

ABILITIES DIGEST

Prepared. For Life.® Vol. 8, No. 2

Late Summer 2021  BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

Adapting Events

Philmont's Zia Experience

The sacred blazing red zia of the Zia Pueblo people is the iconic sun symbol you see on everything New Mexico. This beautiful icon has a much deeper meaning than people realize. During the Zia Experience five very adventurous families lived out some of those meanings during the week of June 27 through July 3 at Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico.



Within those five families were young people with special needs and disabilities. They were looking for an opportunity to camp like Scouts camp and have fun like Scouts have but with disability awareness front and center. They wanted to experience the real Philmont, and they wanted to DO Philmont, like every other Scout who attends camp, but with support for their needs. So off they went on their adventures in the rain, mud, and sun and, like the other Scouts who attend Philmont, they had FUN, of course!

Just like a typical family camp program at Philmont, the five families scheduled times for things to do all week. The "Adaptive Campers," as the Zia campers are known, picked what they wanted to do and then attended their sessions all week long - a typical family adventure. However, unlike the typical

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adventure, these campers experienced extra support and exclusive attention during shooting sports, which included BB gun shooting and tomahawk throwing; horsemanship at the Cattle HQ, which included riding on a trail with trained Philmont staff at hand; and hanging around on the famous COPE course, which included ropes and rappelling. These three sessions included full access to trained Philmont staffers who supported and worked with the families to make it happen for their Scouts. Those with physical limitations were able to rappel with the use of adaptive equipment about thirty feet up on their own power. Those who wanted to throw tomahawks had the assistance of many hands offered by the conference attendees from the Adaptive Special Needs Conference held in conjunction with the Zia track. The conference folks were able to experience Philmont along with the Scouts doing Zia activities. They were able to experience firsthand ways to adapt for those whose abilities needed a boost. They truly experienced taking the barriers down.



Many of the parents of the Scouts who needed special equipment brought what was needed from their homes. More adaptive equipment was brought in by National Special Needs committee member Chris Werhane. The



specialized equipment (as basic as a tow strap, pulley system, or ramp) utilized by the campers provided opportunities that generally have been unavailable at most camps in the past. PTC also had some equipment on hand and, along with Mr. Werhane and community brawn, Scouting activities were ramped up in style and thrill factor. All the while everyone was learning. Everyone was grateful. And everyone had met amazing people to call their lifelong friends.

One Scout's mom noted that before camp her son was afraid of thunderstorms. He was so determined to ride horses and participate as much as he could that he ignored the storms and was an active camper during every activity, rain (mostly) or shine. She said this was a totally unusual move for her son and he probably grew and matured right there at camp.

The Zia Experience was so successful that the camp director, Mr. Danny Tucker, said it's already on the schedule for next summer. PTC brought in seasoned Scouter staff with special needs and disabilities experience in order to enhance the program with their expertise. Their presence also assured parents and Scouts that safety and comfort were just as important as fun and learning. The Health Lodge at PTC is certified to handle all kinds of situations, just like a mini hospital. Personnel who work there are well versed in assisting those in medical need. This is highly important to those participating in the Zia Experience. There is no worry that a medical need cannot be attended to professionally.

PTC also provided a classroom remade into a [Tranquility Base](#) for Scouts in need of down time and regrouping time. This necessary feature of the week came in handy as many of the Scouts that experienced sensory overload were encouraged to spend some time at the base, deescalating so that within a few minutes camp activities could be resumed and enjoyed.

Managing Subscriptions to *Abilities Digest*

Abilities Digest is designed for any leader who would offer a Scouting program to youth who have special needs. Any Scouting volunteer or professional may subscribe.

Subscribing by email. Send a message to specialneedschair@scouting.org, with "SUBSCRIBE" in the subject line. Indicate your name, email address, and council in the message text.

