfect you know but it's a start.

**Alison:** Absolutely yeah it's a really kind of something that people could just do immediately like they probably have those tools available and can just very easily and quickly get a sense of how inaccessible the location might be and what are some you know quick immediate fixes that they can implement.

**Ashley:** Exactly like how steep a ramp is and have push those buttons to push the door open because when I was in a wheelchair my biggest issue was opening doors.

**Alison:** Yeah yeah absolutely. Uh Cedra, did you have anything to add.

**Cedra:** Yeah I would I'd take the wheelchair outside across the lawn across the parking lot check out that sloped accessible parking space and do a test. Walk, put on a blindfold and go around, put in earplugs and go around. Even working in this space, it's really easy to just focus on the mobility and there are so many other ways to to interact with the world.

**Alison:** Absolutely absolutely. Thank you guys. Um another challenge, another barrier that has come up uh from a few speakers in the conference is around accessible transportation to and within national and provincial parks or state parks in the US um and I think this is a rather complex barrier really because it involves an intersection of personal barriers like perhaps personal finances or physical constraints around vehicle ownership, uh government barriers you know a lack of public transit, a lack of adequate policy to support independent living for people with disabilities, and it also includes park barriers, a lack of inter-park transportation or park policies to support accessible movement within parks. So I'm curious to hear everyone's thoughts about how these barriers intersect and what perhaps can be done to improve transportation to and within parks. And I know the US I've seen some some US parks have implemented perhaps better solutions than we've seen here in Canada. So Ashley, I'd love to start with your thoughts on this topic.

**Ashley:** Yeah I feel like this is uh almost the most challenging one so far. Um so one of the ideas that I have is to create a pickup program which I thought would be very helpful um to a lot of people. It wouldn't be um you know door-to-door pickup program but there would be you'd be utilizing some community space or you know public area like maybe a bus station or landmark of some kind that is easy you know to get to and recognizable and people could actually somehow get to get to that particular spot either through public transportation or at the very least you know through uh paratransit which we have here in the states. Um and then from there they can actually get a ride to the park and that could actually be arranged um uh through the park um on like a monthly basis or it could be maybe just a couple times a year or as as interest grows maybe it could be on a weekly basis but there are vans that have been utilized that um that can hold multiple wheelchairs and able-bodied passengers that can be converted in all different kinds of ways in order to accommodate anybody you know you know disabled or not equipment or or not. Um so I really feel like a pickup program you know just out of the blue which I haven't seen you know could out of the you know it's it's a shot in the dark you know. I I don't think it's been done but it's definitely an idea that that I had um but in general I definitely think that there needs to be um better parking um at parks in general, where they have not just you know handicap parking but I would love to see handicap parking wheelchair accessible parking and even family parking because you know families who have strollers even multiple kids you know you're at a park the kids are crazy and excited you know when there's cars moving and going. I would love to see them also get a closer space that's safe to me. I feel like that makes sense and it is important in terms of accessibility for for everybody.

**Alison:** Yes absolutely and I think something I've seen as well is oftentimes the most accessible parks are usually the most popular, the closest to the city. Um the most family friendly and there's there really isn't enough parking uh either accessible you know, disabled spots or just parking in general as well.

**Ashley:** So that is a great point which again the pickup program could also be a great way to to utilize that as well having less cars in the park you know in in the parking lot and you know of course less pollution as well.

**Alison:** Yeah absolutely it kind of it it would solve quite a few problems. Uh Denise, do you have any thoughts to add.

