

Making Inroads in Increased Participation

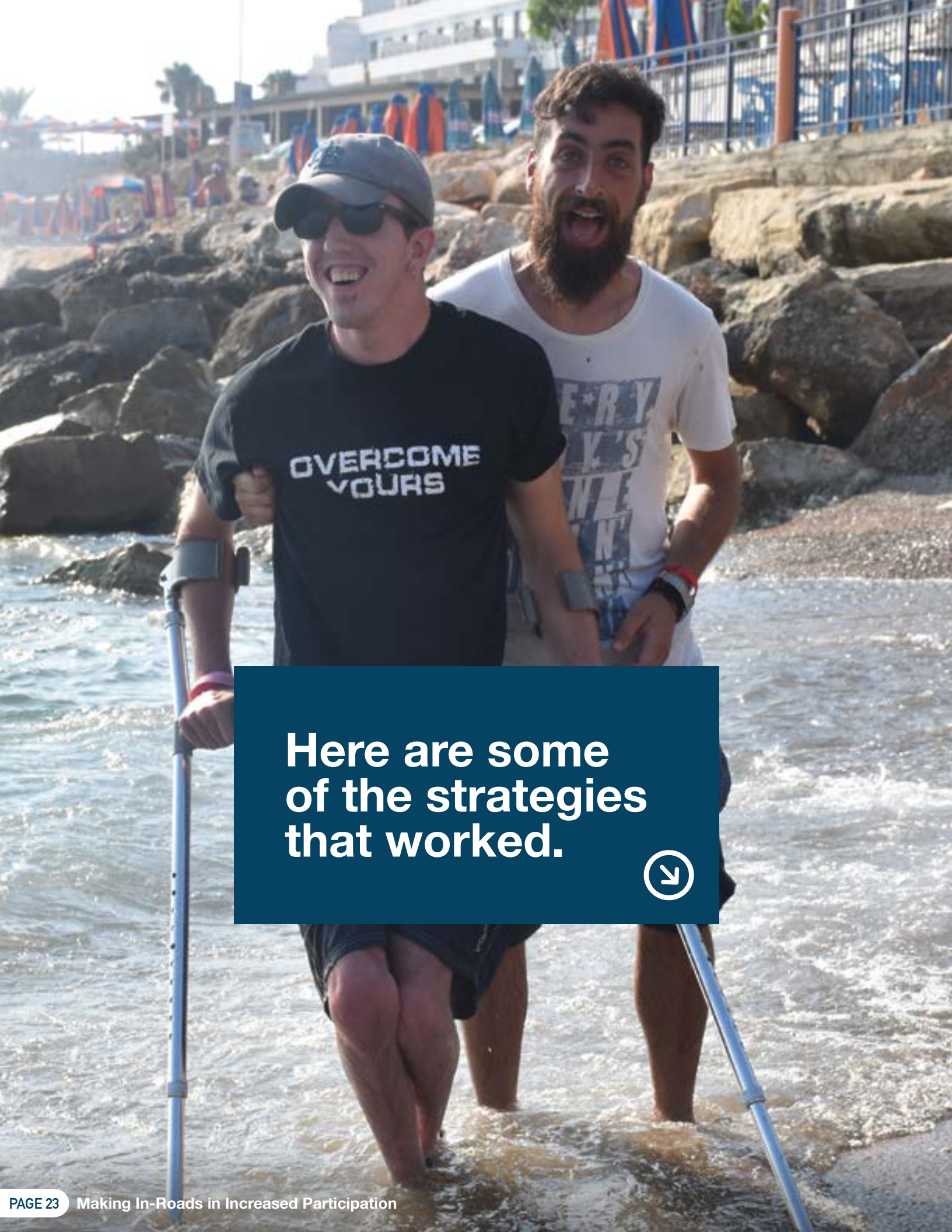
Legacy International has been administering U.S. Department of State-sponsored exchange programs for people from all different age groups for decades. They see more participants with disabilities on exchanges traveling to, rather than from, the United States. So, on the American Youth Leadership Program on environmental stewardship to Cyprus, Legacy International aimed for, and achieved, a U.S. delegation that included 40% of the participants with apparent or non-apparent disabilities. They also sought out first-time travelers and those who were the first in their families to have a passport.

According to Legacy International's Vice President, Mary Helmig, it was easy to encourage Americans with disabilities to participate if they made their efforts more deliberate. Mary used resources and advice from the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange to build the staff's capacity to understand what disability-related accommodations are and to create dialogue with people during the application phase.



Learn About Youth Exchange Programs

eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/youth-programs



**Here are some
of the strategies
that worked.**



Changing Practices

- Ensure that your website and program materials clearly outline types of disability-related accommodations provided on the international exchange program.

“We made that a lot more apparent for people, so they didn’t have to look for it really hard.”

- Make an organizational commitment to plan for participants with disabilities and train staff.

“As a result of our commitment to be more inclusive and the various accreditation processes we go through, some of which ask for disability accommodation plans, we built staff capacity throughout the organization.”

Planning Costs

- Allocate a percentage of the budget for disability-related accommodations, which is allowable in U.S. Department of State and many other exchange grant proposals.

“In the first year we had earmarked 8% of our budget for accommodations, which we didn’t even come close to spending. In the second year we scaled back to 5%.”

- Create clear communication about health insurance coverage and the reimbursement process for participants with pre-existing conditions.

“We have to be very upfront with families that their health insurance is the primary insurance for pre-existing conditions and they have to check whether it can be used overseas or buy their own traveler’s insurance.”

Collaborating with Others

- Reach out to disability groups and schools on a regular basis and highlight stories from participants with disabilities on your website.

“Many parents of teenagers with disabilities are concerned about their children being bullied and not accepted. They really have to build trust with us as an organization and that takes a little bit of time.”

- Ask a medical or disability professional to review each participant’s information forms that you collect to advise you on whether more information is needed to assess the actual day-to-day effects of a participant’s disability.

“People are not always forthcoming about their needs. I wish people felt safer through the process, and saw information sharing and educating others as a key part of preparation.”

Shaping the Group

- Create opportunities in orientation for team building and to share experiences that help foster group dynamics.

“The youth share experiences like what makes it easy for them to feel accepted, what makes it hard to talk in the group, so everybody gets to gauge on how best to be with one another.”

- Invite trip leaders with disabilities or who have professional disability experience who can mentor program staff and participants.

“We had one adult participant with cerebral palsy who was really flexible and helped test out accessibility abroad. I learned a lot about adaptive technologies from another trip leader who was a teacher.”