



The Cost of Access:

Affordable Solutions to
Creating Accessible Programs



The Cost of Access:

Affordable Solutions to Creating Accessible Programs

A Project Access White Paper
Art Beyond Sight



**PROJECT
ACCESS**

By Nina Levent and Joan Muyskens Pursley

With Mary Ann Perkins, Docent Program Coordinator, and Becky Gaugler, Assistant Curator of Education, Carnegie Museum of Art; Matt Foss, Project Coordinator, and Jayna Hintz, Curator of Education, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum; Tish Brown, Accessibility Coordinator, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; John Shields, Manager of Docent and Internship Programs, The Walters Art Museum; Leah Fox, Director of Public Programs, Currier Museum of Art

The Cost of Access: Affordable Solutions to Creating Accessible Programs

A Project Access White Paper by Nina Levent and Joan Muyskens Pursley, Art Beyond Sight

With Mary Ann Perkins, Docent Program Coordinator, and Becky Gaugler, Assistant Curator of Education, Carnegie Museum of Art; Matt Foss, Project Coordinator, and Jayna Hintz, Curator of Education, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum; Tish Brown, Accessibility Coordinator, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; John Shields, Manager of Docent and Internship Programs, The Walters Art Museum; Leah Fox, Director of Public Programs, Currier Museum of Art

A prevailing myth about accessibility at cultural institutions is that it is expensive and often unaffordable for smaller museums and art centers. This paper looks at the price tag of accessibility programs, including those for visitors with dementia, Alzheimer's, visual impairments, and other disabilities. What is the cost of launching and maintaining an accessible program? What tools, trainings, research, etc. are considered worthwhile institutional investments? How have museums leveraged these investments through sharing of resources and partnerships? These are some of the questions addressed in case studies from four museums that are diverse geographically, and have different budgets and collections. Each museum, however, is dedicated to serving the diverse needs of its community.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

Carnegie Museum of Art (CMA), one of the four Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, is the largest art museum in the city; its growing attendance now exceeds 300,000 a year. The museum strives to nurture creativity, preserve its rich heritage for future generations, and embrace experimentation to reach people in new ways. Its In the Moment program for people with Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia, as well as their caregivers, has become a well-developed adult accessibility program since its inception in 2008.

In the Moment began with a phone call from a senior center requesting such a program and two passionate individuals at CMA (the docent program coordinator and a volunteer docent) determined to create one. The success of the program relies heavily on the time, resourcefulness, and the expertise of these individuals, with little financial costs to CMA. They spent two years researching other programs, visiting other institutions, and learning about the unique challenges of working with individuals living with dementia. With their innovative thinking and commitment to accessibility programming, CMA created a program to provide rewarding, compassionate, and educational docent-led art museum tours for this audience. The program also has been a catalyst to explore accessible programs for other audiences, such as visitors with cerebral palsy.

In addition to this commitment of staff time, other resources contributed to the successful development of this program, including some low-cost outreach

The success of the program has relied heavily on the time, resourcefulness, and expertise of these individuals, with little financial costs to the Museum. Incorporating the expertise of local resources also can come at little to no cost.

measures, and the generosity of other museums and community groups. CMA hosted a free public symposium with visiting staff from New York City’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and area experts on dementia. The event, which received solid media coverage, promoted the museum’s programs to the public and served as training for CMA docents. The symposium and follow-up gallery experience with MoMA’s staff were free, except for some nominal travel expenses.

Incorporating the expertise of local resources also can come at little to no cost. For example, experts from the Alzheimer’s Association, medical professionals from the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and staff from local senior centers continue to provide education for CMA staff and docents at no cost. Finally, docent training, although adjusted for the audiences’ unique needs, relies on a previously established inquiry-based tour methodology and is built into an existing training calendar. Docents and staff are supportive of one another in the development of their tours, so no staff time is wasted “reinventing the wheel.”

