

A Beach within Reach

An Accessibility Initiative

of

Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard Community Services Disability Services, and

The Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities

Project Update, Survey Results and the Work Ahead

from the Project Partners

February 2024

A Beach within Reach is an initiative designed to promote and advance accessibility at Martha's Vineyard public beaches across the island. Begun in 2023, its three partners are Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard, Martha's Vineyard Community Services Disability Services, and the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities.¹

WHAT IS A BEACH “WITHIN REACH”?

What do we mean by a beach “within reach”? A “beach within reach” is one whose accessibility allows people of all abilities to get there, get to the water's edge, and enjoy the physical space as independently as possible, whether their interests are swimming, boating, fishing, birdwatching, building sandcastles or appreciating the sun and sounds of the water.

While safe transportation to and from the beach is a necessity beyond the purview of Beach Managers, it is an essential starting point that in the future may prompt examination of related public transportation. For this project, practical elements that define a beach within reach are suitable accessible parking, an accessible route to the water's edge, accessible bathrooms and changing facilities, adaptive equipment like beach wheelchairs and floating chairs, with means to enter, experience, and leave the water safely.

PROJECT PHASES and TIMELINE

In Phase I, from June-September 2023, Beach Managers across the Island completed online surveys of beach accessibility features, based on current law and best practices.

In Phase II, from September-October 2023, the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities and trained volunteers visited the beaches to gauge and note onsite user experiences.

Next in Phase III, which began in October 2023 and will continue through April 2024, project leaders have completed data analysis and will provide feedback to the Beach Managers with short-term recommendations for accessibility improvements. Summaries of the study findings will become available on each of the partners' websites, provided to local media and delivered by presentations to varied interested audiences.²

¹ Contact information is found at the close of this document.

² A comprehensive report of the project activities and findings, the legal standards and best practices was written by the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities and is available from his office and on each of the initiative partners' websites.

Phase IV, scheduled for Spring 2024, will provide opportunities for public comments to recommend near term and long-range improvements. Project leaders envision ongoing collaboration toward the development of action plans and improvements in years ahead.

MORE ABOUT PHASES I AND II

In Phase I of the project (Summer to Fall of 2023), project leaders contacted the managers of every public beach on the Island by telephone and email to introduce the project and request their responses to a 27-question online survey (Survey Monkey), which was accompanied by resource materials detailing current laws and best practices.

Responding to the surveys, the Beach Managers provided current information about the elements of accessibility listed above as well as the availability of trained staff or volunteers to help beachgoers.

There was widespread participation. Data were collected from beaches in each town (Aquinnah, Chilmark, Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Haven, and West Tisbury), including those managed by the towns, Dukes County, the Trustees of Reservations, and the Martha's Vineyard Landbank Commission. After removing duplicates and other replies outside the scope of the project, 30 beaches remain and are represented in this update.

In Phase II of the project (Fall of 2023), user experience site visits by the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities and trained volunteers added to the collected data on the beaches.

WHAT WE LEARNED in 2023

Martha's Vineyard beaches are as diverse as the people who use them, reflecting unique features and degrees of accessibility. These are some examples of what we learned from Beach Managers' survey and Site Visitors' notes about the 30 beaches:

- Several beaches are relatively close to being a “beach within reach.”
- Over 2/3 of the beaches (21) have at least one accessible parking space, but just over half (17) report having an accessible route to the beach entrance from the parking lot or transit stop.³

³ Summary data for all of the survey questions is found in the Report of the Dukes County Associate Commissioner for Disabilities, referenced above.

- Based on Beach Managers' Surveys and follow-up visits, no beach is fully accessible to the water's edge, or for a tidal beach, high tide level, but as many as 1/3 of them (11) are close to meeting standards.
- Half (15) of the sites have beach wheelchairs with large wheels designed to go over sand.
- Floating beach wheelchairs are rare.
- Nearly half (14) have accessible toilet facilities.
- Few have trained staff or volunteers with responsibility to help with accessibility issues.
- Beach accessibility features are not widely publicized.
- There are numerous opportunities for improvements, some at relatively low cost and effort.

CURRENT WORK AND FUTURE COMMITMENTS

Since then, and looking ahead, A Beach within Reach will include Phases III and IV, outlined above, and collaboration toward longer range action plans and improvements. That collaboration may entail technical assistance, seeking funding (fundraising, public or philanthropic grants) and community events where people can come together to enjoy activities at accessible beaches across the Island.

CONTACTS

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