



Outdoors Alliance for Kids (OAK) Testimony to the House Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Re: Title II of the EXPLORE Act (Access America)

April 22, 2026

On behalf of the [Outdoors Alliance for Kids \(OAK\)](#), a national strategic partnership of more than 120 organizations from the private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors dedicated to providing access to nature and outdoor recreation for children, youth and families of every community from across the country, we would like to thank the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands for this opportunity to once again share OAK's thoughts on the implementation of the EXPLORE Act—this time with a focus on Title II: Access America.

OAK fully supports Subtitles A and B of Title II. However, we will focus the majority of our testimony on Subtitle C: Youth Access because this is our area of expertise, and we are concerned that the hearing witnesses may devote limited time to it.

Access to the outdoors is extremely important to the health and well-being of children, families and communities. Access to nature has been found to provide many cognitive and emotional benefits that lead to improved mental wellness. Studies show that individuals who spend time in nature perform better on cognitive tests, are happier overall, and have less stress and anxiety. These benefits are particularly important for children, families and veterans. The passage of the EXPLORE Act over one year ago marked a bipartisan commitment by Congress to make America a leader in the efforts to get people outdoors, engaged in physical activity, and secure access to the beauty and benefits of being in our natural world. Title II in particular presents an opportunity for Congress to ensure that outdoor recreation is accessible, inclusive, and representative of all people by adopting critical programs and strategies that promote access to outdoor opportunities for youth, veterans, and people with disabilities.

Section 231 of Subtitle C requires the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Agriculture to work jointly to develop a strategy to increase the volume of youth recreation visits on federal lands. In developing this strategy, EXPLORE requires them to emphasize increased opportunities for underserved youth, establish quantifiable goals for increasing youth visits, and provide the projected costs of achieving those goals.

Section 232 amends the Every Kid Outdoors Act, granting a seven year extension to the Every Kid Outdoors (EKO) program. This section is generally self-executing, so we will focus the remainder of our testimony on section 231.

In order to fulfill the requirements imposed by section 231, we believe the agencies should first look at the provisions within EXPLORE that expand existing pathways for providing recreation opportunities on federal lands. For instance, the simplification of special recreation permitting procedures accomplished by Title III of the bill should provide new opportunities for outdoor leaders who take children, youth, and families out on public lands. Additionally, the codification of the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP) achieved through Title I of EXPLORE presents new opportunities to invest in the development of outdoor recreation facilities that benefit low-income communities and youth.

With regard to the development of the youth access strategy, we propose that the agencies start by identifying existing barriers to youth access on federal lands, and find ways to address those barriers either through agency action or with assistance from the private sector. As an alliance whose membership consists of numerous organizations that provide direct programming to young people, OAK is uniquely positioned to assist with the development of a Youth Access Strategy. We are well equipped to describe what works and what doesn't, and enumerate what stands in the way of getting youth outdoors.

We encourage the agencies to employ the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) to do outreach to organizations like OAK and others that work in the youth access and the outdoor education space. OAK is currently surveying our more than 120 member organizations to identify the barriers that are limiting youth access to public lands, and what strategies will enable us to overcome those barriers in a way that will be most beneficial to the communities they represent. From their responses, we will develop written comments and recommendations for a strong youth access strategy that accomplishes the following:

1. Expands access to knowledge and information about outdoor experiences that are available to youth visitors.
2. Expands transportation access to outdoor recreational opportunities on federal lands.
3. Acknowledges and addresses fees that exceed the visitor's ability to pay.
4. Reduces safety risks to youth while on federal lands.
5. Increases access to funding opportunities to support youth outdoor programming on federal lands.
6. Increases representation of diverse lived experiences on federal lands.
7. Prioritizes the restoration and renovation of youth programming sites on federal lands.
8. Maintains and expands partnerships between the public and private sectors and federal agencies.

This information will be crucial for informing the youth access strategy produced by the agencies, especially during its early stages of development.

While we acknowledge the efforts that have been made to implement the provisions of EXPLORE thus far, we must also recognize the obstacles that continue to stand in the way. Across the federal agencies, staff reductions continue to slow the EXPLORE Act implementation process and have the potential to leave Title II programs—such as EKO and Accessible Recreation Opportunities—without the resources necessary for them to flourish. These programs are essential for allowing all people to enjoy parks and improve health, and are critical to achieving the intended goals of the legislation.

We urge the subcommittee and members of Congress to continue working closely with organizations like OAK to ensure that the implementation of Title II of EXPLORE will achieve the objectives laid out in the bill. We also encourage those members of Congress who worked tirelessly to secure passage of this legislation to continue demonstrating their leadership on this issue by ensuring that the relevant federal agencies have the necessary resources and capability to implement the Youth Access Strategy once it has been developed.

OAK wants to once again thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to submit testimony on the implementation of the EXPLORE Act.