THE WEEKLY COMMUNITY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CVBs AND HOTELS

USAE

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Boston Hotel and Casino Workers Ratify New Contract

By Jordan Bradley

Following 62 days of consecutive strike action, Encore Boston Harbor's union representatives in Everett, Massachusetts, and hotel officials reached a contract agreement for more than 1,300 workers.

Workers on November 5 ratified the terms of the five-and-a-half-year contract, locking in unspecified wage increases, enhanced benefits and improved working conditions.

Unions members with Unite Here Local 26 and Teamsters Local 25 voted in late August to authorize a strike amid stalled contract negotiations.

The cohort of 1,300 casino and hotel workers who went on strike on September 4 included Local 26 member housekeepers, cooks, servers and bartenders, and around 210 Teamster Local 25 members in the warehouse, horticulture, call center, cage cashier, limousine, dispatch, traffic, valet and guest experience departments.

"Our members walked out not knowing what came next. They held the line through cold, rain and storm, and they held it together," said Carlos Aramayo, President of Unite Here

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TravelAbility organizers and representatives, including Jake Steinman (left of center with red glasses), Founder and CEO, gather for a group photo at the 2026 TravelAbility Summit at the Hilton Downtown Tampa on November 9.

TravelAbility Summit Sells Out for Fourth Year Running

Offers Attendees Invaluable Insights on Accessibility

By Jordan Bradley

TravelAbility, a leader in accessible travel, held its annual summit in Tampa from November 9–11, gathering travel and tourism professionals, advocates and influencers with disabilities, pioneers in the accessible travel sector and tech solution companies.

The 2026 TravelAbility Summit is the organization's eight event—and the fourth to sell out.

TravelAbility Founder and CEO Jake Steinman credits the summit's continued success with the value of the information presented; the connections and community fostered over years through a conference structure that emphasizes a small, boutique event; and an attendee's ability to be able to leave the conference with a plan to address accessibility with the organizations Accessibility Playbook.

"They leave here with a plan," Steinman told *USAE*. "They leave here motivated."

Danah Heye, Director of Destination A11y Development at TravelAbility, said part of the success of the summit is

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IAEE Offering Expansive Educational Slate at Expo! Expo! in Milwaukee

By Todd McElwee

Organizers have brewed up a comprehensive educational agenda for this week's Expo! Expo! IAEE's Annual Meeting & Exhibition.

Cassandra Worthy, Founder & CEO of Change Enthusiasm Global (CEG), is providing the keynote

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iaee expo! expo!
annual meeting & exhibition 2026
milwaukee, wisconsin
16–18 november 2026

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Tampa Convention Center Becomes First to Earn Accessibility Accreditation

By Jonathan Trager

Florida's Tampa Convention Center (TCC) is the first convention center in the world to achieve "TravelAbility Approved" Accreditation, establishing a new standard for accessibility in the meetings and events industry.

The accreditation was announced during the annual TravelAbility Summit, held from November 9–11 in Tampa. Designed by TravelAbility, the program evaluates meeting venues beyond basic Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, establishing key criteria for operational readiness, staff education, and inclusive hospitality.

"Accessibility is essential to delivering exceptional hospitality," said David Ingram, Executive Director of the Tampa Convention Center. "Earning this accreditation reflects our team's continuous hard work to expand our accessibility resources, from specialized

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NEWS

Matt Garman Highlighting Hidden Potential in MPI EMEC Keynote

By Todd McElwee

In January 2023, Matt Garman was part of a three-man team, "Ocean Dadventure," that arrived in Antigua after completing Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge's row across the Atlantic Ocean.

In February 2027, Garman will once again be seaside, presenting his keynote, "Hidden Diamonds: Uncovering the Leadership Potential Hiding in Plain Sight," at MPI's European Meetings & Events Conference (EMEC) in the harbor town of Galway, Ireland. EMEC is February 20–23 at The Galmont Hotel & Spa.

Sharing some insight with MPI and *USAE*, Garman said his session will offer practical ways for organizations to reexamine talent that's already on the payroll.

Sharing some insight with MPI and *USAE*, Garman said his session will offer practical ways for organizations to reexamine talent that's already on the payroll. It will show leaders how to look beyond CVs and job descriptions to the potential in people who may already be leading without a title. He added the discussion draws on his experience of growing and selling two of his own companies, and on leading a team rowing 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean.



"Every one of us knows someone who keeps the whole show running and never gets the spotlight," said Lori Pugh, Vice President, MPI Academy. "That's what Matt's talk is about. Our theme for Galway is 'Your Place at the Table,' and Matt reminds us that some of the best future leaders are already sitting at ours. We just have to notice them. I can't wait for attendees to hear him, and I think they'll go home looking at their own teams a little differently."

Garman, Neil Furminger, and Steve Woolley, left La Gomera in Spain on December 12, 2022, and crossed the finish line at Nelson's Dockyard in Antigua on, January 30—49 days, 15 hours, and 12 minutes later. The U.K.'s *Sussex Express* reported the trio raised £100,000 for the Sussex-based charity the WOLO Foundation and Prostate Cancer UK.

Based in Brighton, Garman's official bio said: "My background is unconventional: formal education wasn't my path, but building and selling technology companies, a PE-backed exit, rowing the Atlantic, swimming the English Channel, and mentoring emerging leaders all shaped how I see people, organizations, and real leadership capability."

Find more information here.

Boston Hotel

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Local 26. "Now they go back in as partners with Encore Boston Harbor, with respect on both sides. This community stood with us. Now we get to give it the five-star service it deserves."

Icylyn Whittaker, a public area department worker at Encore Boston Harbor for the last seven years and a member of Local 26, said that the experience of going on strike impacted the way they viewed being a union member.

"I learned a lot about myself on that line, and a lot about the people I work with. Before, I was a union member. Now I know what it means to be the union," Whittaker. "We go back in as one team, with each other, with Encore and with the community that stood by us."

During the 62-day strike, Encore Boston Harbor's gross gaming revenue for September 2026 fell by approximately 22% year-over-year, according to Teamsters Local 25.

Teamsters Local 25 President Tom Mari said that the strike showed what's possible when a group of workers comes together.

"This strike showed what happens when working people stand together and refuse to back down. Our members remained united and fought for the respect and contract they deserve," said Mari. "Encore Boston Harbor is a world-class operation because of the people who make it run every day, and this agreement recognizes the value of these workers. This is what union solidarity looks like."