Costs for launching the program were minimal, but maintaining this program requires a commitment to support accessibility programming. Currently, *In the Moment* is included in the education department’s annual budget. As the program becomes more established, additional funding will be needed to maintain the research, training, promotion, and evaluation of this program.

www.cmoa.org

The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin

The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum is a mid-sized museum attracting both rural and urban audiences year-round. While the focus of the collection is art of the natural world, with an emphasis on birds and related avian imagery, the Woodson presents eight to ten changing exhibitions annually. Two of the museum’s ongoing programs, *Art Beyond Sight*, designed for individuals who are blind or visually impaired, and *SPARK!*, for those with memory loss and their care partners, address accessibility. Both programs are successful and undertaken at a relatively low cost. Here, we will focus on *Art Beyond Sight*, which is an exemplary case study for how efficient, accessible programming can be affordable.

It is important to note that the Woodson is committed to investing in ongoing training for its educators and program volunteers. With a staff comprising fifteen full-time-equivalent employees, nine of whom are professional staff, and a budget of \$1.7 million, the museum designates approximately \$15,000 for travel to conferences and training annually. Kathy Kelsey Foley, museum Director, believes it is essential that staff have access to enrichment programs and training that further their interests and build their skills.

The Woodson also makes a modest investment in support materials for the art-making component of its *Art Beyond Sight* program. However, no more than \$100 is spent on supplies and materials annually. Resources such as air-dry modeling clay, paper, and bendable WikkiStix™ can be effective tools without adding burdensome expense to a program.

Woodson educators worked with visually impaired visitors to develop effective low-

The key to the Woodson’s Art Beyond Sight program’s success is not budget based. It is about recognizing a need, having a passion, and being able to meet that need.

cost teaching tools and strategies. For example, utilizing recorded sounds and music to “amplify” what viewers might see in a painting can add another dimension to in-gallery experiences. Listening to a loon call on a Wisconsin lake can suggest the environment John James Audubon depicted in his painting of loons, one of the gems of the Woodson’s collection. Other low-cost tools include touchable objects. To help tell the story of finding a lost journal – which is how James Gurney’s *Dinotopia* begins – a leather-covered volume with soft, worn pages was shared. The sensory experience of touching the binding and the pages served as a launch pad for discussions and allowed participants to personalize the meaning of artworks they cannot see. These experiences become personal narratives that are, in turn, shared among participants.

The key to the Woodson’s Art Beyond Sight program’s success is not budget-based. It is about recognizing a need, having a passion, and being able to meet that need. The museum wants its exhibitions and related programmatic experiences to be as robust as possible for all audiences. Thus, access opportunities have become an important factor in exhibition decision making; an exhibition with a touch-art component is a great selling point. www.lywam.org

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

The de Young and Legion of Honor Museums comprise the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF), an encyclopedic museum displaying ancient to modern art from around the world, with the exception of Asia. More than 1.5 million people visit annually and more than 100,000 member families have enrolled. In addition to the permanent collections, there are thirty temporary exhibitions per year.

The museum has had a two-and-a-half to three days a week Access Coordinator since 1993. Now the museum is hiring a full-time coordinator after the access advisory lobbied for this change. The Access Coordinator works with volunteers and docents. There is a select group of docents who are deeply involved in access programs, but all of the docents receive training and are aware that visitors with disabilities might join their tours. There is a number of contractual professionals: an art historian who is deaf gives eight to ten ASL tours a year; an artist leads tours for visitors with early stage Alzheimer’s; another artist provides inclusive hands-on workshops for people at all skill levels twice a year. Every eighteen months a contractual coordinator assists with the organization of Art Slam.

