

## NPC23 Planners' Day of Service

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APA Division members participated in a Planners' Day of Service at NPC23 in Philadelphia Image Credit: APA Women & Planning Division

### PLANNERS GIVING BACK

Each year, thousands of planners descend upon a host city for the American Planning Association's (APA) National Planning Conference (NPC). The collective impacts of up to 5,000 conference attendees, vendors, and staff are significant. While the local economy benefits from the influx of visitors, NPC also interrupts the daily rhythm of people living and working in our host cities. Planners' Day of Service (PDoS) gives visiting planners an opportunity to positively impact NPC's host community while building and strengthening inter-Divisional relationships, raising awareness of Division benefits, generating leadership development opportunities, and exchanging information about important planning issues.

This year's PDoS, held on March 31, 2023 in Philadelphia, introduced participants to **Planning for Neurodiversity**, providing opportunities for professional development and knowledge transfer, a hands-on application of new skills, and a service project.

#### A LEGACY OF SERVICE

Past PDoS events include:

- **NPC18 (New Orleans):**  
District B neighborhood clean-up
- **NPC19 (San Francisco):**  
Fruitvale TOD and Village Beautification Project
- **NPC22 San Diego:** 47th Street Station corridor assessment and clean up

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## WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

*Neurodiversity* is the natural variation in the ways people experience, interact with, and interpret the world. Sensory perception and cognitive abilities are spectrums; there are not "right" and "wrong" ways to experience and process the world around us. While we know that perceptions and senses are not binary, there are commonalities in the ways we perceive and receive sensory inputs; many people perceive similar sensory or cognitive experiences. We describe this as neurotypical.

The word "neurodiversity" is relatively new (coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in 1998), but the experiences of people who are neurodiverse are not. Characteristics of neurodiversity have historically (and can still be) misinterpreted as learning disabilities, mental or emotional disorders, or behavioral problems. This framing perceives neurodiversity as a problem, weakness, or deficit to be fixed, cured, stifled, or repaired.

The characteristics of neurodiversity are *not* problems or diseases, but natural variations and strengths to be celebrated. An inclusive approach to neurodiversity requires acknowledging, accepting, and accommodating a diversity of perceptions and experiences.

Strictly speaking, we are *all* neurodiverse because each of us experiences the world differently, falling somewhere on the continuous gradient of perception. But, when discussing **planning for neurodiversity**, we are elevating the needs of people who experience the world from outside of a neurotypical experience.

## LEVERAGING THE POWER OF PLANNING

Most planning professionals are familiar with the importance of physical accessibility in our communities (ex. ramps for people using mobility devices, accessible pedestrian signals (APS), elevators, etc.). But sensory accessibility and other accommodations for people experiencing neurodiversity are not yet commonplace in our offices, public spaces, and built environments. Planners are uniquely positioned to normalize sensory accessibility and implement accommodations for people experiencing neurodiversity.

Planners can support more inclusive environments for people with neurodiversity in the same ways we support more inclusive environments for physical access - by assessing existing conditions, identifying barriers and/or challenges to accessibility, and rectifying conditions limiting accessibility. A sensory audit identifies potential challenges and triggers, creating more accommodating, productive, and comfortable

## WHAT IS SENSORY DYSREGULATION?

Many people who are neurodiverse experience sensory dysregulation, meaning they receive, interpret, and process everyday sensory information such as sounds, sights and smells much differently than someone who we would describe as neurotypical.

These differences, often unnoticed by or imperceptible to most people, can make certain environments challenging (or impossible) to endure for people experiencing sensory dysregulation.

Assessing our environments (for sights, sounds, feelings, smells, spatial orientation, signage, visual clutter, liminal spaces, and boundaries) and making reasonable accommodations dramatically improves quality of life for people with atypical sensory perception.

environments for people experiencing sensory dysregulation as a result of neurodiversity.

### WHAT'S A SENSORY AUDIT?

A sensory audit assesses the environment for barriers to sensory or cognitive accessibility.

This may include:

- **Visual:** Light (levels, flickering), reflections, colors, and patterns
- **Auditory:** Repetitive sounds, lack of quiet spaces, acoustics, and echoes
- **Olfactory:** Strong or unexpected smells or odors (exhaust, perfume, food, and chemicals)
- **Tactile:** Fabrics, seating, and ambient temperatures
- **Spatial:** Wayfinding, floor plans, furniture placement
- **Postural:** Alternative work or rest spaces
- **Opportunities for sensory modulation:** Quiet, comfortable spaces to recharge; handheld sensory tools to stimulate and/or calm the senses.



