**Showcasing the DNR: Outdoor Adventure Center strives to offer inclusive experience for visitors with sensory needs**

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Making the outdoors available and welcoming for people of all ability to enjoy has long been a priority for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, with a wide variety of accessible recreation opportunities at state parks, campgrounds, boating sites, state game areas, trails and more.

This focus on inclusion and accessibility carried over to an indoor setting when, in 2015, the DNR created a unique opportunity to explore Michigan’s natural resources inside an urban facility – the Outdoor Adventure Center in Detroit.

Since it opened, the OAC has provided accommodations for visitors with mobility needs, a room for nursing parents and other features for family needs, and facility maps in six languages for guests who speak English as a second language.

More recently, the Outdoor Adventure Center has partnered with [KultureCity](https://www.kulturecity.org/), the nation's leading nonprofit on sensory accessibility and acceptance for those with invisible disabilities, to improve its ability to assist and accommodate guests with sensory needs.

According to the organization’s website, “1 in 6 individuals have a sensory need or an invisible disability. These are individuals with PTSD, autism, dementia, strokes just to name a few.”

For people with sensory needs, the KultureCity website continues, “the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that comes in through the senses.Common sounds, lights, crowds and even certain smells might not only be overwhelming but also physically painful.”

The website explains that individuals with sensory needs often “withdraw from communities not by choice but by circumstance as they worry about how the world will accept or include them.”

All Outdoor Adventure Center staff members are KultureCity-certified.

The organization’s Sensory Inclusive Certification is, according to its website, “available to venues, organizations, small businesses or individuals who want to learn more about how to better engage with individuals with sensory needs” and “caters to everyone with sensory needs, not just autism. Sensory Inclusive ensures daily accessibility not limited by time and location thus creating an accepting and inclusive community.”

[See a video about the importance of sensory needs training](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCVPoVdpFUA).

“Our communities are what shapes our lives and to know that the DNR Outdoor Adventure Center is willing to go the extra mile to ensure that everyone, no matter their ability, is included in their community is amazing,” Uma Srivastava, executive director of KultureCity, said. “We’re honored to partner to provide a truly inclusive experience for all fans and guests!”

Sensory accommodations at the Outdoor Adventure Center include a family restroom, a quiet room with a rocking chair, and a designated space with a soft chair and quiet activities for guests who need a break from stimulation.

The OAC also offers resources like sensory bags – containing special KultureCity VIP badges, fidget tools, noise-canceling headphones and other resources – and weighted lap pads available for checkout at no cost, and an online [visual tour](https://www.michigan.gov/oac/-/media/Project/Websites/oac/Documents/About/socialStory.pdf?rev=19128ab056bc416d8672d061885db8e3&hash=5D86EAA02A403429F990BD6A0F72851C) of the building can be viewed from home to prepare for a visit. This walk-through of the facility gives guests, along with their families, teachers and leaders, the opportunity to review what a visit through the Outdoor Adventure Center will include.

The OAC’s social story, an illustrated narrative that helps explain social situations to children with autism, can also help plan a visit. It is available on is available on the KultureCity Sensory Inclusive App, [on the App Store](http://bit.ly/KCiphone) (Apple devices) or [on Google Play](http://bit.ly/KCandroid) (Android devices).

The Outdoor Adventure Center also recently launched its Sensory-Friendly Days, offered throughout the year, when it welcomes visitors with sensory processing differences to sensory-friendly building hours. The events give guests the opportunity to explore and experience the OAC with building sounds and ambient noises at a lower volume and a quiet room with sensory materials available to use. Admission is complimentary on these days.

The next scheduled Sensory-Friendly Day is from 10 a.m. to noon Sunday, Feb. 5. [See a full schedule](https://www.michigan.gov/oac/experience/sensory-friendly-days).

“As a new staff member, I saw a great opportunity for the OAC to grow in accessibility, especially for sensory inclusion,” said Danielle Wilemski, an educational programmer who took the lead to plan and implement the Sensory-Friendly Days. “While sensory-inclusive programming was on the OAC’s agenda previously, the challenges of 2020 impacted the finalization of these events. This is something important to me, so it was one of the first things I took on when I started the role of Educational Programmer at the OAC – getting back to planning and providing these important opportunities to our visitors!”

Wilemski said that guests provided positive feedback throughout conversations with OAC staff during the first Sensory-Friendly Day in October.

“While some were appreciative of the opportunity to experience the Outdoor Adventure Center with less ambient sound, others were glad to have a time and space dedicated to their needs, where staff and other visitors would be welcoming, aware and understanding of guests with sensory processing differences. Many were looking forward to future dates, where they plan to return with their families for an adventurous experience,” she said.

Comments received through a post-event survey included:

* “We loved it!! It was perfect.”
* “Loved it! Staff was extremely friendly - perfect for our autistic daughter and even neurotypical daughter!”
* “It was wonderful - we drove an hour and 30 minutes because our community never had sensory events so we are very grateful. Staff was kind, gentle and caring and that means so much to us. Beautiful facility!”

In addition to offering sensory-friendly building hours, the Outdoor Adventure Center has received communication boards through [Project Jade](https://www.projectjade.org/), an Upper Peninsula-based organization that provides these boards to facilities that have a need and helps children with a variety of disabilities in securing any tools or equipment needed. Communication boards are sheets of symbols, pictures or photos that children can point to as a way of communicating with those around them.

The boards will be posted in the OAC soon, and neighboring William G. Milliken State Park and Harbor has installed three of the boards as well.

Wilemski said that the Outdoor Adventure Center has additional projects slated for 2023 that will continue to improve the facility’s accessibility focus on sensory inclusion.

“It is important to create these accommodations, so everyone is able to enjoy and access the OAC,” said Wilemski. “That starts with creating a safe space the best we can for all. It is important that individuals and families can come and enjoy the building and (hopefully) worry a little less about what people may think and focus on enjoying the experience. Breaking the barriers, the best that we can, so equity can happen for our visitors.”

Learn more about accessibility at the Outdoor Adventure Center, and find additional visitor information, upcoming events and more, at [Michigan.gov/OAC](https://www.michigan.gov/oac).

For more information about accessible recreation opportunities, visit [Michigan.gov/DNRAccessibility](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/accessibility).

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