Palm Beach Officials Again Approve Convention Center Hotel After Lawsuit

By Jonathan Trager

Palm Beach County commissioners voted 6-1 on November 10 to approve a second hotel next to the Palm Beach County Convention Center for a second time, reaffirming a controversial agreement with developer Related Ross after two neighborhood groups sued over the board's initial approval.

The project calls for an 18-story, 400-room hotel in downtown West Palm Beach, near the existing convention center and Hilton West Palm Beach.

The November 10 vote followed a lawsuit filed on October 14 by the Grandview Heights Neighborhood Association and the West Palm Beach Neighborhood Alliance. The groups alleged the county violated Florida's Sunshine Law by providing inadequate public notice before commissioners approved the deal on September 29.

The new vote replaces the September agreements, which were approved after the transaction was added to the agenda six days before the meeting.

Margaret Frazzini, President of both neighborhood organizations, criticized the repeat vote during public comment.

"Today's vote is a formality meant to make our lawsuit go away and exhaust the public," Frazzini said, according to Florida Politics.

Related Ross will finance, construct, and operate the hotel. Under the agreement, the county will acquire

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CESSE Expands Educational Offerings with Two Courses

By Todd McElwee

The Council of Engineering and Scientific Society Executives (CESSE) has bolstered its professional learning portfolio.

Project & Volunteer Management for Associations is the organization's latest offering and combines project management fundamentals with strategies for volunteer engagement. Association Basics enlightens participants with a core understanding of an association's purpose, structure and significance.

CESSE said Project & Volunteer Management for Associations is different from general project management training in that it addresses the realities of nonprofit governance, volunteer leadership and collaborative decision-making. Participants will discover how to build and manage project plans and timelines, lead volunteer groups, improve communication and collaboration, and push through common association project challenges.

"The Project and Volunteer Management offered by CESSE was excellent," Curt Gomulinski, Executive Director, Tau Beta Pi, told CESSE. "It covered topics that I was familiar with, but this provided a good foundation that connected all the key elements together into a single course geared for Association team members."

Association Basics looks at four areas: what sets associations apart from other organizations, balancing margin and mission, volunteer boards and committees, and membership matters. CESSE added the course can be employed to onboard new hires.

Both courses run as two interactive 4.5-hour Zoom sessions with breakout rooms and a workbook for applied learning. Each course earns participants eight CAE credits and is facilitated by association professionals from the CESSE community.

Association Basics is set for November 17–18. Project & Volunteer Management for Associations will run from December 2–3.

Find more information here.

HOTS

HOTS Goodbye to an Historic Ship… The historic USS United States was sunk off Florida's coast on November 11 "after a long goodbye," the Associated Press reports. The famous ocean liner is longer than the Titanic, crossed the Atlantic more than 800 times, and was laid to rest at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. The intentional-sinking event was a long-planned effort to create a new reef, and due to the vessel's size it is now well on its way to becoming the world's largest artificial reef. The $13.5 million project is aimed at luring divers and fishing enthusiasts to the area by creating a home for tuna, marlin and swordfish, AP reports. According to the outlet, the sinking of the USS United States took longer than expected and didn't complete until 9 p.m. "She is an amazing lady who will not lay down without a fight," said Coleen O'Malley, President of Coleen Marine, the company that handled the sinking of the ship, in an interview with AP. "Much like the amazing nation she was named after." HOTS wishes the vessel a fin-tastic future as an artificial reef!

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HOTS Baboon Bamboozle… A small town in South Africa is reckoning with some new neighbors: two troupes of roughly 60 baboons, the Associated Press reports. While some of Simon's Town's 8,00 residents have come to the baboons' defense, others say the situation is untenable. "While some Simon's Town residents seek peaceful baboon-human coexistence on the streets, and welcome them, the reality is that baboons are not good neighbors, and other want them out," AP reports. Baboons in the town have been climbing buildings, smashing windows, breaking into homes to steal food items, and rummaging through trash cans by day—then leaving their messes for humans to clean up while they sleep in trees at night. After years of "fierce debate," AP reports, the city has decided that the troupes have got to go and will be moved to enclosures spanning 5 and 8.6 acres. HOTS can imagine this level of monkey-ing around would get old fast.



On November 9, the Nashville CVC held a luncheon in Washington, D.C., at the International Spy Museum's Rooftop Terrace. Songwriter Scooter Carusoe performed. He has penned hits for artists such as Taylor Swift, Tim McGraw, Eric Church and Luke Combs.

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IAEE

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with six content tracks packed full of professional development defining the learning.

Milwaukee is hosting from November 16–18.

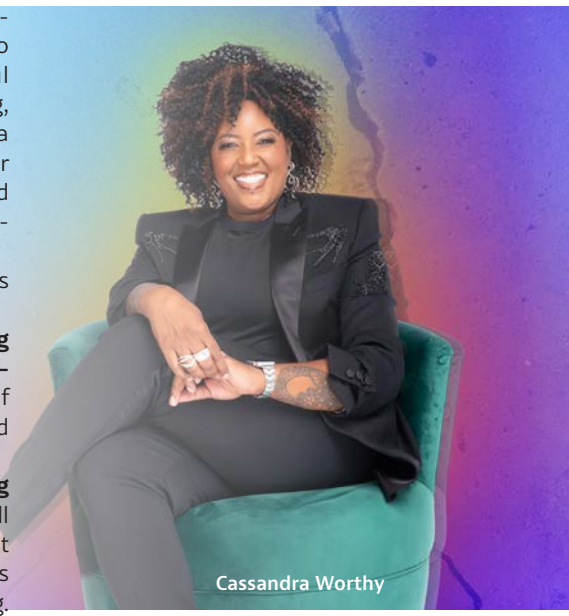
"Just as Milwaukee is famed for its rich brewing heritage and vibrant culture, Expo! Expo! infuses that same bold spirit into crafting events that inspire and excel," the show's website said. "At Expo! Expo!, we're all about brewing up creative ideas that heighten your event craft."

Worthy's will appear on November 17 with "Master the Chemistry of Change: Emotional Alchemy Through Change Enthusiasm." Her official bio says she is an author, thought leader, chemical engineer, and two-time TEDx speaker. CEG shows how to harness the power of change emotions to build resilience and readiness to fuel growth through change, her website said.

