Communities are making progress towards increasing the accessibility of their facilities, but many barriers still prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in activities at these facilities.

For example, facilities and programs designed to include people with disabilities are still limited. As a result, many people with disabilities are seeking to use a small number of specialized facilities and programs that are often operating at capacity, leaving people waiting for access to these programs and thus waiting for physical activity in general.

Also, people with disabilities often face a lack of social support or sense of belonging. This can be a difficult barrier to overcome, especially when someone might not feel confident about their ability to do physical activity. Furthermore, people with disabilities have often newly acquired their disability and are transitioning from
WellSpring rehabilitation and/or specialized exercise settings to community programs and services. Thus, the common question amongst individuals is, “Am I ready for the community?” Transitioning from an environment of people with similar abilities, experiences and expertise to a community environment can be complex and filled with many challenges, be they physical, social or psychological.

**Barriers in the physical environment might include:**
- Lack of transportation to and from facilities
- Lack of accessible design in facilities and equipment

**Barriers in the social environment might include:**
- Facility staff lacking knowledge about how exercise affects disabilities and chronic health conditions
- Attitudes of other community members (e.g. discomfort)

People with disabilities may also experience the following psychological barriers:
- Lack of knowledge about community resources
- Lack of confidence in their abilities
- Actual or perceived lack of social support or sense of belonging
- Lack of skill with their mobility device (e.g. wheelchair, arm canes, etc.)
- Lack of knowledge about exercise techniques
- Lack of knowledge about what special exercise considerations they need to take into account because of their particular disability

**Is the Community Ready?**

Community readiness goes beyond basic access to buildings. To assess if your community facility is ready for people with disabilities, consider the following factors:

- **Adaptability of exercise equipment.** Can your equipment accommodate people with disabilities? For example, cardio equipment with removable middle consoles are easier to mount and dismount. Thera-Bands are a good option to offer in place of free weights, which are difficult for someone with poor grip strength to use.

- **Adaptability of exercise classes.** Do your classes offer choices in exercises, pace and intensity that include participants with a wide range of abilities? For example, one choice could be participating in a yoga class from a chair.

- **Design of activity spaces and placement of equipment.** Does the space between your equipment allow for easy maneuvering of mobility devices such as wheelchairs?

- **Knowledge base of staff about how exercise affects disabilities and chronic health conditions.** Are staff aware of potential problems such as the effect that heat can have on a person with multiple sclerosis?

- **Attitudes of other community members.** Do people with disabilities feel welcome? Are they able to establish social relationships? Do they feel comfortable exercising with able-bodied clientele?

**How Can We Facilitate Access for All?**

In recent years, communities have invested resources and energy in improving access for people with disabilities. For example, the City of Edmonton has created a special needs coordinator position as well as an advisory board on services for people with disabilities. Communities have also subsidized fees to provide physical activity opportunities for community
members, including people with disabilities, who could not afford these opportunities otherwise. On the social and personal levels, it’s important to remember that people seek environments they fit into. Social support and sense of belonging are important components of participation in physical activity. For example, interpersonal interaction, social support and group cohesion are cited as reasons for adherence in group-based exercise (Oka, King, & Young, 1995; Cress, et al., 2004; Estabrooks & Carron, 1999). There are a number of things that practitioners at community facilities can do to create an environment where people with disabilities truly feel they fit.

**What community facility practitioners can do:**

- **Seek resources for people with disabilities.** Municipalities, disability organizations and provincial and national sport governing bodies offer grants, programs and other services that your facility may be able to use.
- **Utilize accessibility guidelines.** The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) provides guidelines on how to increase accessibility for people with disabilities using methods such as universal building design.
- **Seek the guidance of people with disabilities.** Encourage them to have a say. Ask them to share their thoughts on the accessibility of facilities, services and programs. Involve them in every stage of planning.
- **Offer choices.** Create choices in programs and services that enable people to suit their individual interests, needs and abilities.
- **Hire staff with interest and experience in providing programs for people with disabilities, and provide programs.** This will help to create an environment that is welcoming to everyone.
- **Learn about disabilities.** Get informed about different types of disabilities and the special considerations for exercise that go along with them. Hold workshops with staff on disability awareness topics.
- **Consider the particular needs of every individual.** Remember, clients know their bodies best.
- **Inform people with disabilities about initiatives in your community and at your facility.** Sometimes people don’t know about programs and services that would be helpful to them.

**Individuals with disabilities also have a role to play.** People with disabilities are active agents of change and have a key role in developing their own independence. As they transition to community facilities, individuals should:

- **Have a say.** Share your thoughts on the accessibility of facilities, services and programs, either individually or with the support of a disability organization.
- **Get informed about initiatives happening in your community.** Go online or visit your local community facilities and find out what they have to offer.
- **Learn a skill.** Keep developing your skills in areas such as flexibility, strength, exercise technique and wheelchair mobility. Organizations such as Wheelchair Sports Alberta offer a sport and recreation program for adults, and the Steadward Centre in conjunction with the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital offers a wheelchair skills course, to name just a few.
A facility that is low in physical and social barriers can increase a person’s level of independence and help them to become more active. There is much more work to be done, but communities, practitioners and people with disabilities are having more and more success at reducing these barriers. Together we will continue to build the capacity of communities to support people with disabilities fully participating in activities at community fitness and recreation facilities. We all have a role to play.

References


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Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of all people through physical activity.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE’D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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