**Denise:** Well I love everything that Ashley said and um Sequoia National Park has the best parking areas that I've seen to date as far as accessible parking. They have accessible parking lots just for disabled people and they have a lot of parking spots because a lot of times I live near Joshua tree and there's one trail that's supposed to be ADA compliant and there's like one parking spot there. So um it is a big issue but I also noticed that certain parks do have shuttles that they pick up from hotels but I love Ashley's idea that maybe you know people can meet in one location whether it's a community center and get picked up and brought to the park. I have friends who have cerebral palsy who have never been to a national park in their lives and and I wish I can you know I just started driving recently again so I wish I could go and pick them up and bring them you know what I mean but I don't have enough room in our vehicle that I'm using right now but um the shuttle buses are definitely a good idea. I know Bryce Canyon has a shuttle that they run like throughout the day. I know that the busier parks are doing more shuttle buses more and more. Joshua Tree does have a shuttle bus that they run um in season but I'd like to see the shuttle buses running not just in season like year round because there's people that visit parks year round. There's people that visit parks um I like to go to the parks during the week. I don't want to go near on the weekends when there's big crowds because you know I don't want to have to worry about rushing along a trail. I don't want to have to worry about being knocked over. I don't want to have to worry about you know somebody getting in my shot if I decide to take photos because right now the most accessible places for me to take photos in a park is in a parking lot. So again the issue with the cars going in and out um you know for families, for disabled people, and for photographers, disabled photographers like me, um you know. I I'm my biggest challenge is finding places where I can set up, where it's safe, where I won't get hit by a car, where I won't get knocked over, where I won't fall. So um yeah there's a lot of things that make it complicated but is it impossible. No it just takes you know people sitting down and coming up with ideas and and doing what we're doing right now having discussions and talking to you know a variety of people and figuring out the best solutions to problems that can be solved.

**Alison:** Absolutely I think those are some great points. Uh Kristen, given your work with the Rick Hanson Foundation and your accessibility audit so the staff do you you know is parking something that you guys look at and and provide feedback on.

**Kristen:** It's serious. Parking's a huge part of it and it really does create so many it either creates freedoms or it creates barriers right. I definitely agree with what you're saying Denise. You pull up to a park you really can't wait to see and they've created one accessible parking space and you look all around you and there's so many other parking spaces that could have been adapted and so parking is actually the first thing we always look at when we arrive on a site for assessment and we spend a lot of time focusing on you know. We always say it's not always about being the closest site, it's about choosing the best sites. So looking at where there's flat, safe level access. Looking at where you can make sure that people have ample room to exit their vehicles from a side exit or a rear end exit making sure there's proper access aisles and of course a lot of our national parks don't even have paved parking but being creative and marking out those spaces so there's generous spaces that people clearly understand how they're used is a really important part. And always making sure that there's vertical signage as well as horizontal because so often the weather will just quickly mark off that horizontal signage on the ground. You might get a bit of snow in November like Denise you were saying you want to be there all year round it's true. So making sure it's clear where people are designated to be able to park and and just offering that clear information for people.

**Denise:** Can I add one more thing? I wanted to mention that when parking areas are designed for um accessible parking to make sure there's not curves on the passenger side. So a lot of times when I'm getting out of the car, if my boyfriend's driving there's a curb there and I have issues getting out and issues worrying about twisting my ankle. There should be no curves on either side of the accessible parking. That's why um I really strongly feel.

**Ashley:** Hi Ashley again jumping in, um I strongly feel that having different you know accessible parking spots which solve this all of these problems that we're talking about you know again having a parking spot that's handicapped you know that's just a general general spot you know. Maybe you're aging you know, maybe you just broke broke your leg you know, it could be a million different things. Um and then one that's wheelchair accessible or you actually have that space that you can open up your car door or you have a ramp and you can get a ramp safely out and you have that correct space and then again a different size for families as well. Mm-hmm. And I think as as on top of that like the different types of uh parking spots and also perhaps like a loading and unloading zone for dropping people off you know. If we're doing that you know if there is organizations or local communities that are organizing these shared accessibility um accessible rides that there's a safe and designated space for them to to be. Dropping people off or picking people up.

**Alison:** Cedra, I wanted to to ask if you had anything to add to this transportation challenge.

**Cedra:** Just just a couple thoughts. Some places where we already maybe have a model that could be built on. Um I haven't been there so I'm speaking from from a lack of knowledge but Lake O'Hara already has a bus in situation that you have to book. My assumption not having checked is that this is not an accessible park because if they bus people in because it is so remote but the national parks already has a book a shuttle platform that could be expanded to book a shuttle to other parks, specifically around accessibility. Also, in some provinces, doctors are now able to write a prescription to a national park which allows someone with a disability and their caregiver free access to the park. Could there also be some component that that recognized transportation. I mean right now the guidelines say when they're near a national park. The nearest national park to me is two hours away. The next one is another two or three hours beyond that. So it's just because it doesn't cost anything to go through the gate doesn't mean it doesn't cost anything to go then. We had a presenter yesterday talk about how national parks are free in the US for folks with disability, that's another potential way to approach it. There are already structures in place that we can copy and build on and improve.