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Subscribing online. Visit the web site ablescouts.org. The page's lower left corner displays a small gray rectangle with the word "Follow" and three dots. Click on the word "Follow" and enter your email address. You will receive an email whenever a new *Abilities Digest* appears, plus an email when articles are republished.



From March 11-21, 2022, members of the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee (NSNDC) will be supporting Family Adventure Camp at Camp Jackson Sawyer in the Florida Keys, specifically for Scouts with special needs or disabilities to be able to experience BSA Family Adventure Camp. Families may take advantage of the lower 2021 camp rates by signing up before November 1, 2021.

The Keys Experience gives families the flexibility to choose the exact number of nights they wish to stay. They can elect to camp in either Luxury Deluxe Tents that fit up to 6 people or in traditional campsites. All have access to indoor restroom and shower facilities, as well as outdoor common areas for meal prep and eating.

NSNDC committee members will be there to help support family activities in camp as well as support any adaptive needs with nearby vendors in Bahia Honda State Park. Families will have the opportunity to create their own schedules, whether they want to stay in camp and wade in the tidepools, visit Bahia Honda State Park for aquatics activities, visit the Brinton Environmental Center and learn about Marine STEM, spend the day in Key West, or explore other areas of interest.

Register for the Keys Experience at <https://www.campspot.com/book/sfcbbsa>. Choose your dates from March 11 - 21 and enter "KEYS EXPERIENCE" in the additional information when registering. A member of the NSNDC committee will be in touch after registration to follow up for additional information to insure that the best support is available for your Scout. Register before November 1, 2021, to take advantage of 2021 rates.

Enhancing Awareness

Introducing the Inclusion Toolbox

The [Inclusion Toolbox for Special Needs and Disabilities](#) is a printable website that keeps special needs and disability information accessible 24/7/365 for the Boy Scouts of America community, including Scouts BSA. The Toolbox will replace the printed and PDF *Scouting for Youth with Disabilities Manual* from 2007. These modules are now available, or will be available soon:

- [Introduction](#)
- [Basics of Scouting From a Special Needs Perspective](#)



- [Camp Program: Swim Areas](#)
- [Camp Program: Waterfront and Boating](#)

Future modules will provide guidance for advancement, range safety, and other program topics. There will also be modules to introduce unit leaders to the different disabilities and special needs that might be encountered in a Scouting unit..

Course Helps Scouters Address Youth Mental Health

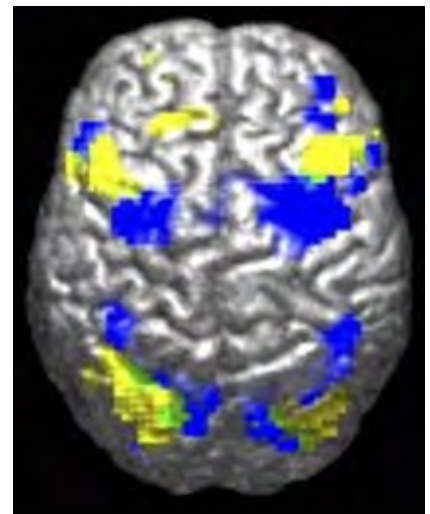
Bernard Adelsberger, the Old Dominion District Special Needs Coordinator, National Capital Area Council provided the following description, which has been edited for publication.

Statistics from 2009 to 2019 have shown a continuous rise in suicide and in suicide attempts by high school age youth. Suicide has become the second leading cause of death among youths behind accidents. Suicide attempts are the most reliable predictor of death by suicide. (*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 21 August 2020, vol 69, pp 47-55)

These trends are leading Scouts BSA units to actively address the issue of youth mental health. In the National Capital Area Council units are partnering with public health officials to deliver a well-recognized training program to Scouters. Called Youth Mental Health First Aid, the class has been offered to Scouters in the Patriot District. The district introduced the program after Scouters realized there had been at least three suicides by Scouts in the district over a five-year period.