"What if your fear, frustration, and fatigue during change weren't roadblocks—but catalysts?" IAEE said. "In this keynote, Cassandra reveals the Change Enthusiasm mental framework—a science-backed, emotionally intelligent approach that empowers every individual to transform resistance into resilience and anxiety into opportunity. Through a powerful blend of business insight, storytelling, and emotional mastery, Cassandra teaches you how to decode your emotional signals during change and alchemize them into growth, innovation, and renewed engagement."

Expo! Expo!'s six content tracks include:

- **AI & Technology: Implementing Practical Use Cases Immediately—** The sessions will be exploration of real-world applications for AI. GES and onPeak are presenting.
- **Experience Design: Creating Memorable Journeys**—Learners will look at producing experiences that attendees remember and sponsors value. GES and onPeak are sponsoring.
- **Marketing & Engagement: Converting Interest to Action**—Participants will gain practical frameworks to drive growth and deepen customer loyalty. Louisville Tourism is partnering on this track.
- **Operations, Risk & Show Management: Driving Better Outcomes**—The track will showcase tools to manage risk, negotiate stronger contracts, and build workforce strategies. New Orleans & Company and Ernest N. Morial Convention Center are sponsoring.



Cassandra Worthy

- **Sponsorship & Sales Strategies: Unlocking Hidden Revenue Opportunities—**Actionable sales strategies for increasing sponsorship value and unlocking new revenue streams will be looked at. T3 Expo is presenting.
- **Sustainability Sanctuary**—The track will provide practical tools to design, execute, and evaluate events through environmental and business lenses.

Find more information here.

NEWS

Training Company VisitAble Helps Destinations Be More Visitable

By Jordan Bradley

When it comes to accessibility in travel, staff training can make or break the experience of a person with disabilities.

According to a new study from VisitAble, an organization offering disability and accessibility training and certification that surveyed 325 Americans with disabilities, 90% of respondents said at least sometimes during a trip, interactions with staff made them feel misunderstood or ignored.

For VisitAble founder and CEO Joe Jamison, CPACC, this data point resonated. As the son of a father who uses a wheelchair, Jamison has witnessed a lifetime of interactions with staff that leave much to be desired—and the data from the new report backs him up.

"The extent to which people rated that as one of the most important things in their experiences was mind-opening to me," Jamison said. "That really resonated with me and really reassured me that this is definitely a problem worth solving and prioritizing. I didn't realize it was to that extent."

When a DMO or attraction considers that one in four American adults live with a disability and those adults and their travel companions spend around $100 billion annually on travel, it makes good business sense to consider their feedback and experiences.

To help these companies do just that, VisitAble has been offering training and certification programs to destination marketing organizations, restaurants, hotels, attractions and other businesses and organizations since 2019.

That training, which Jamison said is the organization's "bread and butter," spans 30 minutes for non-managers and 60 minutes for managers. It is self-paced and asynchronous in order to accommodate the hustle and bustle of hospitality.

"We know it's sometimes hard to get people all in one place at one time when it's so busy, and teams may be running tight--you're making sure everything is still running," Jamison said.

Throughout the course of the program, participants learn about all disability types, best practices, common mistakes and assumptions, the best verbiage to use, important concepts to keep in mind, interaction best practices, and practical accessibility best practices. The training also provides best practices tailored to an organization's specific industry, including hotels, historic properties, attractions, and food and beverage outlets.

Jamison said VisitAble tries to keep the training "as relevant and as convenient as possible to make it easy for hotel teams and other types of teams that may not have a whole lot of time" to do it quickly and efficiently.

Though removing physical barriers for individuals with disabilities—such as installing roll-in showers at a hotel or a wheelchair ramp at an art museum—makes a significant impact on their experience at a destination or hotel, costs to update infrastructure are not always feasible. With VisitAble training, staff are equipped with real-world situations and actionable steps to take in real time--and the impact on their experiences is significant.

"Unlike a renovation, which may require approval, corporate getting involved, or maybe even historic implications, this training is something a hotel can [use to] fix [accessibility on site] in weeks," Jamison said.

VisitAble has partnered with Richmond Region Tourism since 2022. According to a testimonial on the VisitAble website from Toni Bastian, Director of Accessibility & Tourism Sales at Richmond, VisitAble has trained more than 2,200 frontline employees at hotels and attractions across the region, "giving them the tools and confidence to better serve all visitors."

"The impact has been real, both in how travelers experience our region and in how our partners approach accessibility," Bastian said in her testimonial.

In VisitAble's new report, "Beyond the Ramp: How Training Closes the Real Accessibility Gaps in U.S. Hospitality," the group details some actionable steps while also equipping readers with some important insights into the experiences of travelers with disabilities.

The report also pointed to a common theme in American's access to accessibility: while the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) established in 1990 was a good start to address the needs of an underserved population, it doesn't even begin to cover the whole picture.

"A ramp gets a guest through the door," the report states. "What happens next whether they are met with a cold shoulder or a warm welcome, with assumptions or with genuine curiosity, is what determines whether they ever return."

Jamison's father, David, attended TravelAbility for the first time, assisting Jamison as a vendor throughout the summit. He has been a wheelchair user since before the ADA was in effect, he told *USAE*.

"I think as a vendor or an exhibitor, we have to continue to look forward to new frontiers and new things to use, and how we sell our products, goods and services to companies to assist those with disabilities or people with abilities of all sorts," David said. "I think there's much, much room to grow, but as a person with a disability for over 47 years, I've seen tremendous change."



Joe Jamison (left), Founder and CEO of VisitAble, was joined by his father, David, at the 2026 TravelAbility Summit in Tampa. They manned the VisitAble booth and distributed a new study on accessible travel.

Often what David heard from attendees while manning the VisitAble table was the significant need for the organization's training.

This is something Jamison echoes and adds that the training provided by VisitAble offers information that empowers staff to respond to situations with confidence.

"Sometimes [staff members] have a fear of messing up when it comes to people with disabilities. They may not engage," Jamison said. "They may not provide the exact customer service that's needed, and ultimately, if staff were empowered with knowledge" they would be able to "provide the best experience possible."

To the hotel industry in particular, David said that training staff in best practices when assisting a guest with disabilities is crucial to good hospitality.

"It is extremely valuable and important to make an impact with your front-line staff because they are the face of your organization to interact with people of all abilities," he said. "I have experienced so much from hotel management, hotel employees. That first interaction is golden."

Find VisitAble's report here and their website here.

