

AccessLetter

**Cambridge Commission for
Persons with Disabilities**

Giving People with Disabilities Opportunities to Connect with Nature

In August, the common room at one of Cambridge Health Alliance's Elder Service Plan programs becomes a summer ocean's edge with live lobsters, hermit crabs, kelp and salt water. In October, the library at the Massachusetts Hospital School (MHS) in Canton becomes a New England farm at harvest time. Among the squash, pumpkins and herbs, live turkeys gobble (yes, turkeys), chickens peck inquisitively, and a therapy dog awaits his chance to visit individually with each student.



Connecting with nature.
photo by Sue Huszar

The Nature Connection (NC) is a non-profit that carries the outside inside, bringing nature programs to people of all ages who may have limited access to the natural world. Weaving therapeutic and educational practices together, it provides hands-on learning and exploration of animals, nature, and the human-animal bond. The

cornerstones of its work are safety, choice, and respect, which apply to both the animals and the participants. Founded over 27 years ago, NC connects individuals with nature's capacity to heal and to teach.

NC serves people with a variety of disabilities, including mental illness, physical disabilities, emotional trauma, age-related disabilities, and individuals with multiple disabilities throughout the greater Boston area. The organization also focuses on individuals whose life challenges may include poverty and violence. NC's client sites include afterschool programs, psychiatric treatment centers, special needs schools, senior services facilities and foster children programs.

(More on Nature Connection, page 2)

DPW Expands Snow Clearance Efforts

In response to ongoing concerns expressed by the disability community and others, the Cambridge Department of Public Works (DPW) has broadened its approach to addressing seasonal problems of snow and ice accumulation on the City's sidewalks. DPW wishes to stress that, as always, primary responsibility for shoveling sidewalks, including curb ramps, remains with the adjacent property owner. However, in recognition of the need to do more to keep sidewalks and curbs clear for people with disabilities, two new initiatives are being announced.

First, starting this winter, residents have a new way of reporting sidewalks that are not properly shoveled. Android smartphone and Apple iPhone users now can download the Cambridge iReport app (available from Apple's App Store and Android

Marketplace). Once downloaded, the iReport app allows residents to make reports while on-the-go (and even to attach a photo of the unshoveled sidewalk, if they like). If one does not have a smartphone, there are still two traditional ways to report unshoveled sidewalks:

- 1) Call the DPW Snow Hotline at (617) 349-4903
- 2) Use the DPW online reporting form on the DPW snow page at www.cambridge.gov/snow.

Second, also new this winter, DPW will clear ramps at corners and bus stops on prioritized routes after significant snow accumulation (generally 6 inches or more) within 3-4 days from the end of a storm (if back-to-back storms occur, from the end of last storm).

(More on DPW Snow, page 2)



Nature Connection (cont. from page 1)

At their weekly or monthly visit to various client sites, Nature Connection staff and volunteers transform indoor spaces into wildlife habitats. The rooms come alive with nature. Participants become nature students and, along with clinicians and caregivers, circle around a small New England habitat created by NC volunteers and staff.



Hands-on learning with the Nature Connection.

photo by Bob Lotz

Josey Kirkland, NC's program coordinator, engages the group with a story about a walk through the snowy forest or the survival skills of tidal creatures adapting to the changing environment at the ocean's edge – from low tide to high tide, from hot summers to New England's winters. NC staff and volunteers then work slowly, sharing animals and natural materials, one by one, with each individual participant.

Participants are able to touch the soft fur of a chinchilla, watch the darting eyes of a chicken, smell and feel pine needles. Watching and learning about a disabled finch provides a metaphor for some participants. This multi-sensory exploration and discovery connects the people NC serves with nature's capacity to teach and to heal.

In the words of MHS principal Janice Feinberg: "These programs continue to encourage our students to be curious and sensitive to all living creatures, and to value and respect the natural world we live in. As one of our teachers aptly states: 'Sight, sound, touch and smell of the natural world come alive within the confines of our classroom when The Nature Connection is here. For many of the kids, it is a new experience, one that reaches beyond their backyards and front doors.'"

Emily Firor, Director of the MinuteMan Arc Day Habilitation program, spoke to the additional therapeutic progress made by participants. "Lack of motivation stands as a powerful obstacle

between developmentally disabled adults and their growth. A program like [The Nature Connection] is one that will motivate. A dog can come up... and the person can touch it, initiating a movement that may achieve an occupational therapy goal. Engaging them in functional movements may help them with basic activities of daily living such as reaching out for a cup, or putting their arm into a sleeve.... A program like [NC] brings joy and excitement, along with initiation and movement."

To watch a video of NC's work, visit www.nature-connection.org or call 978-369-2585 for more information.

DPW Snow (cont. from page 1)

DPW gave weight to the following factors in determining priority routes:

- Bus routes (a general indicator of high pedestrian and vehicular activity)
- Proximity to facilities where pedestrian access is particularly important, including:
 - Public and private school property
 - Libraries
 - Youth Centers
 - Senior Centers and Elderly housing
 - Galleria and Twin City Mall
 - 100 ft. buffer of MBTA subway stops



During this past summer, DPW staff met with the Commission for Persons with Disabilities and members of the Cambridge Pedestrian Committee to receive feedback on the prioritization process.

Using this prioritization process, for the winter of 2011/2012, DPW plans to:

- Include all corner ramps along the following high-volume bus stop streets: