[SLIDE 1}

My name is Perri, and I am a Disability History Fellow with the National Park Service Park History Program, based in Washington, D.C. Image Description: White Woman with shoulder-length brown hair and glasses.

Today's presentation is based on my 2019 collaboration with the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York. I have continued to work with the National Park Service as they consider place-based history and how to interpret the stories of people with disabilities in the past. While I will today speak on my NPS work, I must preface that I am not speaking on behalf of the National Park Service.

[SLIDE 2]

We're now on Slide 2.

The text on this slide asks a question, "What is more important: historic preservation or accessibility?" The answer? "Yes." While this presentation is more focused on the interpretation rather than access and preservation, I argue we must go beyond accessibility compliance alone. to encourage multi-modal interaction with a historic site.

[SLIDE 3]

We've moved to Slide 3.

I imagine many of you attending this webinar from New York may have visited, or even work at, the Home of FDR. Dedicated to portraying the former president's life, this site also interprets Roosevelt's polio diagnosis in 1921 and the ways it impacted his life thereafter. Roosevelt's wheelchair, such as the one depicted on this slide, and other assistive devices are on display throughout the home. Further, the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt is one of the only national park sites that explicitly interprets disability history. Although other sites may refer to the existence of people with disabilities in the past—either who lived at or passed through these places—the Home of FDR must grapple directly with FDR's lived experience as a disabled person.

While we have plenty of examples for how FDR lived, his experience would not have been representative for most people with physical disabilities, let alone people with polio. His class, race, and gender were critical to the services he received and adaptations that were both created for him and that he constructed. Acknowledging the privileges that FDR had begins with acknowledging how many disability things, as Smithsonian curator Katherine Ott calls them, FDR had at his disposal. But the absence of objects or access features in a historic built environment also has significant power.

Despite the impressive collection of tangible "disability things" at the Home of FDR, I found myself less interested in them and more in the *traces* of disability material culture. I believe it is these that we must consider, as, so often, the histories of marginalized populations and those who have been other-ed due to their race, ethnicity, class, and gender, their stories are embedded and hidden within places.

[SLIDE 4]

To convey this point, let us return to FDR's retreat at Top Cottage, a short drive from his family home.

The photo on this slide depicts the veranda of Top Cottage. In the bottom left of this photo, I bring your attention to a mound of dirt that sits just below the edge of the veranda floor. At all other edges of the veranda, the ground is roughly two feet below. FDR would not have been able to descend from the veranda because of this drop. But the mound in the left-hand corner is what remains of his ramp, made of dirt. In the absence of a proper ramp, his staff packed dirt to allow him to move with relative ease into his backyard. I'm sorry I don't have a better photo, but this photo captures how the earthen ramp has eroded since his time. It's not noticeable at first. But we must train ourselves to notice these disability things in the built environment.

[SLIDE 5]

We're onto slide 5.

Of course, there are serious challenges to interpreting disability history in the built landscape. We must engage with material and immaterial evidence of how disabled people—or people perceived to have disabilities—navigated the world around them. This means that today, we must sift through transient or permanent fixtures in the built environment to uncover these stories.

I encourage us all to reflect on how notions of disability have shifted temporally and geographically. Disability is often the shared denominator for people who both historically and today are not guaranteed the full rights of citizenship. According to some scholars, disability is the ultimate marker of intersectionality.

This is not to suggest that the diagnosis of disability is not real. Certainly, disability is a social and cultural construct, but it is also a real lived experience for one-fifth of the American population today. And while the saying goes that "Anyone who lives long enough will become disabled" is true, it is also factual that people who are lower-income and non-white face higher percentages of disability than those who are white and financially comfortable. Recognition of the structural

conditions that shape the lives of peoples with disabilities and at times create disabling circumstances are essential to interpreting American disability history.

[SLIDE 6]

I've flipped to Slide 6.

So what does that mean for the NPS and other places that share America's stories? I encourage you to pause and acknowledge the traces of disability history in our built environment. These include barriers, modes of access, and the structural conditions that shape a culture's attitude toward disability. This also means recognizing modes of resistance, whereby people with disabilities claim and make space for themselves.

And at all steps in the interpretive process, from the time you decide to explore a site's disability history to the time it is interpreted with the public, we must consult with organizations by and of people with disabilities. As you all likely know, visitors like to "see/hear themselves" in the stories told and depicted at sites, and they want those stories told right. Likely, they'll be happy to have been contacted and offer feedback.

Lastly, there are greater risks to not interpreting disability history. Possible risks include: 1. allowing myths surrounding disability to perpetuate 2. The silencing may be interpreted as disability being something to be ashamed of and not to be discussed, and 3. misrepresenting the experiences of people with

disabilities or perceived disabilities can influence attitudes towards people living with disabilities today.

[SLIDE 8]

As for the National Park Service specifically, the Park History Program is currently working toward publishing a Disability History Handbook. This handbook will support interpretive and educational staff, as they consider themes in U.S. disability. Handbooks can lay the groundwork for a National Historic Landmark theme study to identify sites of significance.

On this slide, there is an image of the front cover of *All In! Accessibility in the National Park Service 2015-2020*, the booklet developed by the NPS to enhance access for diverse visitors. While this document expired in 2020, the Park Service is charting new paths in ensuring accessibility and interpreting disability history.

The importance of this work is not limited to the NPS. Awareness of the intersecting processes of ableism and how they relate to gender, race, ethnicity, and class is critical for museums practitioners and scholars alike. I encourage you to attend to such processes as you develop narratives of the built environment in your scholarship, museum or historic site, or curriculum.