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Our Journey to Accessibility

A Message from Tami Reist, President/CEO Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association

I hope you will enjoy learning about the journey of entering the marketplace, lessons we have learned, and accessibility we have been building throughout North Alabama for nearly two years.

I often meet people who have heard about our initiative and our commitment to becoming the first regional destination verified by Wheel the World. What began as an idea has grown into something much greater—a movement to make North Alabama a destination where everyone has the opportunity to travel, explore, and experience our region with greater independence and confidence.

When we began this journey, we looked closely at the changing needs of travelers. We saw Baby Boomers entering retirement and recognized that many would experience mobility or other limitations that could make travel more difficult. We wanted them to know that when they chose North Alabama, we were working to be prepared—to provide the information, resources, and experiences that could give them the independence they deserve.

But we quickly learned that accessibility reaches far beyond mobility.

Our work has expanded to consider individuals and families navigating sensory needs, dementia, blindness, low vision, and many other visible and non-visible disabilities and limitations. Alabama Mountain Lakes wanted to help remove uncertainty from travel and create a region where people can better understand what to expect before they arrive.

Has this journey been easy? No.

I have learned more than I ever imagined—about accessibility, advocacy, funding, partnerships, and even the political process involved in trying to make meaningful changes. There are still barriers that need to be removed and resources that are needed to make travel easier for everyone.

But my heart is full when I think about the responses we have received from the people whose journeys we have helped make possible. Those stories remind us why we started and why we must continue.

This guidebook was created to help others begin their own accessibility journey. Inside, you will find resources, ideas, information about accessible products and services

others navigate accessibility—including communities and destinations beyond our state.

Most importantly, I hope this guide demonstrates that accessibility cannot be accomplished alone.

It takes tourism professionals and community leaders. It takes businesses and elected officials. It takes parents, spouses, caregivers, children, advocates, and people with lived experiences. It takes individuals willing to listen, learn, and sometimes look at the world through someone else's eyes.

There are so many people I want to thank. I especially want to recognize our Alabama Mountain Lakes Dream Team, who embraced this idea and believed in what we could accomplish together. I also want to thank Jake Steinman with TravelAbility, Leslie Walker, and the many partners, advocates, influencers, organizations, communities, and individuals who have helped us along the way.

From the bottom of my heart, I am proud of this project.

I hope we can continue securing the partnerships and funding necessary to move this work even further. We have accomplished much, but our journey is far from over.

Helen Keller, one of my greatest inspirations, once said: ***“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”***

Those words perfectly represent our accessibility journey.

I believe Helen Keller would be proud to see what is happening here in her home region of North Alabama—a place working together to make travel more welcoming and accessible for all.

Thank you to everyone who has helped turn this dream into a reality.

The journey continues—and we hope you will join us.

Tami Reist

President/CEO

Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association



Theme Campaign Award –

"Creating the Accessible Friendly North Alabama", Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association

Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association serves as the destination marketing organization for North Alabama's 16 counties and is a recognized leader in accessible tourism development. Through its Creating the Accessible-Friendly North Alabama Region campaign, the organization launched a comprehensive effort to position North Alabama as one of the most accessible travel destinations in the Southeast. In partnership with Wheel the World and more than 200 hotels, attractions, outdoor recreation sites, and events, the campaign provided professional accessibility assessments that offer travelers verified, reliable information for trip planning.

At the center of the initiative is Accessible North Alabama, a first-of-its-kind regional platform featuring detailed accessibility information, sensory-friendly attractions and events, certified accessible-friendly businesses, downloadable itineraries, and direct booking opportunities. The campaign also hosted accessibility influencers whose authentic travel experiences generated impactful

content and expanded awareness among travelers with disabilities and mobility needs. In addition, a partnership with Travels with Darley's Adventures produced the documentary *Under the Sun, Moon & Stars: Accessible North Alabama* with Wonders Within Reach, which earned recognition at the TravelAbility Film Festival and aired on United Airlines flights nationwide during Disability Pride Month.

Beyond marketing, Alabama Mountain Lakes invested in long-term accessibility improvements through industry training, certification programs, sensory inclusion initiatives, and community grants. More than 100 tourism professionals completed accessibility training, while grants, donated equipment, and partner support generated more than \$185,000 in accessibility improvements across the region. Through innovation, collaboration, and measurable impact, the campaign has strengthened communities, expanded tourism opportunities, and established North Alabama as a national model for accessible travel.



PAVING THE WAY

North Alabama is helping more visitors experience its museums, historic sites and outdoor attractions through reliable travel information, trained hospitality partners and practical accessibility resources.

Accessibility can become personal in an instant. A broken ankle can change how someone enters a building. Surgery can turn a short walk into an exhausting one. Aging, pregnancy, low vision, hearing loss or a new diagnosis can reshape the way a person moves through the world.