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Industry Movers



Jasmin Schubert is now the Fairmont Breakers Long Beach's Director of Sales & Marketing. Schubert joined the hotel in early 2026 as the director of group sales and most recently was acting director of sales & marketing. Prior to joining Fairmont Breakers Long Beach, Schubert spent seven years with Welcome Group, most recently as regional director of sales and marketing overseeing commercial strategy across multiple hotels.



Kristie Mark has been named as the first Executive Director of the Employee Ownership Foundation. Mark will continue serving as the COO of The ESOP Association, with which the foundation is affiliated. Before joining The ESOP Association as COO in 2019, Mark was chief administrative officer in the Executive Office of the president during the Obama administration. She is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire.



Sarah Bohn is now General Manager of Hilton Scottsdale Resort & Villas. HM Alpha Hotels & Resorts made the announcement. Most recently, she served as the hotel manager at Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa in Tucson. Her background includes experience with Marriott-managed Ritz-Carlton properties as well as CIVANA Wellness Resort & Spa. Additionally, Bohn spent a year and a half living and working in Haikou, China.



Randy W. Fiser, AAiP, has been appointed CEO of the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA). Vetted Solutions conducted the search. He is the founder and CEO of Advisor 360 and was Interim president & CEO of the Future Business Leaders of America. From 2020–2023, he was CEO of the American Geophysical Union, where he implemented a strategic plan, positioning the union as a global organization.

See more Industry Movers

Tampa CC

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staff training to dedicated assets like Distract Paks and communication cards. We remain focused on ensuring every visitor enjoys a welcoming environment at our facility."

The TravelAbility Approved evaluation framework audits and verifies critical operational areas across the 600,000-square-foot waterfront facility:

• Specialized Staff Training & Neurodiversity Readiness: Frontline venue staff, event operations management, and security personnel have completed specialized training. This equips a team with practical skills to assist guests with physical disabilities, hidden disabilities, and neurodiverse needs.

• On-Site Sensory & Communication Support Assets: To ensure every guest feels comfortable and supported, TCC provides dedicated accessibility toolkits on-site, including Distract Paks (specially curated sensory-support kits designed for neurodiverse attendees or individuals experiencing sensory overload during large-scale conventions) and Communication Cards (visual and tactile communication aids that assist non-verbal guests or attendees with communication disabilities).

• Advanced Safety & Evacuation Protocols: Safety planning at TCC includes emergency evacuation frameworks specifically tailored to assist wheelchair users, mobility device operators, and neurodiverse guests during urgent venue egress.

• Digital Transparency: To aid event organizers in clear communication, TCC offers a "Know Before You Go" webpage detailing venue navigation, accessible parking, and nearby hotel room inventories compliant with the ADA. Find more information here.

"We are honored that the Tampa Convention Center has received recognition as the first TravelAbility certified accessible convention center," said Raquel Pancho, ADA Coordinator for the City of Tampa. "The City of Tampa strives to ensure all services and programs are welcoming and inclusive. We are grateful for our team members' ongoing attention to accessibility and their efforts to introduce resources to create a more accessible experience for everyone."

Palm Beach

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the property and completed hotel for $26 million and lease it back to the developer for an initial 33-year term, with renewal options extending the arrangement to as long as 97 years.

The county is expected to receive $1.117 million in annual base rent, with 3% annual increases, plus 6% of gross annual revenue above an initial $77 million threshold.

Parking remained a major point of disagreement. The agreement allocates 335 spaces in the county-owned convention center garage to the new hotel, eliminating the requirement for the developer to build a separate garage. Commissioner Gregg Weiss cast the lone dissenting vote, arguing that the parking arrangement would leave insufficient spaces for guests at both hotels.



TravelAbility held its eight annual summit at the Hilton Tampa Downtown in Tampa, Florida, from November 9–11, gathering tourism officials, accessibility advocates, tech and solutions companies, and influencers with disabilities to discuss the current state of accessibility in travel. Pictured from left to right: Josh Heinz, Community Engagement Manager, Visit Greater Palm Springs; Q Arroyo (front row), Chief Accessibility Officer, Metropolitan Transit Authority; Cheryl Dettrick, Writer and National Grant Consultant, Alison Butler, Senior Disability Policy Advisor, State of Colorado Disability Opportunity Office; Dianne Primavera (in pink), Lieutenant Governor for the state of Colorado; Tami Reist, President and CEO of the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association; and Jake Steinman, Founder and CEO of TravelAbility.

Stay Connected

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NEWS

NCBMP Challenging Attendees to "Be Bigger Than the Moment" at Annual Conference

By Todd McElwee

"Be Bigger Than The Moment," is not only the tagline the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals adopted for its (NCBMP) 43rd Annual Conference in Louisville, but also the ethos under which organizers have designed the event.

Reflecting that spirit, NCBMP said the conference's educational slate is designed to push attendees past their comfort zones, helping them to see a bigger picture today, and expand their vision tomorrow. NCBMP's Annual Conference is December 9–12.

"The moments we create today have the power to influence careers, organizations, communities, and future generations," NCBMP said. "Together, we will explore bold ideas, celebrate excellence, strengthen relationships, and elevate the impact of professionals across the meetings, conventions, tourism, hospitality, and events industry. Over four transformative days, you will gain access to inspiring keynote speakers, thought-provoking education sessions, meaningful networking opportunities, industry-leading partners, and unforgettable experiences designed to help you lead with purpose and create lasting impact."

Facilitated by Jason Dunn Sr., CEO, NCBMP, and Joy-Ann Reid, an award-winning political analyst, journalist, and *New York Times* bestselling author, the three learning objectives for the opening plenary, "BE BIG: Perspective, Power, and Progress," largely establish a framework for professional learning in Louisville.

Gaining fresh perspectives on leadership in uncertain times is the opening session's initial objective. Various facets of leadership—including engaging with organizations whose DEI commitments and supports have waivered but wish to do business again; what meeting professionals should do when the very partners assigned to support their event become barriers to success; creating a legacy and developing the next wave of leaders—will be explored.

In "Everybody Has Values Until It's Time to Write the Check," a panel of executives representing various corners of the meetings industry challenge attendees to take an honest look at how purchasing decisions are made and what those decisions say about the leaders making them.

"We'll explore the tension between cost and commitment, value and values, short-term savings and long-term impact," NCBMP said. "Because every

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TravelAbility

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due to its structure, which features short, 30-minute sessions and information with substance.

