



Sarah Vidler-intern testing out the beach mobility chair at one of the municipal beaches in Dartmouth, NS

A memorable work experience learning how to bring inclusion and accessibility to recreational programming

THE HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY has made accessibility and inclusion in recreational programs a key priority, building its capacity and expertise to high levels.

Over the past couple of years, the municipality's Parks & Recreation department has expanded its inclusion team to include three Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists and has developed programming called "Ready for Rec" – through which outdoor fun and multi-sport programs are designed for children and youth who have diverse needs and require additional supports to be successful in a recreation environment.



HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY,
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Cassady Yochoff, Inclusion and Accessibility Specialist and Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Sarah Vidler joined the municipality’s inclusion team for four months during the summer of 2022. At the time, she was in the final year of earning her Therapeutic Recreation degree at Brock University in St. Catharine’s, Ontario. Sarah’s work as an Inclusion Coordinator for the municipality has allowed her to fulfill part of her degree’s internship requirements.

She was hired with support from CPRA’s Youth Employment Experience program, designed to provide young people with valuable experience and skills development in the parks and recreation field.

“I recognized this would be a true learning opportunity because strong inclusion programming in municipal recreation is still quite rare in Canada,” Sarah says. “I was impressed that they have three staff certified in recreation therapy, which made this job highly relevant to my university studies.”

Cassady Yochoff is a member of the inclusion team for the municipality. Her title is Inclusion and Accessibility Specialist, and she too is a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist.

The municipality’s Parks & Recreation department provides some inclusion programs for newcomers to the community; however, its prime focus is on expanding access for children and youth with disabilities.

“Youngsters with disabilities can participate in our typical recreation programs with adapted equipment, one-to-one support and other accommodations to meet their needs. Or they can go to our smaller, more targeted groups created just for folks who need additional support,” says Cassady.

The core philosophy of Ready for Rec is to adapt programs to include children with disabilities, as opposed to asking the child to change to fit in, she says.

“We look at the child’s strengths and prioritize reducing barriers. How can we put the person first and adapt the environment, instead of telling them, ‘Here are all the things you need to change in yourself so you’re able to access our programs,’” explains Cassady.

“Here’s one example: If we do a hike, instead of asking a child in a wheelchair to observe the others hiking because the hill is too steep, we plan the hike on a path that is flatter and easier to navigate for that child.”

During her work term, Sarah spent several weeks providing one-on-one inclusion support to children attending outdoor

summer camp. Sarah and Cassady also worked together on a project to assess local parks, beaches and trails to identify and document accessibility features. They then developed a resource to inform community members about accessible spaces in the Halifax region.

Sarah says all her experiences were professionally and personally rewarding. The support she provided to a boy who used a wheelchair was especially memorable.

The youngster was attending summer camp for the first time, and Sarah provided support to him during his weeks at “Adventure Earth,” the outdoor summer camp at Shubie Park in Dartmouth.

“One of the regular activities in this camp was to take the campers canoeing down the canal to the lake. This particular camper had never been canoeing before but was totally on board with trying out the experience,” says Sarah.

“We managed to amend the schedule to accommodate this for him and booked some canoes so the whole group could attend alongside him. We were able to get a bean-bag chair for him to sit in during the canoeing, and he had a blast! He was like any other kid at camp.”

To enhance her ability to support campers with mobility restrictions, Sarah tested what it would be like to use a special, floating beach wheelchair that can be taken right into the water.

Cassady was impressed with Sarah’s dedication. “Sarah was brave enough to try it out herself, experiencing what it felt like to float in the water in this mobility aid. If she was supporting a camper using the chair, she could offer reassurance and inspire trust because she understood how it worked.”

As Sarah’s mentor, Cassady passed along her knowledge about best practices in inclusive recreation and helped her sharpen her skills for planning and delivering programming. At the same time, Sarah contributed a lot to the organization and its employees, Cassady says.

“I know Sarah learned new things, but we also learned from Sarah. Many of our day camp counsellors are age 16 to 18, often in their first jobs, and Sarah showed them what could be done. The quality of care she provided to campers and her creativity in enhancing their camp experience made her a fantastic role model.” 🍁