Mental Health First Aid is an international training program operated in the United States by the National Council for Behavioral Health in partnership with the Missouri Department of Mental Health. It is available for teachers, law enforcement, and others who might come in contact with distressed youth. The Scouting community can certainly use and apply such training, given the lengthy associations developed during youths' Scouting careers.

The eight hours of instruction include discussion and role-playing. Trainees receive an information book and other handouts. The course results in a three-year certification and a patch. Officials hope someday it will be as common as CPR training.



Members of the Fairfax County Community Services Board (CSB) presented the Patriot District class at a Northern Virginia church's troop meeting room. Enrollment was capped at thirty and all the slots were taken. The CSB instructors said the course is not intended to teach prevention or treatment of mental illness. They compared it to medical first aid. Scouters learn to treat injuries or illnesses before they become serious and until professional help is available.

Basic Symptoms

Symptoms of mental illness can be more difficult to pinpoint than a broken bone or a fever. General signs can include withdrawal, absenteeism, emotional or mood changes, and substance abuse. These may appear before significant red flags such as talk or threat of suicide, or missing prescription medicines, or weapons.

The instructors discuss differences between typical youth behavior versus potential warning signs:

- Withdrawing from family vs. withdrawing from not just family, but also friends and once-favored activities.
- Seeking privacy vs. behaving secretly.

Basic Actions

The first aid practice itself is summarized in five steps, under the acronym ALGEE:

Assess the risk for suicide or harm.

Listen non-judgmentally when you speak with a youth who seems to be having mental health difficulties.

Give the youth reassurance and information that might be helpful to a situation that's troubling him or her.

Encourage the youth you perceive to be at risk to seek professional help, whether from a school counselor or psychologist, county services, or private services, often covered by family health insurance.

Encourage self-help strategies, such as identifying supportive friends and family, managing immediate symptoms and appealing to the youth's interests.

About *Abilities Digest*

Abilities Digest is the official e-letter of the Boy Scouts of America National Disabilities Awareness Committee. Its mission is to expand membership through helping parents and Scouting volunteers to improve their understanding, knowledge, and skills related to including and serving the special needs population. Therefore, districts and councils may reprint articles from this publication. Our plan is to distribute four issues of *Abilities Digest* annually, but special editions may go out whenever there is important information to share. Feedback, suggestions, and letters to the editor are welcome at disabilities.awareness@scouting.org.

The bottom-line advice after you've gone through the ALGEE steps and suspect that a youth is considering suicide is discuss your *observations* ("I notice you've been pretty quiet lately" or "I haven't seen you at many meetings – everything OK?") rather than stating your assumptions.

If, based on warning signs in behavior and conversations, you think a youth is considering suicide, the CSB instructors advocate being blunt when you talk to him or her: "Are you thinking about killing yourself? Do you have a plan?" Which, admittedly, is unnerving to do, even in a training course practice session. Let the youth know such thoughts are not uncommon and that help is available. Involve the youth in a decision to get help. Finally, by calling 911, you can alert health officials. Many communities have teams specially trained to help in life-endangering episodes.

The course covers other nuances in talking to youth who might be having mental health issues. Routines that can help a youth include exercise, communal meals, sleep, personal interests, healthy self-esteem and feeling in control of one's life.

Another statistic presented by the instructors: People are much less likely to commit suicide if they have at least three people in their lives they feel they can engage with. One of our jobs as Scouters is to make sure every youth we support in the program has such a network of people they can trust.

For more information

Visit the Mental Health First Aid web site at www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org. Check your local public health office for information on mental health issues and services such as suicide prevention. Information and help are also available 24/7 nationwide by calling Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services (PRS) at 800-273-8255; or by texting "CONNECT" to 85511.

Awareness Events

The National Outdoor Conference

The National Outdoor Conference is Scouting's biennial event focusing on outdoor programs for youth. It takes place virtually this year during November 5-6. Visit [the conference web page](#) for further information and registration.

Below we highlight two sessions hosted by volunteers in the BSA's National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee (NSNDC).