"They're excited about being here," Heye said. "I've attended a lot of conferences over the years. People skip sessions—even at the end of the day [at a TravelAbility Summit,] people were still hanging in there and wanting to talk. And the conversations around the tables that I'm hearing is just how meaningful it is, and how people are touched by it, and what they're walking away with is a desire to do better."

At this year's summit, TravelAbility hosted lieutenant governors and government officials, held a grant lab to help DMOs find and apply for grants to support accessibility improvements around their destination, and released a new set of data from Longwoods International.

A Look at the Numbers

While discussing the current state of accessible travel with Camilo Navarro, co-founder of Wheel the World, at the start of the conference, Steinman noted that while Wheel the World has made a lot of progress helping hotels reach basic accessibility standards, the "hotel community is still skeptical – especially at the owner and asset manager level—about accessibility because of the drive-by lawsuits that they've had to deal with. They may not have encountered them directly, but they've been reading about them for years."

The Accessibility Moonshot Project (as TravelAbility is referring to its vision for increasing accessibility countrywide by 2030, the year that all Baby Boomers will be over the age of 65) shows those hotels are missing out on a significant revenue when they're not able to accommodate travelers with accessibility needs, Steinman said.

"It's 30 million people, and if you count their house partners, that's 1.1 people per household—that's 33 million more" that aren't staying at hotels without accessible enough rooms, he said.

During Longwoods International President and CEO Amir Eylon's presentation, Eylon detailed a new study that focused on accessible travelers.

Longwoods International is a market research consultancy that has worked with more than 200 destinations, state tourism offices, industry brands, hotels airlines and amusement parks. Through a study of more than 30,000 Americans with disabilities or accessibility needs sponsored by TravelAbility's Destination A11y Club, Longwoods was able "to dig deeper than had ever been dug before on a national level, looking at American travelers' accessibility issues," Eylon said.

The study found that these travelers felt that accessibility verification would best improve their travel experiences, followed by better-trained staff, on-the-ground support and additional planning resources.

But what was really telling in the study was that just 16% of travelers with disabilities travel alone, meaning that a significant portion of travelers with disabilities travel with a companion or their family. When a destination is unable to readily accommodate a traveler with disabilities, not only are they losing out on that individuals dollars, but the rest of their traveling party as well.

That echoes the point Steinman makes when discussing the Moonshot Project.

A growing trend among destination management organizations, TravelAbility noticed, is an increase in financial responsibility for infrastructure improvements that support accessibility.

In an effort to support DMOs in these endeavors, TravelAbility held a Grant Lab on November 9, which featured destination representatives sharing their successes in winning grant funding, tips from national grant writers, and local government programs that have aided accessibility funding.

After spending 12 years as a grant writer, Bevon Joseph created GrantLogic AI, an AI-driven platform that helps secure grant funding for tourism initiatives by analyzing applications and available grants for compatibility.

Meanwhile, Josh Heinz, Community Engagement Manager at Visit Greater Palm Springs, emphasized the importance of networking with city officials and community representatives as he worked to make Palms Springs more accessible to individuals on autism the autism spectrum.

"I built up those relationships and then I would literally just show up at city council meetings and did public comment," Heinz said. "That way I could put it on the record that I was there, and for three minutes, I advocated for them to create grants. I was very fortunate that a mayor in the city of Palm Desert had family members that were on the autism spectrum and she directed the city to look into it, and she created a grant."

Connection & Community

Vendor Christy Vanek, CEO of accessibility consulting firm Which Way What LLC, said the conference has grown since she attended in 2024, "but it still has that sense of community."

Q Arroyo, first-time attendee, presenter and Chief Accessibility Officer at the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York, said the connections he made at the conference stood out to him.

"So far, I've really enjoyed meeting very interested people who are experts in their field in their own regard and love the idea of creating a more accessible travel industry," said Arroyo. "Or sharing their stories about their lived experiences—not only their hardships and trying to hack an inaccessible travel landscape, but all the positive stories of things that have been made accessible and the difference that it makes in their family's ability to enjoy what's out there."

During the conference, Arroyo connected with Houston Vandergriff, a travel photographer with Down syndrome and the talent behind travel blog Downs and Towns, and his mother, Katie. The pair shared their enthusiasm for New York's transit system with Arroyo, which highlights the value of the embrace and implementation of accessibility throughout a destination.

When asked if he had any piece of advice or an observation for *USAE* readers, Arroyo honed in on hoteliers.

"I think we're long overdue for hoteliers to get rid of their fear of the disability community and understand that this is an untapped market that is longing for their embrace—and settling lawsuits on a weekly basis is not a proactive approach to helping their customers feel like they belong," Arroyo said. "I think there is a long way to go to making people with disabilities and their families feel like they are a customer base that hoteliers care about, and I cannot wait for someone to plant a flag and say that they are taking on the challenge of building an accessible infrastructure—one that goes beyond just checking the box, but thinks about the user experience and delivers a hotel of really true inclusion, true belonging. That will be done when my needs have been taken care of without me having to ask for them, and no one does that today."

Scene at TravelAbility Summit





















NEWS

NCBMP

continued from page 6

dollar spent creates opportunity for someone. Every contract awarded is an endorsement. Every purchasing decision helps shape the industry we all say we want to build. This conversation asks attendees to move beyond good intentions and examine whether their actions align with their words."

Hospitality attorney Joshua Grimes, Grimes Law Offices, will provide insight on the clauses, negotiations, and hidden risks that can impact both planners and hoteliers long after contract is executed in "Don't Sign That Yet."

Looking at how influence and advocacy shape progress is another of the opening plenary's listed goals. Numbers tell the story to stakeholders and policy makers and relevant data will be presented throughout the conference.

NCBMP is highlighting the results of a study it commissioned from Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company illustrating the magnitude of the Black meetings market. Research showed that in 2025, Black meetings generated $113.9 billion in total economic impact, supported 578,045 jobs, and produced $15.1 billion in tax revenue, $6.3 billion of it for state and local governments. For example, the National Society of Black Engineers' 2025 convention brought Chicago 15,658 attendees, 20,342 room nights and $29.3 million in economic impact.

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Marsha Flanagan, CEM, President & CEO of IAEE is leading a global outlook plenary with leaders from ICCA, Special Olympics and ACAMS, and facilitated by NCBMP Chief Strategy Officer Hilina D. Ajakaiye. Mauricio Parise, V.P. - Brand Experience Design, Delta Air Lines, will present the data and trends shaping the future of aviation.