**Alison:** Absolutely yeah Denise.

**Denise:** Yes so um you had mentioned affordability and you mentioned um the access pass that's what it's called here in the United States. So um if you have a permanent disability here in the United States you can get an access pass for free and that gives you free entry to all the national parks, some of the national forests here in the United States. Um I wish that they would also have the access pass be able to use at state parks. All the parks should be free in my personal opinion. Um not just to disable people but to everybody but I I understand why um you know some parks charge but uh as far as you know having accessibility is also affordability. And when you start thinking about the costs because last year I did eight national parks in eight days and the cost that it cost me to do that to go investigate, to go make videos, to visit all these national parks, gas driving, hotels and then you know I wanted to see the state parks as well not realizing that the state parks charge you know 10 dollars per entry and some of the parks don't have like once you exit you can't come back in. So there's certain things that I feel like you know could be improved on but if you create an access pass that's usable at any park for disabled people then that would be a good start. Personally I'd absolutely absolutely it definitely addresses you know one of the barriers.

**Alison:** Uh Ashley, I saw your uh your hand go up.

**Ashley:** Um we can definitely move on now. There's only 10 minutes left so that's alright.

**Alison:** I figured we'll just, we'll get through what we can get through. I mean this I I said it already today that I feel like we could have run this conference for seven days and we still would have more to talk about. Um uh let's move on to to this question. So I think another misconception around accessibility is that it's a finite goal you know. We put in a wheelchair accessible washroom check, we paved this trail and built this wooden boardwalk check, we put Braille signs up check but accessibility I I think is a is more of a moving target uh. On one hand things deteriorate over time you know. The weather washes away the trail or causes it to buckle and crack. Braille signs could get worn down and damaged and on the other hand, advancements in technology and engineering can create new ways to facilitate access. So I wanted to talk about accessibility as this moving target or as this living breathing dynamic destination that needs repeated attention in order to be successful. Um so in what ways does this create challenges for parks to meet their accessibility goals? Uh and Kristen let's have you start this conversation.

**Kristen:** Sure thanks. Yeah something I'm really cognizant of because as I work with different clients in the national parks, one of the things that I've noticed is they really want to be accessible. I really don't encounter a lot of situations where people aren't interested in creating in increasing access or it's not that they are opposed to it it's usually that lack of knowledge that we've all been talking about, the lack of understanding of what's required to truly provide meaningful access and everybody is just hoping that you're going to pass them this magic checklist that's going to give them every little box they need to tick off and then it'll be like this one and done right. But just like you said Alison things deteriorate, standards change, people's equipment is getting bigger and better all the time and so it's not as simple as just saying okay here's the list make sure you've marked all your boxes and you're going to be fine. We want to make sure that people are building into their structure and their attitudes and awareness that this isn't an ongoing ever increasing need to look for ways that access can be improved and maintained and so it really has to be built into I believe like the policies that are within the park organization. It needs to be built into the staffing component so that there's somebody always responsible to be thinking and evaluating these things and someone that really understands universal design like making sure they understand that magic between you know the experience of arriving at a park and going out and encountering nature and not even being able to say why you loved it so much. It just didn't take a lot of energy and effort drain and it was an amazing experience and you can't wait to go back again. Usually that's a sign that something's been done really well but it's not because it was done well once it's because it's being maintained and improved all the time. And so you're absolutely right Alison. It is a it's a moving target and we have to accept it will always be a moving target because we're going to get better and better. We're not going to settle for a standard and let it sit there.

**Alison:** Absolutely yeah thank you for that uh Denise, I can see you nodding along, do you too want to add?

**Denise:** Yes well I know a big issue is money. I know a lot of the parks need money to improve on certain things and um but there are parks that are getting very creative with how they're you know um dealing with accessibility. Again Sequoia National Park is one of the best parks as far as accessibility goes. They have a brochures that are just for everything accessibility like is in this brochure. So all you have to do is ask for it at the gate or at the Visitor Center. Pecos and New Mexico, they have a GPS system that you can check out and it'll tell you how close to the curve you are if you're in a wheelchair. I know Cabrillo National Monument has a talking pen that works with the interactive media. So there are parks that are getting very creative and using what they have to make things more welcoming to to disabled people and to make things more accessible to everybody.

