A Zoo for All

Chicago Zoological Society's Access and Inclusion Programs

April 15, 2015

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Who we are?

- Chicago Zoological Society is a nonprofit that operates Brookfield Zoo on land owned by the Forest Preserves of Cook County.
- 216 acres, more than 4,000 animals representing 450 Species.
- Brookfield Zoo is the No. 1 visited cultural attraction in Chicagoland among those who track attendance.
- 450 full time employees, over 2,000 seasonal employees.

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Our Commitment

- The Zoo welcomes more than 2.0 million visitors each year and estimates as many as 400,000 may have some level of intellectual, developmental or physical disability.
- The Zoo is responding by building an inclusive conservation movement through a holistic approach to programming that provides opportunities for meaningful change in the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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Internal Benchmarking

- Formed an internal working group that included staff from education, outreach, human resources, and development to assess current access and inclusion programs.
- Internal benchmarking took 18 months. Why?
  - Discovered multiple staff driven initiatives that were not public knowledge.
  - There were too many people, implementing projects in isolation.
  - Key staff person resigned.

- Existing Initiatives & Programs:
  - Zoo Camp for All
  - Special Events for organizations such as Autism Speaks, Easter Seals, and Misericordia
  - Work training program with local non-profit
  - High School volunteer and employment program
  - Parking Lot cleaning contract
  - Noise cancelling headphones, visual schedules, social stories, etc.

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Positioning Our Work for Funders

- *A Zoo for All: Access and Inclusion Programs* provides innovative engagement opportunities for people with disabilities across four general areas:
  - ✓ Life and work skills: We provide programs that train young adults for employment and volunteer opportunities. Launching in 2015, a new initiative, called the Autism Network program provides teens and adults on the autism spectrum with facilitated social skill building events.

- ✓ Inclusion in CZS programs and customized programs for specific learning needs: We strive to offer inclusion opportunities within all our programs, for example Zoo Camp. To ensure counselors are prepared for recognizing and addressing special situations, they receive training in attention deficit and autism learning needs. Piloted last year, we also added Saturday Mornings at the Zoo, a program for early learners on the autism spectrum.

- ✓ Facilities, exhibits, and learning experiences for Brookfield Zoo guests – We provide guests, upon request, with noise cancelling headphones, visual schedules, social stories, self-identifying badges, etc.
- ✓ Outreach events – Our Animal Ambassadors and program staff provide special community-based opportunities for people to interact with animals and zookeeper staff for individuals from underserved neighborhoods as well as persons with disabilities.

- Current Partners: Autism Speaks, Misericordia, Best Buddies of Illinois, the LaGrange Area Department of Special Education, Special Education Department at Riverside Brookfield High School, the Special Recreation Associations that serve Brookfield and nearby communities, and Southside Occupational Academy.

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The Results

- 2015 Grants:
  - Two Chicago area foundations provided $25,000 in funding for Saturday Morning Autism Program, the Autism Network, and outreach events.
  - Two foundations, one national and one local, provided $17,500 for Zoo Camp for All.

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