Preparing Medical Staff for Special Needs Scouting

This elective, led by a licensed medical professional from the NSNDC, will provide specific action items to

address concerns regarding Special Needs Scouting and best practices to welcome participants to camping programs. Takeaways will include:

- Guidance on preparing camp medical staff for the shift in trends of care required at camps,
- A review of the elements of safe medication management,
- Importance of the provisions of sensory friendly spaces, and
- How to collaborate with council committee champions for special needs to ensure a safe, and inclusive Scouting experience while at camp



Special Needs Scouting and the Water

This elective illustrates how to work with Scouts with special needs or disabilities in and on the water. It includes a discussion of helpful tips and techniques to get through swim test anxieties, phobias or other barriers to success in the water. Additional discussion covers adaptive equipment to make aquatic programs accessible to all Scouts.

Adapting Advancement Strategic Planning With the ISAP



The BSA has a planning form for families and leaders to use to jointly map out the future for a Scout with a disability. It is called the Individual Scout Advancement Plan (ISAP), and you can find it by searching for BSA Form 512-936. It is modeled on the individual education programs (IEPs) and 504 plans used in public schools for students with special needs. Unlike an IEP or 504 plan, the ISAP does not create legal rights or legal status. The ISAP can be updated as a Scout matures and moves through the Scouting program.

An earlier Abilities Digest article discussed [joining conferences](#) for new unit members. Creating an ISAP will take more detailed discussion than is appropriate for a joining conference. In general, before preparing an ISAP the family will need some time to learn more about the Scouting program and the unit will need some time to understand the Scout.

Cub Scouting

If a Cub Scout has a known special need or disability, it is wise for the parent/guardian and den leader to meet at the beginning of the program or school year and review all of the rank requirements for that year: Lion, Tiger, Wolf, Bear, Webelos, or Arrow of Light. This is the time to identify requirements that pose exceptional challenges for the Cub. Remember, a Cub fulfills a requirement by doing his or her best. If the Cub cannot even begin to try a requirement, the parent and den leader can work together to come up with alternatives. The pack committee must approve alternative requirements.

Scouts BSA, Venturing, etc.

At the Scouts BSA level and older, **the first planning step is to figure out how to support what the Scout wants to do.** While few Scouts advance without family and leader encouragement, we don't want advancement to be driven by the parents, guardians, or leaders. Realistically, the Scout with a special need should set the goals and the rest of the adult team should help spot opportunities to make progress on those goals. It is perfectly fine if a Scout just wants to have fun, make friends, and go on outings instead of making effort to advance in rank. Scouts often fulfill rank requirements just by being present as the opportunities occur. Some Scouters call this *stealth advancement* since others may keep track of these achievements even if the individual Scout fails to do so.

The **second planning step is figuring out which Scouts need an ISAP.** Some Scouts arrive at a unit with an obvious disability, where some advancement requirements are very difficult or impossible, and you can start on an ISAP soon. However, many Scouts have an *invisible disability* that does not draw any immediate attention. An invisible disability or special need is a difference that doesn't change the way the person looks or moves, but does make learning, organizing, or demonstrating knowledge for requirements extra hard.

A Scout leader should not try to diagnose any Scout, but a wise leader takes a long look at the performance of each new Scout after the first year. It is important to **figure out if a Scout is not performing well despite trying hard or because he or she is not really trying.** If a Scout has the will to succeed but is not being effective, it is time to start developing an ISAP.

Even though the ranks of Scout, Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class are presented in sequence, most Scouts work on requirements for all of these levels at the same time. Scout leaders often refer to this group of ranks as the "Trail to First Class". The first round of planning is to go over these requirements and determine which ones need alternatives and which ones need accommodations. If the adult team can tell up front which are which, you can go ahead and apply for alternative requirements while the Scout works on what he

Most of the time, you will not know all of the obstacles until the Scout makes an attempt on a requirement.

