**Park Hosts Two Workshops on Accessibility**

During two days in August, over 45 representatives from 24 different national and state parks, museums and historic sites joined staff and volunteers from Thomas Edison National Historical Park in attending two accessibility workshops hosted by the park. The first, on August 2nd, focused on "Welcoming Visitors Who are Blind or Visually Impaired to your Site". The second workshop on August 9th, covered the topic of "How to Welcome Visitors on the Autism Spectrum to your Cultural Institution or Site".

Each workshop was presented in two parts. The morning session featured three speakers. The first two presenters covered general awareness information on the topic, use of terminology, best practices for providing service and interacting with visitors and adapting educational programs to meet the audience's needs. The third presenter was from a museum and shared a specific example of a successful program that utilized the information presented.

The afternoon sessions focused on those who would be developing or leading programs and tours. By using the park as a classroom, participants learned how to practically implement the information gleaned from the morning session and develop techniques and ideas for creating and adapting interpretive programs at their own sites. Morning and afternoon sessions at both workshops were filmed and will be edited into DVDs. These will be made widely available as training aids for staff and volunteers within the NPS and other organizations.

The presenters at the first workshop, **"Welcoming Visitors who are Blind or Visually Impaired to your Site",** included Joe Ruffalo, President of the National Federation of the Blind NJ. Blind since the age of 27, Joe shared with us his first hand experiences about the challenges of visiting a historic museum. He offered practical information about how to assist a person who is blind or visually impaired while respecting their independence. Carol Castellano, President of the National Federation of the Blind, Parents of Blind Children, offered compelling examples that stressed the need to expand museum programming to accommodate tactile experiences. Christena Gunther, who works in Access & Community Programs for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, shared innovative and practical examples of museum programming for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

The afternoon session consisted of hands-on experiences within the historical museum space so attendees could learn to adapt their interpretive programs to meet the needs of the target audiences. Participants were coached by the experts as they took turns practicing how to direct a visitor who may be blind or visually impaired. Audio describing techniques were also demonstrated and those attending had a chance to apply what they had learned in attempting to provide an audio described tour for their blindfolded partner. Use of terminology and exhibiting sensitivity toward visitor needs were also addressed.

**"Welcoming Visitors on the Autism Spectrum to your Cultural Institution or Site"** also featured experts in this field. Erik Solberg**,** Principal of the NJ Academy Learning Center, shared his educational experiences working with students on the autism spectrum. His session included concrete ideas for programmatic adaptations as well as making the museum setting more comfortable for visitors with autism and their families. Claudia Ocello provided examples from museums and cultural institutions around the world. The examples included information that some institutions provide on their website to assist visitors on the autism spectrum prior to their visit and also actual examples of museum programming that has been adapted for visitors with autism. The final presenter, Lynette Morse from the New York Transit Museum, illustrated her museum's wide range of programming specifically targeted for visitors on the autism spectrum. The Transit Museum has been widely recognized for its leadership in developing activities and programs for visitors with autism, particularly children.

The hands-on afternoon session challenged participants to apply the morning session's knowledge to adapt the building conditions and programming goals to meet the needs of persons with autism. Topics included "quiet rooms", additional museum hours for visitors on the spectrum to visit when the space is less crowded, use of iPad technology, and the use of picture schedules to familiarize visitors ahead of time with their museum experience. The session also touched upon exhibiting sensitivity toward the visitors and their caregivers.

Overall, the goal of the workshops was to gain a greater awareness of welcoming guests with disabilities to our sites with a longer term goal of recruiting volunteers with disabilities. The workshops were made possible through a Volunteer in Park - Specials Fund program. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive both in regard to the workshops and the materials provided. In an effort to conserve paper resources and facilitate the dissemination of good practice, workshop materials were provided on a jump drive provided to each participant. The jump drives were pre-loaded with an extensive range of publicly available reports, articles and on-line links providing further information on the topic of the workshop and general accessibility issues.

The success and positive impact of the workshops are reflected in some of the comments that have been received from participants.

"The combination of presentation and active learning was very effective. I have rarely attended a workshop which has had an immediate effect on my perception and performance."

"I have been working for museums for the past eight years. By far, this workshop, from start to finish, was the MOST rewarding, informative and illuminating! Please, please, please, do offer this again, and with the same presenters!"

"I have already shared with my co-workers what I learned and have already started plans for appropriate programs at one of our museums."

"Excellent workshop----one of the best I've ever attended!"

"Resources are amazing!"

"The jump drive makes sharing resources SO easy. Thank you for all of your efforts in putting the presentation together. It was excellent."

 It is therefore hoped that if further funding can be secured, additional accessibility workshops can be held next year.