

BUSINESS

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Accessibility serves tourism

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Visitors with disabilities can find far more resources and increased accessibility in Hawai'i — from airports and rental cars to all-terrain wheelchairs at some O'ahu beaches — compared with just a decade ago.

Those improvements have helped solidify Hawai'i's reputation as an accommodating destination for visitors with disabilities, generating new business at a time when the overall tourism industry is going through one of its sharpest downturns in history. "I'm just amazed by the number of calls and e-mails I'm getting from tourists," said Colleen Casey, a therapeutic recreation specialist for the City and County of Honolulu. "The word is definitely getting out; it's really increased for tourists."

One of the most popular pieces of accessible equipment made available by the city are the all-terrain wheelchairs, which allow disabled users at beaches to cross the sand to reach the water's edge. The chairs are available at seven beaches, including Hanauma Bay, which has six of the chairs that are heavily used by tourists. Ala Moana is another popular location, where about half of the people using the chairs are Japanese tourists, Casey said.



Josh Neely, left, general manager of the Prime Time Sports concession on Waikiki Beach, and AccesSurf president Mark Marble offer all-terrain wheelchairs that let disabled visitors and residents enjoy the beach.

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But it's not just visitors who are taking advantage of many of the outdoor activities geared toward the disabled. Kane'ohe resident Kelly Anderson is the mom of a military family of five who knows firsthand the challenges of traveling, since her 7-year-old son Brendan relies on a wheelchair in daily life.

The Andersons, a Navy family, spend time traveling not just for vacations but for frequent moves across the country. "Logistically, it's very difficult. You have to do a lot of advance planning," Anderson said. That includes getting on and off the plane and preparing for whether the electric wheelchair will be checked at the gate. She said she's encouraged by some of the programs that are becoming increasingly available.

AccesSurf (www.accessurf.org) is one of the leading private organizations helping local residents and visitors with disabilities enjoy the beach and water sports. Anderson said AccesSurf made a huge impact on Brendan. The organization usually holds monthly events on the first Saturday of every month at White Plains Beach in Kalaeloa.

The Andersons first met AccesSurf president and CEO Mark Marble when he still worked full time as a therapist at Shriners Hospital for Children. The AccesSurf volunteers took Brendan out surfing when he was about 4 years old. Marble said the organization relies on grants and individual donations and since last year, he's worked full time for AccesSurf.

"Over the last five years, I've seen a real increase in education and awareness," Marble said. "I think Hawai'i's making great strides."

At the time they first went, Anderson was living a stone's throw from North Beach at Marine Corps Base Hawaii with no way for her son to reach the water. "Here we are looking at the ocean every single day and we couldn't enjoy it," she said. At AccesSurf, "they just scooped him up and put him on the surfboard." While the family was living in Texas last year, Brendan kept talking about surfing. "He wanted to go back to Hawai'i to surf."



A beach mat makes getting to the ocean easier for Dennis Okada, his therapy dog Jetson, and Marble. AccesSurf

Access for travel for people with disabilities has improved dramatically in the past decade, said Francine Wai, executive director of the state Disability and Communication Access Board. Two laws have made a big difference: The Air Carriers Access Act, enacted in 1986, which made air travel more accessible to people with disabilities and has made a bigger difference in Hawai'i since the state is so dependent on air travel to bring visitors here.

The other law is the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is more familiar and has helped to make everything more accessible for travelers, from the airport to hotels, restaurants and tourist destinations.

At the Hawai'i Tourism Authority, Muriel Anderson, director of tourism programs, said the shift in accessibility has increased dramatically. "Travel has really opened up for people with disabilities over the last 10 to 15 years," Anderson said.

Marble said the aging of baby boomers is increasing the number of people with the desire and the resources to travel and not let disabilities slow them down much. "They're demanding a higher quality of living." Waikiki offers generally good accessibility, Wai said. She noted the Kuhio Beach area is "very nicely done with curb ramps, etc." And Ala Moana Beach Park has accessible showers and a beach mat, also care of the city.

The city's Casey said the specialized wheelchairs cost about \$2,500 each. The first were donated, and others have been purchased by the city with the help of grant funds. Casey said the city has gradually added chairs with the last one going to Poka'i Bay about eight years ago.

Marble is working with the city on a pilot project and said he is donating a newer chair and mat, worth about \$11,000 total, to be used at Waimea Bay during the quieter summer months. Marble is also working to establish a regular presence in Waikiki, perhaps as early as summer.

Right now, Marble said his organization works with visitors who make arrangements with them for a fee subsidized by the nonprofit. But he said the largest outreach remains the monthly events at White Plains.

At a time when demand for disability access is growing, the existence of Wai's agency is threatened by budget cuts. A House budget proposal recommends that the state end three programs, including hers, which is part of the Department of Health. The program is run by a statewide 17-member board whose mission is "to advocate and promote the full integration of independence, equal access, and quality of life for persons with disabilities in society."

Josh Neely, general manager of the Prime Time Sports concession, works Waikiki Beach fronting Fort DeRussy and said he gets a lot of demand for the wheelchairs from injured veterans and from some older folks who have limited mobility. "They probably get used once a week or twice a week," Neely said.

He said families who know about the chairs will return each year and make reservations as soon as they set their vacation dates. "We have customers that come every year and they use them every day that they're here," Neely said. Shyla and Mark Patera are both in wheelchairs and came to Hawai'i for their belated honeymoon after learning about AccesSurf through the Web, while researching and planning for their vacation.

They sent a thank-you e-mail when they returned home to Montana to express their appreciation "for the ultimate experience of surfing with you guys last week." They wrote: "It truly was a thrill of a lifetime to surf" and are planning their next trip here.

They added: "Catch waves for me daily."

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Mark Marble, president of AccesSurf, offers all-terrain wheelchairs, specially designed surfboards and beach mats to disabled visitors and residents. The organization also holds monthly outreach events at White Plains Beach in Kalaeloa.
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RESOURCE GUIDE

The state Disability and Communication Access Board provides a county-by-county guide to help visiting travelers with disabilities or health conditions. (<http://hawaii.gov/health/dcab/travel/>) Information is available on accessibility of airports, transportation, adapted vehicle rentals, access to beaches and trails, rentals for medical equipment and supportive gear, as well as communication and service animals.

The Honolulu Department of Parks and Recreation provides all-terrain wheelchairs for two hours at a time at these beaches:

Ala Moana Beach Park

At Diamond Head and 'Ewa food concession stands at each end of the park. 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 949-2500

Fort DeRussy Beach

Partnership with Prime Time Sports. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. 949-8952

Hanauma Bay Natural Preserve

Beach Information Kiosk. 8 a.m.
4 p.m. Closed Tuesdays. 396-4229

Sans Souci Beach Park

New Otani Kaimana Beach Hotel.
9 a.m.-4 p.m. 923-1555.

Kualoa Regional Park

Campsite A. Call ahead. Hours:
9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Monday to Saturday; 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday. 237-8525

Kailua Beach Park

Kailua Beach Concession. Must call one day in advance. Monday-Thursday 9 a.m.-3 p.m. For Saturday and Sunday. call Friday 9 a.m.-noon. 233-7300.

Poka'i Bay Beach Park

Pilila'au Army Recreation Center.
8 a.m.-4 p.m. 696-6783.