If there is doubt about whether a Scout can complete a task, he or she should be given a chance to complete the requirement as it is written. **Be careful that you do not force the Scout to fail.** Once the adult team knows what alternatives are needed, they develop them and submit them for approval. The actual process will be discussed a little later.

Scouts that need alternative requirements and merit badges often need to be efficient with their time and effort. This is very important with merit badges because **you cannot request alternative requirements for merit badge requirements. They are an all or nothing proposition.** The Scout and his or her supporting adults need to look at all of the requirements for a merit badge before starting work on it. If the Scout cannot complete all of them with reasonable flexibility and accommodations, the Scout will not be able to earn the badge even though the Scout may enjoy the activities of the badge and benefit from the socialization and participation.

There is a risk of creating hard feelings when merit badge work is done in a group setting. If a Scout is encouraged to participate alongside other Scouts in a group setting, it can create an expectation that the Scout can complete the badge, even if there are requirements that are impossible for that particular Scout. When the rest of the group is presented with badges, but he or she is not, it can seem unfair to the Scout and the family. It is vital that the leaders and family are on the same page about whether or not the Scout is encouraged to participate and important that the family manage the expectations of the Scout.

Currently (2021), an Eagle Scout must earn 13 merit badges out of an “Eagle-required” list of 17 merit badges, and an additional 8 badges of the Scout’s choosing, for a total of 21. Ten of the 13 badges are specific badges and the other three allow a choice between two or three related badges. These badge alternatives are built into the regular advancement requirements and don’t require special permission. **As the Scout finishes the First Class rank, it is time to make a plan for these “Eagle-required” badges.** A good target is to try to have all of the achievable Eagle-required badges completed by the time the Scout turns 16 years old. This leaves time to get alternative badges approved and to finish them before age 18.

When planning for the Eagle-required badges, we want to avoid false starts and wasted effort for the Scout while giving the Scout a chance to strive, succeed, and surprise the adults. Like before, the planning review needs to look at all of the requirements for all of the Eagle-required badges and determine which badges cannot be completed due to the Scout’s disabilities. Some borderline requirements may have to be attempted in order to be sure. **Alternative merit badges need to be selected to provide similar challenge and learning experiences** to the originals. There is a special form (BSA 512-730) for requesting alternative merit badges for the Eagle rank. This form includes lists of possible alternative badges to consider for some of the badges. The

exact badge to pick will depend on the individual and the details of his or her disabilities.

Recognizing Abilities

Torch of Gold and Woods Services Awards

Every Scouting council may present one Torch of Gold Award every year to recognize a Scouter who has performed significant service in Scouting with special needs and disabilities. Nationally, one Woods Services Award is presented every year to recognize a Scouter for particularly outstanding service. Both of these awards require nominations.

Every council that presents a Torch of Gold should take the nomination form and use the information to nominate that winner for the national Woods Services Award. For example, a council might collect Torch of Gold nominations early in the calendar year, and present it during the year. Before the end of the year, the council transcribes the Torch of Gold winner's nomination information onto the Woods Services nomination form. Send the form to SpecialNeedsChair@scouting.org.

Woods Services nominations must arrive by **January 31**.

Helpful Links

Scouting with Disabilities landing page: scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/

AbleScouts: *Abilities Digest* articles posted online: ablescouts.org

#ScoutingAtHome: scouting.org/scoutingathome/



Links in Articles

ISAP form: filestore.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/512-936_WB.pdf

National Outdoor Conference: scouting.org/outdoor-programs/2021-national-outdoor-conference/

Philmont Training Center: philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/

Seabase Keys Experience: campspot.com/book/sfcbsa

Torch of Gold Award: scouting.org/filestore/pdf/512-945.pdf

Woods Services Award: scouting.org/filestore/pdf/512-258.pdf

Social Media



Twitter: @AbilitiesDigest

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Abilities-Digest/824105334298165

Facebook No Scout Left Behind: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1967878213431320>

Email your comments and questions to specialneedschair@scouting.org.