A trio of offerings, including ironically enough the closing session, play into the opening plenary's last objective: learn how to leverage your voice to drive meaningful change. These sessions will discuss the establishment of one's voice, being courageous and creating impactful legacies.

At the sold-out "We Got Next," Kireem Swinton, President & CEO, Visit Baltimore, will join rising leaders on what comes next for the industry.

"We Got Next is an interactive experience created for emerging Black hospitality professionals who are ready to build more than a career," the event's website said. "It's a space to ask the questions no one teaches you to ask, connect with peers navigating similar challenges, and engage with leaders who understand the realities of growing in today's hospitality industry."

"Rewrite Your Own Rules: Becoming Bigger Than the Moment," is a fireside chat with Morgan DeBaun, Founder & CEO, Blavity. NCBMP noted it will help attendees challenge conventional boundaries and take control of their professional narratives.

"Discover how to harness resilience, innovation, and bold leadership to transform challenges into defining moments of success," organizers said.

"What Will Outlive You? Closing Plenary Breakfast," will feature Dr. Angela Y. Davis, scholar, author, activist; Rhonda Payne, Founder & CEO, Flock Theory; and Mya Dunn, an Account Sales Coordinator, Marriott International's Global Sales Organization. They will look at the enduring power of purpose, courage, and leadership.

"Throughout her life, Dr. Davis has challenged generations to think beyond immediate circumstances and commit to work that creates lasting change," NCBMP said. "In this inspiring closing conversation, attendees will reflect on the legacy they are building through their leadership, service, and influence, and leave challenged to create impact that extends far beyond the moment."

Find the complete educational slate and more information here.

Around Associations

National Restaurant Association Shares Priorities for New Congress... The National Restaurant Association said it is looking forward to working with the 120th Congress to make it easier to open, run and grow a restaurant.

"Restaurants are at the intersection of the nation's affordability conversation, managing increasing costs and decreasing margins as their customers scrutinize every dollar they spend," said Michelle Korsmo, President & CEO of the National Restaurant Association. "The months ahead will be an opportunity for federal policy to make a true difference on both sides of the counter. By prioritizing comprehensive immigration reform, passage of the Credit Card Competition Act, and tariff-less trade for food and beverage items, Congress can tackle affordability for consumers while delivering the relief restaurants need to serve their communities."

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The National Restaurant Association's agenda focuses on three issues that directly affect restaurant costs and stability:

Immigration reform that helps restaurants find, hire and keep the workers they need to serve guests and grow.

The Credit Card Competition Act, which would bring competition to credit card processing and help lower swipe fees, which for many operators is their third-highest cost behind food and labor.

Stable, predictable trade policy that helps keep food and supply costs manageable for restaurants and their guests.

"The decisions made in Washington reachs down into every community and every restaurant," said Sean Kennedy, Chief Advocacy Officer at the National Restaurant Association. "Restaurants are the country's second-largest private employer and drove more than 5% of GDP in 2025. Our priorities for the new Congress are about making restaurants more affordable to run and more affordable to visit. When restaurants can invest and grow, the benefits extend far beyond our industry. Strong restaurants mean more jobs, stronger local economies, vibrant communities, and greater affordability for the people we serve."

Find more information here.

MPI-CAC Signature Luncheon Set for November 24... MPI's Chicago Area Chapter (CAC) will hold its Signature Luncheon at The Geraghty on November 24. Keynote speaker Diana Kander's will present "Unleash Your Curiosity."

"The luncheon focuses on professional and personal development, corporate social responsibility, and emerging trends, ensuring our members stay at the forefront of innovation and leadership in the industry," the chapter said. "You won't want to miss this annual event!"

Find more information here.

Registration Live for UFI Global CEO Summit 2027 in Madrid... UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, is hosting its Global CEO Summit 2027 in Madrid from January 27–29.

"The Global CEO Summit, or the GCS as it is also known, is UFI's most exclusive event," the association said. "It serves as the exhibition industry's annual curtain raiser event for the most senior executives worldwide. The GCS is an invitation-only conference for CEOs and equivalents from international exhibition organizers and venue operators."

UFI added: "The Global CEO Summit always takes place in one of the top locations. The 2027 edition will take place in Madrid, Spain. Madrid brings late light, a serious business calendar, and a natural bridge between Europe and Latin America."

Find more information here.

NEWS

OBITUARY

Jack Johnson, Destination Organization Advocacy Pioneer, Dies

By Jonathan Trager

Jack Johnson, who served as Chief Advocacy Officer for Destinations International and is widely hailed as a visionary in the field of public policy and global advocacy, passed away peacefully on October 28 at his home in San Antonio. He was 66.

Raised in Homewood, Illinois, Johnson attend North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, where he earned a B.A. in Political Science & Public Administration.

Johnson's professional journey began in Springfield, Illinois, where he served as a Legislative Analyst for the Illinois House of Representatives from 1985–1989, according to his obituary published on Legacy.com. He served as the Chief of External Relations for Chicago's Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority (MPEA) from 1989–2007.

Johnson then helped to establish Choose Chicago, where he held multiple executive roles from 2009–2016. He concluded his career as Chief Advocacy Officer at DI from 2016–2025.

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Don Welsh, who worked closely with Johnson as President & CEO of Choose Chicago and then as President & CEO of DI, told *USAE* that Johnson was a true pioneer when it came to community advocacy work. It was Johnson who popularized terms like "community shared value" and developed a specialized lexicon to describe DMOs and what they do, Welsh noted.

"Jack changed the narrative on how DMOs were positioned for years, which was to maximize heads in beds, fill restaurants, fill attractions, fill convention centers, but never really factoring in what impact that had on the community," Welsh said. "Jack's work, along with the Advocacy Committee, literally transformed that thinking. It has led to community alignment, responsible tourism, the branding of the community. None of that exists to the extent it does today without Jack's Johnson's work. That's where his legacy will live on and on and on."

John Percy, President & CEO of Destination Niagara USA and former Chair of the DI Foundation board, worked with Johnson during the difficult period of the Covid pandemic and the two developed a friendship.

In an industry filled with extroverts, Johnson was a "true introvert, a self-proclaimed one, and yet so beautifully brilliant," Percy told *USAE*.

"I don't think I've ever met a more brilliant mind in my life in this industry," Percy said. "We all want to leave a legacy, a footprint, our mark, I don't think there's a person who's left a bigger, more impactful, more indelible mark on this industry than Jack Johnson."