The complicating factors of large temporary exhibitions cause some visitors with disabilities to eschew general admission hours in favor of what FAMSF calls “Access Day” Monday, when the exhibition is opened by reservation for visitors with disabilities. Since the museums are closed on Mondays, Access Day visitors forego the café, shopping, and access to other galleries in exchange for extra disability parking and seating, frequent docent tours, discounted costs, and with admission limited to 35 people per quarter hour, relatively uncrowded galleries. Access Days, which attract as many as 300 people, are held six times a year and are very labor intensive. For the *Pissarro’s People Access Day*, 300 people attended in ninety-two groups that ranged in size from one to twenty people. Security cost (\$800 per five-hour session) is the main cost for these events. Because so many museum members participate, this cost has been absorbed in the operating cost of the museum. The same is true for the cost of

public service assistants who help visitors get into the galleries. Other departments absorb some of the access costs: all graphic design work, including large print and program flyers, is done in house, and the IT department helps with captioning videos. <http://deyoung.famsf.org/deyoung/visiting/accessibility>

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

The Walters Art Museum has a collection that spans 5,500 centuries and includes the arts of Asia, Islam, and the Ancient Americas. Since the fall of 2006, the Walters has had free admission to the permanent collection and charges only for special exhibitions. This led to increased visits by families, young people, and people of color. Family-oriented programming on the weekends and seasonal family festivals also have increased attendance.

For more than a decade, the Walters has partnered with the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped to provide touch tours of sculptures (both actual works and reproductions); verbal description tours of its permanent collection that include music and scent; and verbal description tours of special exhibitions that also include hands-on materials for touching. The museum participates with the library in city-sponsored summer reading programs, which include tours and art studios, and it has visitors from Blind Industries and from groups that help low-vision and blind adolescents and adults gain confidence in way-finding in public spaces.

Touch Tours at the Walters Art Museum have been very successful, and its partnership with the Maryland State Library has been critical to the program's longevity and its low cost. The library's proximity to the museum and mutual eagerness to collaborate make the partnership easy to manage. Each program offered has first-time participants, as well as many repeat visitors with both visual and physical challenges.

Museum expenses are quite minimal: The full-time Manager of Docent and Internship Programs coordinates the partnership. The docents leading the tours are all volunteers. The museum spent a little over \$1,500 for reproduction works of art for use on Touch Tours. This money came from the annual budget as well as an IMLS grant for the Heroes: Mortals and Myths in Ancient Greece (fall 2009) exhibition. Every October the Museum has a special program for Art Beyond Sight Awareness Month that involves the manager, possibly a curator, and the docents. The Maryland State Library provides light refreshments.

The museum is able to share some of the program expenses with the library and other community institutions, too. For example, the Library printed large-text and Braille labels at no cost for a recent special exhibition, and the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore created some 3-D plastic touch models from 2-D museum photo images at no cost to the Walters. The result of this largely volunteer effort and small monetary investment is that the Walters Museum has gained a lot of respect for reaching out to this non-traditional audience.

Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire

The Currier Museum of Art is a medium-size museum that features European and

The result of this largely volunteer effort and small monetary investment is that the Walters Museum has gained a lot of respect for reaching out to this non-traditional audience.

American art, offers a studio program through its Art Center, and provides tours of a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed residence. Annual visitation to the museum, Art Center, and historic house averages 60,000 adults and students.

Building a Strong Foundation at Minimal Cost: In 2010, the Currier launched an institution-wide accessibility initiative. This project began with a comprehensive self-evaluation, with each department examining its policies and practices using the National Endowment for the Art's Accessibility Checklist. Simultaneously, an Access Advisory Committee was developed. Advisors visited the museum unannounced, took guided tours, and shared feedback with the project manager. Their constructive feedback, along with the results of the self-study, served as the foundation for the first advisory committee meeting where experiences were shared and priorities were shaped. These first two important steps toward increased accessibility had very minimal expenses – \$50 honoraria and annual museum memberships for each advisor's participation. From these efforts mandatory disability awareness training was scheduled in collaboration with VSAarts for all staff and volunteers, and a mobile tour of collection highlights with verbal description was implemented. In addition, the museum is launching a multimedia tour of its collection highlights in celebration of the New Hampshire Association for the Blind's 100th anniversary.

