

Introduction

- Hawai'i's beaches are central to community life, recreation, and cultural connection, yet many remain inaccessible to people with disabilities.
- Engagement in outdoor and coastal leisure activities supports physical health, mental well-being, social participation, and quality of life for people with mobility needs (Access Board, n.d.; DCAB, n.d.).
- AccesSurf Hawai'i provides adaptive beach access programs, systematic data on the accessibility of public beaches across O'ahu has been limited. (AccesSurf Hawai'i, n.d.).
- Understanding environmental barriers to beaches in Hawai'i is essential for improving equitable access and informing resource allocation, advocacy, and design improvements for people served by AccesSurf Hawai'i programs.

Project Description

- This capstone experience and project involved a partnership with **AccesSurf Hawai'i** to develop, refine, and deploy a standardized beach accessibility survey tool.
- Engagement with trained community volunteers allowed assessment of the physical access features at ten beaches in Oahu
- Assessment included documentation of conditions related to 1) parking, 2) beach pathways, 3) surf conditions, 4) restrooms facilities, 5) beach mats, 6) lifeguards, and 7) overall terrain.
- Data collected was used to create user-friendly beach access summary reports that will guide accessibility recommendations for local agencies and community stakeholders.

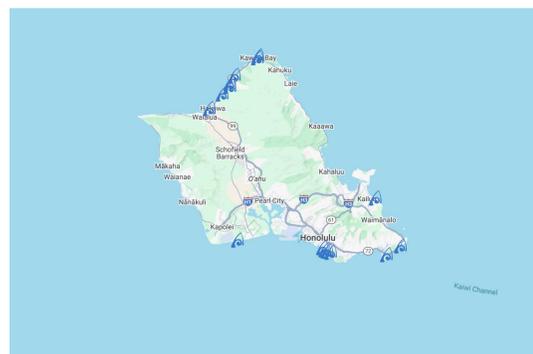


Figure 1. Map of beaches located on O'ahu



Purpose/Aims

- To evaluate the **current accessibility of O'ahu beaches** using a structured, observational survey.
- To identify **environmental facilitators and barriers** impacting access for wheelchair users and individuals with mobility challenges.
- To provide **actionable accessibility summaries** to AccesSurf to support program planning, advocacy, and future beach improvements.



Figure 2. Sample Waikiki Beach accessibility graphic created for each surveyed site.



Figure 3. Example of access mat photo used to document on-site pathway conditions.

Methods

- Survey Tool Creation:** Adapted from ADA/UFAS guidelines and existing inclusive recreation frameworks; included 8 domains (parking, pathways, bathrooms, mats, lifeguards, sand mobility, water access, and general safety).
- Volunteer Training:** Eight community volunteers were trained and assigned one beach each and received instructions on taking measurements, rating accessibility, and uploading photos.
- Data Collection:** Observational assessments completed between Oct–Nov 2025 across multiple North Shore, Windward, East, and South Shore beaches.
- Data Synthesis:** Survey responses were converted into rating summaries (1–5) and brief accessibility statements for presentation and future use by AccesSurf.

Results/Outcomes

- **8 volunteers trained in the adapted Beach Accessibility Survey Tool**
- **10 O'ahu beaches evaluated for accessibility**
- Parking:** 90% had accessible stalls, though quality and distance varied.
- Bathrooms:** 80% had accessible or semi-accessible restrooms; others lacked paved paths or usable stalls.
- Access Mats:** 30% had mats, often too short or covered in sand.
- Lifeguards:** 90% had towers; only 60% had barrier-free access routes.
- Terrain:** 50% had mixed or uneven terrain (soft sand, roots, grade changes) limiting mobility.
- Water Entry:** 60% had calm or manageable entry conditions (seasonally dependent).
- Beach Wheelchairs:** 20% provided on-site beach wheelchairs.
- Overall Accessibility:** 60% scored in the moderate–high range (overall rating ≥ 3).
- Most Accessible Beaches (based on terrain, facilities, and water entry):**
 - Ala Moana Beach Park – 5/5
 - Hanauma Bay – 4/5
 - Waikiki Beach – 4/5
 - Kuilima Cove – 4/5
- These beaches offered smoother terrain, accessible facilities or pathways, calmer water entry, and fewer mobility barriers compared to the other surveyed sites.

Discussion

- Substantial environmental barriers exist across many O'ahu beaches, especially in pathway access, bathroom design, and water-entry safety, which greatly limit true independence for beachgoers with mobility needs.
- These results reinforce the importance of **site-specific evaluations, seasonal considerations**, and the need for **collaboration with local agencies** to implement improvements such as mat maintenance, curb cuts, pathway extensions, and clearer signage.
- This **project aligns with HPU's values** through community engagement with supports responsible and accurate beach-accessibility assessment across multiple O'ahu beaches. The volunteer-based approach provides AccesSurf with practical, real-world insights from diverse observers and a supports on-going and continuous beach accessibility assessment.

References

