



Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens – 2024 IDEA Cohort Final Project Report

Project: *Welcoming Neurodiverse Visitors to Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens*

Our primary objective for this project was to make Jenkins a more welcoming and accessible site for neurodiverse visitors, including those on the autism spectrum. To accomplish this objective, we identified four action items:

1. Expand online resources for pre-visit planning.
2. Create and promote a sensory backpack program.
3. Train staff to better welcome neurodiverse visitors.
4. Build meaningful relationships with members of and care providers for the neurodiverse community.

We accomplished the first two action items and have made progress on the third and fourth.

Why did you pick your project?

As outlined in our newly adopted Strategic Plan 2023-2027, Jenkins is working to make our site, programs, and services more accessible to all our community members. As part of that goal, we wanted to improve resources for neurodiverse visitors, including those on the autism spectrum. We frequently interact with neurodiverse visitors in the garden, and it is our aim to make sure our staff and site are as friendly, comfortable, and safe as possible.

What is changing because of your project?

1. **We expanded online resources for pre-visit planning.** This included adding descriptions of spaces and trails, listing a dedicated email address to contact with questions related to accessibility, and linking to a new social narrative guide for visiting Jenkins. [Click here to view the social narrative guide.](#) The accessibility web page is a work in progress, and we will continue to add resources and descriptions in the future.
2. **We implemented a new sensory backpack program.** Visitors are invited to borrow backpacks for free during their visit. The backpacks include:
 - Two fidgets

- Polarized sunglasses
- Sun visor
- Noise reducing headphones
- Plush chipmunk
- Binoculars
- Magnifying glass
- Printed and laminated copy of the social narrative guide to visiting Jenkins

The backpacks and items within are sized for children but can be borrowed by visitors of any age. We promoted the program on social media and in our newsletter, but there is still more work to be done to make our visitors aware of this resource.

3. **We are working on scheduling a staff training.** It has been difficult to find a training option that would be suitable for our team (more discussion on this in the “Challenges” section, below). We began a conversation with the National Center on Accessibility at the [Eppley Center for Parks and Public Lands](#) of Indiana University to explore a possible custom training option. In the meantime, several online resources have been circulated within our team to get the conversation started.
4. **We hope to build relationships within the community in the coming months.** The timing of this project overlapped with our busiest season of the year, so we were not able to tackle this last action item. We are compiling a list of service providers and community members to connect with in the coming months and years. Our hope is to forge meaningful relationships to make sure community members are aware of Jenkins as a resource and give us the opportunity to listen and learn.

Who are you making the change for?

This project serves both internal and external audiences. Internally, the training and community connection aspects of this project will better equip our team to serve our visitors and each other. Externally, our expanded resources will engage and serve a community of neurodiverse visitors.

What were the challenges you faced (expected and/or unexpected) and how did you work through them?

One unexpected challenge related to our project was the difficulty in finding appropriate training for our staff. We were looking for training resources that were tailored for team members at a public-facing organization such as a zoo, park, garden, or museum and were not able to find anything suitable. There are plenty of trainings available for health care workers, parents, and teachers as well as some trainings that are altogether too broad and “one size fits all.” We connected with the team at [Art-Reach](#) who put us in touch with Ross Edelstein at the

Eppley Center for Parks and Public Lands, and we are in discussions with him about creating a custom training for our team.

Another challenge we are facing is to connect our new services with people that might benefit from them. We still need to build more relationships with caregivers, families, and individuals to better spread the word about Jenkins as a welcoming site for neurodiverse visitors.

What were your biggest takeaways/lessons learned?

One lesson learned was the simple practice of seeing the garden through someone else's eyes. Many of us look primarily at physical limitations when addressing accessibility, but there are many disabilities that are less obvious or altogether invisible. Our visitors arrive at Jenkins with their own unique set of experiences, capabilities, and expectations, and it is a good practice for all of us on staff to broaden our understanding of what it means to experience the gardens.

What are resources you used and/or would recommend?

We are working on hosting an all staff/board training in-person but wanted to get the conversation started while we work out those details. Two TED Talks were shared to introduce the concept of neurodiversity:

- [Neurodivergent, neurodiversity and neurotypical: a guide to the terms](#)
- [TED Talk with Elisabeth Wiklander – Neurodiversity – the key that unlocked my world](#)

To collect ideas of what to put in the backpacks, we initially connected with colleagues at [Hershey Gardens](#) to discuss their program. Additionally, we looked at lists and information provided on the websites of other gardens and museums. Those listed and linked below were particularly helpful:

- [Children's Museum of Richmond](#)
- [Denver Botanic Gardens](#)
- [KultureCity](#)
- [North Lincolnshire Museum](#)
- [University of Colorado Museum of Natural History](#)
- [US Botanic Garden](#)

If you were to go back and do things differently, what would you have done?

Due to some of the time constraints around completing this project, we were not able to include a larger group in planning and implementation. If we could go back and do it again, it would have been valuable to include neurodivergent visitors in the conversation from the

beginning. We have plans to build connections with neurodiverse visitors in the coming months but would have benefited from these voices earlier on in the process.

What advice would you give others?

Don't let perfection be the enemy of progress! We have lofty goals for accessibility at Jenkins and many of these initiatives come with a big price tag and a large investment of staff time. As we slowly plan for bigger goals, we can make progress on some of the smaller, more affordable (or free!) initiatives in the meantime. Many of these small tweaks can result in a big impact. For example, our trail system is not currently accessible and will take a large investment to make the paths more navigable. In the meantime, it is hugely helpful for us to add information about our trails to the website (describe the trail material, slope, etc.) so visitors can plan and decide which trails would be best for them. Adding more information to the website is free and easy but can completely change a visitor's experience of Jenkins for the better.

What's next for you?

This initiative is one small piece of a larger roadmap for increasing accessibility at Jenkins. Our accessibility plan, which was drafted in 2022, identifies areas that need improvement along with the resources needed for each task and a target date for completion. Accessibility planning is iterative and will never be complete, but we look forward to making progress towards our goal to create a more welcoming garden for all to enjoy.