**Alison:** Yeah absolutely Ashley.

**Ashley:** Um again I think it's important to keep in mind that people are coming to the park for an experience to experience nature um so just allow us to do that whether it's Shenandoah National Park or the majority of the park is overlooks okay you know, like let us know which ones are are accessible. Um it's not going to be perfect yeah for absolutely everybody that's just not gonna not gonna happen but again yeah if you just focus on the experience that's going to be so very important and I feel like when you create some access in particular like when you create an accessible trail like a boardwalk or um even um a a hard crushed rock uh walkway, this means that everybody's actually going to stay on the pathway or they're more likely to stay on this pathway and not meander off into the wilderness trampling on you know plants and animals that you know you know that are small that can't really be seen that are hiding in the leaves and brush. It really helps to build sustainability, it keeps everyone on on that path when you create an accessible path and it's an accessible path for everybody. It's a clear marker for for any and everybody whether you have a disability or not. Um and I feel like if you create a foundation you know if you have you know some basic information you know you have a couple of overlooks, you have a couple of picnic tables, and and bathrooms and parking you know. Start there you know, build from there and more things will grow and then people will be like oh well I was able to do this and you know you should add this to your list and you know when the information will just keep growing but yes having that basic information is so important. And um being open to you know fixing these these small barriers. I mean there's been so many times where people have built a wooden platform but at the very front of the wooden platform because of the erosion um there'll be like a two inch or three inch gap and even in power wheelchair that can be pretty difficult especially if there's no side railings to really stay on that platform and if it's a wet day and it's slippery. Um and let alone if I'm in a manual chair that's going to be hard to go up but instead of just having that just be a straight platform you could actually have a wooden boardwalk ramp down to that and so that would basically prevent you know erosion from making this one beautiful platform inaccessible.

**Alison:** Absolutely absolutely and I think it the maintenance or potential lack of maintenance, it also speaks to that information thing right like if it says it's accessible and then you turn up but that path has been eroded and now there's a two inch lip, it's so disappointing and so frustrating for people. So having that up-to-date information.

**Ashley:** Yes and and just and just to add to that but even very simple basic features you know like bathrooms there's a lot of times where I've looked in the map okay this is an accessible bathroom. I get there and again there's a step that has been eroded where it's now like a you know 12 inches step for me to even get into this accessible bathroom. So all this money was spent to create this beautiful accessible bathroom that I can't get into. Yeah absolutely and I just do I mean lower those hooks in in the bathroom you know all those little tiny things. Lower the hand washer, so people can reach it. Lower the soap, all these little things you know definitely add up make make a sink again that we've been thought of. So using that wheelchair going around in that park will definitely open up your eyes. Oh my goodness I can't reach the soap when I go into the bathroom you know and and we'll definitely uh promote accessibility throughout. Absolutely you know that's those are some fantastic points.

**Alison:** Uh Cedra did you have anything that you wanted to add to this conversation.

**Cedra:** Yeah I just to reiterate that understanding why is a really key point and our organization was actually the result of realizing that you can have all the consultants and experts you want but if the people on the ground doing the actual work and in our case construction don't understand why they're not going to be able to implement it properly. You can provide all the documents and consultation you want but if the people with the hammers and screws in their hands don't get it, it's not likely to succeed and that includes the people doing the maintenance like if the person that needs to check the trails. Oh there's a tree down that's obvious, we'll clear the tree out of the way. Oh but the step to the bathroom has eroded or the the approach to the boardwalk has eroded. They need to understand that too and why so they know how to prioritize because no parks gonna only have one maintenance issue. Everybody's going to have to be noticing all of it, all of the time and triaging what's the most important thing to fix first and that's true whether we're talking about disability or not. It's just way more important when it's about access to really key things like washrooms and parking.

**Alison:** Absolutely, absolutely. Guys I wish we could have this conversation for like a whole other hour. This has been fantastic. Um we are going to have to wrap up now but I want to thank each each of you for for joining us today and coming with your personal experiences, your expertise. It has been wonderful. Thank you guys so much.

**Everyone:** Thank you.

**Alison:** Um alright. I think that concludes our speaker lineup today. I want to give a huge thank you to all of our speakers who shared their stories, their their thoughts, their research with us today. Uh we look forward to welcoming everyone back tomorrow at 12 pm Eastern Standard Time. Everyone has a great rest of their day.