Percy continued: "We can honor Jack by doing the work this incredible human being wanted us to do. He made us [destination organization professionals] think differently about our jobs, encouraging us to start considering our own community as one of our markets, as partners, as true stakeholders of what we do on a daily basis. And he was so right."

Melissa Cherry, Senior Vice President at Miles Partnership and Johnson's colleague for years at DI, also noted that Johnson **"**was one of the most brilliant minds I've ever encountered in my career."

"He had a quiet presence, often standing in the background, taking everything in. But when Jack spoke, you listened, because every word mattered," Cherry said. "He had an extraordinary ability to take complex challenges, connect ideas and turn them into meaningful change that would leave a lasting impact on our industry. His legacy lives not only in the ideas and organizations he helped shape, but in the countless people whose lives and careers he influenced."



Johnson was the direct supervisor of Andreas Weissenborn, Senior Vice President, Advocacy and Destination Advancement, at DI.

Weissenborn said: "It's hard to put into words the influence Jack Johnson has had on me and the work we did together. In so many facets of his life, Jack thought deep, spoke softly and cared immensely. He worked hard to change minds and had a brilliant ability to always see the finer details in every discovery. I will miss him immensely, not just as a loss to our industry, but also as a mentor, peer and friend. I cherish our time together and hope to continue to honor him as he would have wished, helping this incredible sector move forward."

According to Johnson's obituary published on Legacy.com, outside of his professional life, his greatest joy was spending time with his spouse, Phil. "Together, they loved sharing an exceptional meal, discovering a new favorite wine and exploring vibrant local communities," the obituary states.Jack is preceded in death by his parents, Don Arthur Johnson and Marie Allison Johnson. He's survived by his loving spouse of almost 20 years, Phillip Huron Guzman; his three siblings, Martin Don Johnson (Anna Maria Piro), Nancy Marie Johnson, and Michael Alan Johnson; and nieces and nephews, Melissa, Lars, Brigitta, Aaron, and Christopher.

A memorial and celebration of Johnson's life were held at San Antonio's Mission Park Funeral Chapels South, Cemeteries & Crematories on November 14.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made in his honor to two organizations he loved, supported, and listened to daily: the Human Rights Campaign and National Public Radio (NPR).

Find more information and make a donation in Johnson's name here.

Sponsored Content

Discover why New Orleans Is Built to Host

Take Meetings Beyond Ordinary: Experience New Orleans This Season

For associations planning their next meeting, the destination can play an important role in bringing members together. Beyond educational programming and professional development, attendees value opportunities to reconnect with colleagues, exchange ideas and experience something memorable.

New Orleans offers an inviting setting for upcoming winter and spring gatherings. Welcoming outdoor weather, distinctive venues, a walkable downtown and authentic cultural experiences create opportunities for associations to deliver meaningful meetings, even when planning on a shorter timeline.

Whether organizing a regional conference, member leadership retreat or smaller professional gathering, New Orleans provides the setting, hospitality and experiences to make time together count.

A Season That Invites Connection

Winter and spring bring opportunities to experience New Orleans beyond the traditional meeting room. The city's generally mild temperatures make outdoor receptions, courtyard dining, rooftop gatherings and group activities appealing additions to association programs.

Imagine a morning of educational sessions followed by lunch in a historic French Quarter courtyard, an afternoon exploring the Mississippi Riverfront or an evening reception beneath the stars.

New Orleans' expanded 2.25-mile riverfront park system offers scenic walking paths and open spaces for wellness activities, informal networking and opportunities to recharge between sessions.

For associations looking to enhance the member experience, these activities provide more than a change of scenery. They create opportunities for spontaneous conversations, stronger relationships and shared memories that reinforce the value of gathering in person.

Give Members an Experience Worth Sharing

In New Orleans, culture is not simply something attendees observe. It is something they experience together.

As a UNESCO Creative City of Music, New Orleans offers opportunities to incorporate local musical traditions into meeting programs. An intimate jazz performance can create an inviting atmosphere for a member reception, while a brass band can bring energy to an evening celebration.



Scenic riverfront spaces along the Mississippi River offer opportunities for outdoor networking, wellness and relaxation.

A traditional second line offers a distinctly New Orleans experience. Rooted in historic jazz funerals, where a brass band and procession formed the first line and mourners joined behind as the second line, the tradition has evolved into a celebration. Today, attendees can follow a brass band through the streets, dancing and waving handkerchiefs as they move between venues.

The city's culinary scene offers additional opportunities to connect. Chef-led dinners, interactive cooking demonstrations and neighborhood food tours invite members to discover the people, stories and traditions behind New Orleans cuisine.

These shared experiences encourage conversation and help transform professional acquaintances into lasting relationships.

Make the Destination Part of the Meeting

One of New Orleans' greatest advantages is the ability to incorporate authentic experiences naturally into an existing meeting agenda.

A networking dinner can become an opportunity to engage with a local chef. A reception in a historic property can introduce attendees to the city's architecture and cultural heritage. Even a transition between venues can become a memorable group experience.

This approach reflects New Orleans & Company's ***Built to Host*** philosophy, which emphasizes creating meetings that inspire fresh thinking, foster meaningful relationships and leave attendees energized long after the program concludes.

For associations, the goal is not simply to add activities. It is to create opportunities that complement educational programming, encourage participation and strengthen connections among members.

Built to Bring People Together

New Orleans combines its distinctive culture with the infrastructure and hospitality expertise needed to deliver successful meetings.

Its compact, walkable downtown connects hotels, meeting spaces, restaurants and attractions, while historic properties, boutique hotels, museums and unique off-site venues provide flexible settings for gatherings of varying sizes.

New Orleans & Company works alongside local hospitality partners to help planners develop programs that balance professional objectives with authentic destination experiences.

For associations considering an upcoming winter or spring meeting, New Orleans offers a compelling combination of mild weather, meaningful experiences and genuine hospitality.

Give your members more reasons to gather. Discover why New Orleans is **Built to Host** at neworleans.com/meetings.



Outdoor settings inspire fresh ideas, collaboration and meaningful connections.



Mild seasonal weather makes historic courtyards ideal for outdoor receptions and networking.

Sponsored Content

Buffalo Is a City with a Flavor All It's Own

In Buffalo, you can put your best foot forward without stepping on your budget. Our walkable downtown is dotted with refined venues and chic hotels, and you're never far from an exceptional meal. Give your guests a well-rounded experience without cutting corners.