Sometimes the need is temporary. Sometimes it is permanent. Sometimes the traveler is helping a parent, child, spouse or friend navigate the experience. At any given moment, accessibility could become an issue for anyone.

That reality is helping transform the way North Alabama welcomes visitors.

Led by the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association (AMLA), tourism partners across the 16-county region have invested in verified travel information, mobility equipment, adaptive technology, sensory resources and employee training. The result is a growing network of experiences designed to welcome visitors with a wide range of physical, sensory and cognitive needs.

“Accessibility is more than a project, it is AMLA’s mission,” said Tami Reist, president and CEO of AMLA. “We are committed to ensuring that North Alabama is not only beautiful and adventurous but also inclusive, inviting and accessible.”

BUILDING A VERIFIED DESTINATION

In 2025, North Alabama became the first region in the state to achieve Accessibility Verified status through Wheel the World, a global accessible travel platform.

During a 10-month process, approximately 150 hotels, restaurants, attractions, airports and other tourism businesses underwent third-party accessibility reviews. Travelers can now find details about entrances, measurements, room features, surfaces and other accommodations before deciding where to stay, eat and explore. Participating businesses also received training and support materials to help them better serve travelers with disabilities.

The Accessible North Alabama website brings many of those resources together in one place. Visitors can find practical travel tips, detailed itineraries and links to Accessibility

Verified hotels, restaurants, attractions and other businesses. AMLA also worked with disabled travel content creators to develop peer recommendations and itineraries based on different lived experiences.

The goal is not to suggest that every location will work for every traveler. It is to provide clear information so visitors can make informed decisions before they arrive.

AMLA has also introduced free digital itineraries through Bandwango. The mobile passes connect visitors with attractions, accommodations, restaurants and other tourism businesses across the region. Once registered, travelers receive a pass directly on their phones, placing trip information in one convenient location.

EQUIPMENT THAT CREATES ACCESS

North Alabama's accessibility initiative extends beyond websites and travel information.

More than 50 wheelchairs have been distributed to tourism partners across the region. At the U.S. Space & Rocket Center, AMLA donated 23 wheelchairs through grant funding from Alabama's Mountains, Rivers and Valleys Resource Conservation and Development Council. The center welcomes more than 650,000 visitors annually, and the wheelchairs are being used in both the museum and Space Camp.

Additional wheelchairs have been placed at museums, parks, restaurants and other locations, where they are available to visitors at no charge.

Adaptive technology is also opening new possibilities for visitors who are blind or have low vision. Meta Smart Glasses have been placed at museums and historic attractions throughout North Alabama. The technology can provide real-time visual assistance, helping users identify objects, read information and better engage with exhibits and their surroundings.

At Ivy Green, Birthplace of Helen Keller, five pairs of Meta Smart Glasses give visitors who are blind or visually impaired another way to explore the home, museum and grounds associated with one of the world's most recognized advocates for people with disabilities.

The Cook Museum of Natural Science received a wheelchair and two pairs of the glasses. Two additional pairs were provided to the U.S. Space & Rocket Center. Other participating attractions include the Alabama Veterans Museum and Archives, EarlyWorks Museums, Evelyn Burrow Museum, Jesse Owens Museum, Scottsboro Boys Museum and Little River Canyon Center.

Creative Tourism Consultant Leslie Walker said, "Accessibility doesn't start with equipment. It starts with awareness. But when you pair that awareness with the right tools, like these new wheelchairs and Meta smart glasses, you move from good intentions into real, tangible access. That's when a visitor stops worrying about how they'll navigate a space and can actually experience it." Walker was instrumental in creating Tourism ALL-a-Bama and currently serves as the Program Manager. Funded through a grant from AMLA, the mission of Tourism ALL-a-Bama is to promote and enhance the tourism industry within the state by offering sensory tourism trainings and practice stay experiences for individuals who qualify.

PREPARING PEOPLE AS WELL AS PLACES

AMLA's work also includes training tourism employees to better understand individual needs.

Through Tourism ALL-a-Bama, hospitality partners receive sensory tourism training and participate in practice stays designed for individuals and families affected by autism or sensory sensitivities.

At SpringHill Suites Huntsville Downtown, General Manager Ashlee Crosby and her staff completed accessibility verification and sensory training. The hotel has resources that may include weighted blankets, sound machines and other items for guests who request them.

Crosby's daughter, Samone, was born with limb differences and sometimes uses a wheelchair for longer distances. Their experiences have shown Crosby that accessibility is never one-size-fits-all. One guest may need a mobility device. Another may need a quieter environment, a different room setup or simply accurate information.