*PDod participants conducted a sensory audit of Reading Terminal Market. Image Credit: APA Women & Planning Division*

### EACH ONE, TEACH ONE

Bright and early on Friday March 31, one day before NPC23's official start, APA Divisions members convened at the Downtown Philadelphia Marriott for PDoS 2023. Over the course of three hours (with plenty of coffee, fruit, and pastries, of course!) planners were introduced to the concepts and language of neurodiversity and sensory accessibility, and participants discussed the planner's role in advancing neurodiversity acceptance, accessibility, and accommodations. Attendees gained hands-on experience, knowledge, and tools to bring home to their own communities by participating in a group sensory audit of the Marriott's lobby, Reading Terminal Market, and the Pennsylvania Convention Center. For the service component of PDoS, participants assembled 100 Calming Kits (sensory friendly care packages) that we donated to [Kamp for Kids](#), a Philadelphia-based non-profit organization providing fun experiences for kids on the neurodiversity spectrum.

***"Thank you so much for this wonderful gift! We plan on giving them [Calming Kits] out at our autism camp this summer and our autism groups at the Youth Center." - Penni Morton, Kamp for Kids***

## WHAT'S A CALMING KIT?

Calming Kits contain items to stimulate and/or soothe the senses, refocusing attention on the acts of feeling, smelling, hearing, and breathing. They are a useful tool to relieve anxiety, stress, anger and other unwanted emotions. Calming Kits benefit all people, but they are especially useful to people who have difficulty regulating their senses and emotions because they are easily distracted or overwhelmed by external stimuli. This includes people who experience Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The items in a Calming Kit help relieve symptoms and promote self-care strategies. Managing stress is a difficult skill to master; Calming Kits are a way to practice emotional self-regulation skills. Even the act of retrieving the kit establishes a habit of stepping away from overwhelming problems before confronting them.

The Calming Kits created for PDoS included mindfulness exercises, ear muffs, slime, play foam, "chewlery," scratch-n-sniff stickers, a soft washcloth, stretchy string, pop toys, fidget toys, pop tubes, and an emotion wheel, to help talk about feelings.



*PDoD participants assemble Calming Kits to donate to Kamp for Kids Image Credit: APA Women & Planning Division*

## KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM

The Women & Planning Division will continue raising awareness of the need for enhanced sensory and cognitive accessibility. As a follow up to PDoS, we will synthesize our sensory audit observations, feedback from NPC23 attendees, and information from conference sessions focused on neurodiversity (Future of Neurodiversity-Inclusive Jobs; Mental Health and Neighborhood Design; Work Adaptation: Flexibility and Staff Investments; Future of Work and Inclusive Design, etc.). We will use these findings to develop a brief set of sensory accessibility recommendations, including instructions for performing a sensory audit, to share with APA staff, leaders, Divisions, and Chapters for future conferences and events. We hope that, over time,

sensory accommodations become normalized in the same way that other, once rare accommodations (i.e., rooms for lactating parents), are now commonplace.



*Calming Kits included a variety of items to stimulate and soothe the senses. Image Credit: APA Women & Planning Division*

## **STRONGER TOGETHER**

This year's Planners' Day of Service was an overwhelming success, in no small part due to the help and support of multiple APA Divisions, the Divisions' Council, and individual APA members. PDoS was undoubtedly one of the most memorable parts of the conference and, this year, there was some heavy competition for that honor! Together, we met all our goals - giving back to our host city; contributing to professional growth; and cultivating new connections between Divisions and Division members. It may be hard to believe, but discussions about NPC24's service event are already underway. We'd like to take this opportunity to extend an early invitation to join us in Minneapolis for what's sure to be another rewarding Planner's Day of Service. Hope to see you there!

*Planners Day of Service (PDoS) is an initiative conceived and led by APA Divisions, and supported by Divisions Council grant funding. This year, PDoS was led by the Women & Planning Division, with additional financial and in-kind support from the Environment, Natural Resources and Energy Division; International Division; Planning and the Black Community; Small Town and Rural Planning Division; and the Transportation Planning Division. For more information or to participate in and/or support NPC24 Planners' Day of Service, please email [women.apa@gmail.com](mailto:women.apa@gmail.com).*

**Please use the resources below to learn more about neurodiversity, sensory dysregulation, and sensory accessibility.**

[Autism TMI Virtual Reality Experience](#)

[Sensory Environment Checklist](#)

[Neurodiversity Hub](#)

[ADHD and the Built Environment](#)

[Design for the Mind - A toolkit for cognitive inclusion](#)

[Supporting a Neurodiverse Workforce A Mental Health and Well-being Resource and Training Package](#)

[Thinking Differently: Neurodiversity in the Workplace](#)

["It Is a Big Spider Web of Things": Sensory Experiences of Autistic Adults in Public Spaces](#)

[Senses of place: architectural design for the multisensory mind](#)

[Designing for Neurodiversity](#)

[Sensory Audit for Schools and Classrooms](#)

[Neurodiversity and Sensory Design](#)

[OCD and Anxiety in the Workplace](#)

[Sensory Sensitivities](#)