



APGA Conference Session 2026

Accessibility on a Shoestring Budget – Notes & Resources

Wednesday, June 10, 2026 | 11:30 AM to 12:00 PM

Welcome and brief introduction to MCBG

- 47-acre botanical garden located on the ancestral lands of the Northern Pomo People
- Founded in 1961 and opened to the public 60 years ago
- Serves as a place for conservation, education, recreation, wellness, and inspiration where plants and people thrive together along California's rugged coast
- Located within California's coastal zone, with a mild maritime climate, coastal fog, and most rainfall occurring between November and April
- Showcases both cultivated ornamental gardens and natural coastal habitats
 - Recognized for world-class collections of rhododendrons, perennials, heaths and heathers, dahlias, succulents, rare and endangered plants, and ocean frontage
 - Supports and protects rich biodiversity and important habitat for native plant communities, migratory birds, and marine life
- Four miles of trails throughout the property, approximately a half-mile walk from the main gardens to the Pacific Ocean
 - Main pathways are approximately 4 feet wide, with hard-packed fine-gravel surfaces
 - Some areas include uneven terrain, natural surfaces, and narrower secondary trails
- Supported by a small, highly collaborative staff
- Welcomes a diverse audience, including local residents, regional visitors from the Bay Area and Sacramento, international travelers, families, and retirees
- Located in a remote rural region approximately 3.5 hours from major metropolitan areas
 - Fort Bragg's economy was historically built on logging and commercial fishing
 - Today, tourism is the primary economic driver, supported by hospitality, outdoor recreation, and coastal attractions
 - Like many rural coastal communities, Fort Bragg faces challenges related to housing affordability, workforce availability, and seasonal tourism fluctuations
- Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens is a living, growing hub where plants thrive, and people come together to learn, connect, and take meaningful action that supports both environmental and human health

Defining the Topic

- Accessibility on a limited budget
- Accessibility isn't just about big capital projects—it's about ongoing, intentional effort
- You will gain momentum when you make it a priority and integrate accessibility into every decision
- Our motto – start small / keep building / listen often

Challenges Public Gardens Face

- Common barriers – These challenges are shared across many nonprofits:
 - Limited funding

- Permitting constraints
- Challenging natural terrain
- Infrastructure from the 1960's
- Small staff capacity

Practical, Low-Cost Solutions: What We've Done and Other Ideas

1. Community Outreach – Start with Listening

- The most important first step is listening – listening is free and foundational
- Connect with community members to build relationships and resources
- Types of needs to understand:
 - Physical
 - Financial
 - Emotional and or invisible needs
- Feedback guides priorities and builds your “wish list”

2. Informal Accessibility Audits

- Work with community members:
 - [Leslie Krongold](#) -Health Educator and Advocate
 - Bonnie Lewkowiz – Disability rights advocate in the field of inclusive tourism. [Access California](#) for info on outdoor spaces
 - Validation for what you are doing well and actionable improvements
- **Video – Leslie Krongold & Jessica Nussbaum**

3. Small Improvements

- Small, inexpensive changes can significantly improve independence and the overall experience of a guest's visit.
- Some small changes we have made and other ideas on the list:
 - Lower hooks for coats and bags
 - Easier-to-use door handles
 - Earplugs for noise sensitivity
 - Adjustable mobility device belts
 - Clearly marked accessible routes and entrances
 - Flexible seating options during programs and events
 - Staff and volunteer training on disability awareness and inclusive communication
 - More detailed terrain and accessibility information on the website for visits, classes, and events
 - Links to accessibility resources such as [Access California](#)

4. Assistive Resources

- Many assistive resources are inexpensive, donation-based, or easy to implement, yet they can dramatically improve comfort, independence, and confidence during a guest's visit.
- Low-cost resources:
 - Mobility scooters, wheelchairs, and adaptive gardening tools

- Earplugs/headphones for sensory sensitivity
 - Loaner canes or walking sticks
 - Portable folding stools for rest breaks
 - Golf cart or shuttle assistance during large events
- Clear communication is a free resource:
 - Clearly marking the most accessible routes
 - Advance notice about loud sounds, crowds, or performances
 - Accessibility contact information is clearly listed online
 - Encouraging visitors to request accommodations in advance and creating a culture where asking for assistance feels welcomed and normal

5. Infrastructure Improvements

- Phasing projects over time instead of tackling everything at once
 - Building a long-term accessibility wish list
 - Prioritizing high-impact improvements first
- Incorporating accessibility upgrades into existing projects – Think accessibility with every new project
- Apply for grants!
- Partnering with our volunteers, volunteer organizations, contractors, or service groups
 - In-kind donations or free/low-cost labor and design

6. Financial Accessibility – Accessibility includes affordability

- Even small financial barriers can prevent people from experiencing nature, education, and community connection.
- Programs and opportunities offered by MCBG:
 - [Museums for All](#) national program supporting discounted admission
 - Free admission for individuals with developmental disabilities and their support staff or caregivers
 - Partnerships with schools, nonprofits, and social service organizations – free group visits
 - Volunteer opportunities that include an opportunity to earn a free membership, plus free or discounted event admission and educational program access
 - Donate event tickets to local nonprofits serving low-income families

7. Accessibility Beyond the Physical – Accessibility is also emotional and social

- Belonging is part of accessibility. Everyone deserves an enjoyable experience
- Core ideas:
 - Creating a welcoming, judgment-free environment
 - Ensuring visitors feel comfortable, included/seen, and not self-conscious
- Find community resources
 - Include community groups that focus on inclusion
 - Consult with professionals:
 - [Dr. Kianna Zielesch](#) – Public Safety Psychologist. Former fire captain. Did a mental health training for management – volunteered her time. Website:

Recap & Resources

- Research potential local resources with accessibility expertise:
 - Most communities have a network of organizations and services that support people with disabilities and can be valuable partners when developing accessibility initiatives, programs, or facilities
 - County Health and Human Services Departments
 - Independent Living Centers (ILCs)
 - [The Arc](#)
 - [Area Agencies on Aging](#) (AAA)
 - [National Federation of the Blind and American Council of the Blind](#)
 - Local school districts, colleges, libraries, and State Parks often provide accessibility resources, adaptive technology, and community connections
 - Accessibility Experts – voluntary or grant-funded
 - Local organizations, groups, and individuals that can help review signage, trails, programs, websites, and visitor experiences, and often provide direct feedback from community members who will use the facilities. Many organizations are eager to participate in accessibility planning because they appreciate being involved early rather than after decisions have already been made.
 - Occupational therapists and rehabilitation specialists
 - Orientation and mobility specialists for blind and low-vision individuals
 - Deaf and hard-of-hearing service providers and interpreters, and organizations
 - Blind and low-vision organizations
 - Independent Living Centers
 - Autism and sensory-access groups
 - Senior advocacy organizations
 - Veterans organizations
 - Local disability advisory councils
- Create a wish list and prioritize
- Research grants that fund accessibility initiatives, inclusion, and safety
 - Local Community Foundations
 - [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) (IMLS)
 - [American Horticultural Society](#) (AHS)
 - [American Association of Retired Persons](#) (AARP)
- Seek partnerships with volunteers, specialized local businesses, and contractors

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