"By equipping our partners with tools, strategies and best practices, AMLA is ensuring that North Alabama can welcome visitors with disabilities with the same warmth and hospitality the region is known for," Reist said.

OPENING THE OUTDOORS

North Alabama's mountains, lakes, waterfalls and trails are among the region's greatest assets. They can also present some of its greatest accessibility challenges.

At Joe Wheeler State Park, a TerrainHopper funded through a Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) grant helps visitors with mobility challenges navigate outdoor terrain that may be inaccessible to a conventional wheelchair.

For 16-year-old Serenity Hartman, the equipment transformed a birthday visit into an experience her family will not forget.



Tourism Program Expands North Alabama's Accessibility

The Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association is pleased to announce that all 16 counties of our region submitted a proposal for the new Accessibility Advancement Grant program. The purpose of the grant program was to enable local tourism bureaus to identify and complete small-scale projects that make North Alabama more inclusive and welcoming for visitors with disabilities.

1



Blount County:

Installation of a sign and fencing for the Happy Trails of the Locust Fork property.

2



Cherokee County:

New wheelchair-accessible swing at Mouth Park playground within Little River Canyon National Preserve.

3



Colbert County:

Develop Braille Brochures for Birthplace of Helen Keller Museum.

5



DeKalb County:

Purchase new wheelchair-accessible swing at Mouth Park playground within Little River Canyon National Preserve.

6



Etowah County:

Install new ADA-compliant handrail at the Gadsden Museum of Art.

7



Franklin County:

Purchase a WE Electric Wheelchair for the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce office.

13



Marion County:

Make enhancements to its website that improve the digital experience for individuals with disabilities.

14



Marshall County:

Develop Top 10 Instagrammable spots campaign with signage at each location in Braille and be ADA compliant.

15



Morgan County:

Create a sensory-friendly space at the Decatur Morgan County Visitor Center.

Building a more inclusive, welcoming North Alabama for all

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Lauderdale County:

Replace outdated, damaged, or non-compliant accessible parking signage outside the Florence-Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau office.

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Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce:

Installation of two ADA-compliant sinks featuring touchfree, motion-activated faucets at the Oakville Indian Mounds Museum.

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Cullman County:

Purchase modular accessibility ramps for use at festivals and special events.



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Limestone County:

Design a new accessibility webpage for visitathensal.com.

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Madison County:

Installation of automatic door openers at front doors of the Huntsville/Madison County CVB office.

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Jackson County:

Install three new instructional signs at the accessible boat ramp within Goose Pond Colony.

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Winston County:

Build a permanent, wide ramp in front of The Lodge.

Additional Special Projects Included:



Bear Creek Collaborative's archery program introduced adaptive archery equipment and construct an accessible archery stand.



Joe Wheeler State Park expanded their Junior Ranger program for persons in need with the acquisition of a Terrain Hopper all-terrain mobility scooter.



The U.S. Space & Rocket Center received 23 wheelchairs and two pairs of Meta Smart Glasses donated to the museum by the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association.



everyone.



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Serenity has spent much of her life in hospitals and has had limited opportunities to explore the outdoors. When her mother, Judith, brought her to Joe Wheeler State Park for her 16th birthday, park staff helped Serenity use the TerrainHopper. For the first time, she was able to travel the trail and experience the landscape from within it, rather than watching from the sidelines.

“To be able to get out on those trails, to hear the birds, to see the rabbits, to feel that peace, even for a moment, you don’t realize what that means,” Serenity’s mom said.

Serenity’s experience was shared with Alabama State Parks, AMLA and TVA leaders. It helped build support for another outdoor mobility vehicle being secured for Lake Guntersville State Park.

Other North Alabama destinations offer accessible paths, overlooks or viewing opportunities, including Wilson Dam, Coldwater Falls, Larkwood Falls, Little River Falls, Grace’s High Falls and Noccalula Falls. Each destination is different, which makes detailed advance information especially valuable.

A REGIONAL COMMITMENT

North Alabama’s work has been built through partnerships among AMLA, attractions, state parks, tourism businesses, grant organizations and regional agencies.

Together, they have created a network of equipment, technology, training and travel information that serves visitors and residents alike. A wheelchair placed in a museum may serve someone visiting from another state or a resident



who has lived nearby for decades. A TerrainHopper can give a traveler access to a trail while also opening that experience to a local family.

“Today is more than an announcement, it’s a promise,” Reist said when the regional initiative launched in October of 2025.

“These are not just resources; they are bridges. They connect people with different needs to the beauty, adventure and hospitality that define North Alabama.”

North Alabama has not removed every barrier, but it has created a coordinated path forward. The region is providing more information, more tools and more ways for people to participate, showing what can happen when accessibility becomes part of the welcome rather than an afterthought.

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