There are nearly 2,000 hotel rooms, with more than half of them within a three-block walk of the Buffalo Convention Center.

Our walkable downtown connects visitors to the unique energy of the city. There are nearly 2,000 hotel rooms, with more than half of them within a three-block walk of the Buffalo Convention Center. Speaking of places to gather, the BCC offers over 110,000 square feet of flexible meeting space and is just steps from nightlife, live theater and Buffalo's rising culinary scene.

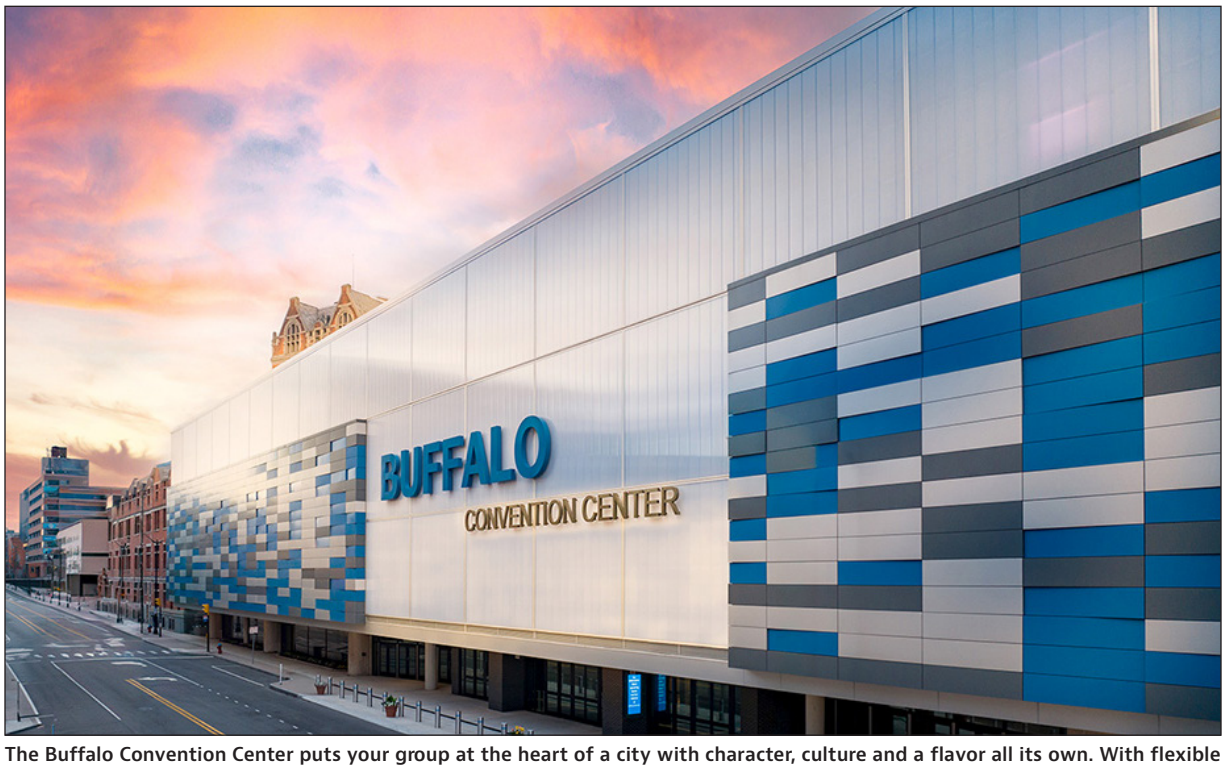
If a traditional meeting space isn't right for your team, Buffalo offers a wide array of one-of-a-kind, historically new venues: architectural landmarks that have been thoughtfully restored, reimagined and given new life. Host a gathering amid the extraordinary architecture of the Richardson Olmsted Campus, connect with Buffalo's African American history at the Michigan Street Baptist Church, or bring your group to Duende at Silo City, where the city's industrial past has become the backdrop for one of its most distinctive spaces. In Buffalo, the history and appeal of the venue only enhances the event.



Big-city culture, small-town ease. Buffalo brings the best of both worlds to your next meeting, with iconic landmarks like Shea's Performing Arts Center and a walkable downtown full of energy, history and local flavor. Here, the memorable moments are always just around the corner.

Dine-arounds are easy when there are more than 200 restaurants in downtown Buffalo. Foodies can design an entire itinerary around a culinary tour of our neighborhoods, home to restaurants dishing up everything from James Beard–recognized cuisine to "Texish" barbecue and Buffalo wings. And our cocktail, mocktail and craft beer scene will add even more flavor to your night.

When your team wants to move beyond the walls of the meeting room and into inspiration, Buffalo has the cultural offerings they won't find anywhere else. The Buffalo AKG Art Museum contains a world-class collection of modern and contemporary art. Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House is an architectural showcase and the perfect backdrop for an evening reception. Shea's Performing Arts Center and its high-wattage marquee light up our theater district and the venue offers on-stage meeting space, while the city's revitalized Canalside brings waterfront energy year-round.



The Buffalo Convention Center puts your group at the heart of a city with character, culture and a flavor all its own. With flexible meeting space, walkable downtown attractions and a thriving culinary scene just steps away, Buffalo makes it easy to create memorable experiences without stretching your budget.

And where else but Buffalo can you fly into our airport and easily be downtown in 10 minutes? J.D. Power has consistently ranked our airport among the top in the U.S. for passenger satisfaction.

The support and friendliness start before you even touch down. Visit Buffalo's convention services staff brings the same warm welcome you'll experience throughout the city to every meeting and event. From planning and logistics to local connections and on-the-ground support, they'll focus on the small moments, so planners create a big picture that feels seamless from arrival to departure.

But what truly sets Buffalo apart is our vibe. Here, you'll find a city that shows up, rolls up its sleeves and genuinely wants your gathering to succeed.

Come see how a city rich in character can also be refreshingly affordable.

That's Buffalo for you.



VISION YOU CAN SEE.
PROGRESS YOU
CAN VERIFY.
SEE IT HAPPENING
LIVE.

The GRB South building expansion will add state-of-the-art meeting and exhibit space, advanced A/V technology, and flexible configurations to accommodate events of any scale.

From seamless registration areas to dynamic networking zones, every detail is crafted with one goal: to make your event planning simpler and your attendee experience exceptional.

Houston's master plan for hospitality. **GRB SOUTH OPENING SUMMER 2028**

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