Audience input is necessary for a project of this scope, and a focus group from the Association for the Blind provided important guidance regarding audience needs, technology, descriptions, and necessary front-line staff training.

Cost of Descriptive Multimedia Tour: It had been a long-term goal of the museum to launch a mobile tour of collection highlights for a diverse general public, and the Currier's new relationship with the Association for the Blind prompted it to move forward. While there is great potential to provide extensive interpretation and accessibility, the program will begin with sixteen collection highlights – one descriptive stop, one interpretive stop and transcript for each artwork. To develop content and implement this project on a shoestring, a group of volunteer docents were trained by museum educators to write the interpretive stops; a trained intern wrote descriptive stops and prepared materials in alternate formats. Audience input is necessary for a project of this scope, and a focus group from the Association for the Blind provided important guidance regarding audience needs, technology, descriptions, and necessary front-line staff training. New Hampshire's public radio station provided access to voice talent and a recording studio.

This accessible, multimedia project is launching in two phases. For the first phase, the mobile tour company TourMate is producing the audio files, compiling images and video, and providing hand-held devices that proved accessible to the target audience. This phase of the project costs approximately \$7,000, supported by external funding. The next phase will launch the content on a mobile web app for users to access with their personal devices. The museum is working with TourSphere on this aspect of the project, which will launch for approximately \$8,300, pending additional external funding. Additional expenses include image rights, accessible related print material, and a launch reception with the Association for the Blind.

Several months before the project's October 2012 launch, the museum began seeing increased visitation by groups of visitors with sight loss. This led to training docents on verbal description and seeking approval for touch tours. Also, museum staff

members shared this project at the National Federation for the Blind state convention and were received with great enthusiasm, including by those who didn't initially think they would have an interest in art. The entire accessibility initiative resulted in a heightened enthusiasm for and comfort with welcoming visitors with diverse abilities. www.currier.org

Conclusion

These case studies show that accessible programming can be created without a large financial investment. They present a number of low-cost scenarios where a small financial investment is leveraged by community partnerships, trained and enthusiastic staff, and an engaged advisory board. What's important is creative thinking; a board, staff and docents dedicated to the programs; and formal and informal partnerships with disability advocacy groups.

These case studies reveal a trend toward making accessibility a seamless part of museum overall work. They include accessibility costs in exhibition and general operating budgets. Additionally, different departments share the costs of accessibility programs.

There are larger one-time investments that aid in creating lasting and vibrant accessibility programs. Such program investments might be creating an audio tour, acquiring tactile models, or designing tactile diagrams. These investments do not constitute ongoing expense, however, and do have the potential of being funded through grants.

Incorporating universal design techniques and approaches into new exhibitions does not demand additional cost – it just means selecting a designer who understands how to create barrier-free exhibitions, or selecting exhibitions that offer engagement opportunities for audiences with various levels of abilities.

Investing in professional development for educators and docents is a key component of many accessibility programs. It is an investment in specific skill sets that can benefit multiple audiences. Docents and educators trained to provide effective verbal descriptions for visitors who are blind or low vision improved their skills in providing tours for all audiences. Similarly, staff and educators trained to provide programs for people with dementia, on the Autism spectrum, or with developmental disabilities, find their new skills transferable to other audiences. Trained staff also become keenly aware of visitors with “invisible disabilities,” who are often overlooked by museums, as these visitors don't identify themselves as being “disabled” and don't think about taking advantage of special tours.

As America ages, the percentage of people with disabilities, visible and invisible, grows. Museums that meet the needs of these audiences not only attract new visitors, but are less likely to lose older members and patrons who may no longer see, hear or move as well.

© 2012 Art Beyond Sight, Art Beyond Sight, 589 Broadway, 3d floor, New York, NY 10012, coordinator@artbeyondsight.org; www.projectaccessforall.org; www.artbeyondsight.org