



Summary

People experiencing disability or mobility impairments often encounter unique barriers in community fitness centres.

The AIMFREE audit tool helps recreational facilities identify space, design and usage barriers, in order to improve the accessibility of their centre.

Simple modifications can create more accessible and welcoming environments and support physical activity for all.

People in motion. More places. More often.

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Fitness and recreation facilities can be accessible to ALL individuals. Small modifications to programs, policies and professional behaviour can make EVERYONE feel welcome to participate. The first step in developing an accessible facility is to provide a safe and attractive place to be physically active. Tools such as the AIMFREE accessibility audit can guide centres on *what can be done* to make facilities welcoming for all.

Benefits of Physical Activity for Individuals Living with Impairment

Promoting physical activity among people with disabilities has long been advocated as an important goal for public health and public policy, as regular physical activity improves physical, emotional and social wellbeing.

Benefits of physical activity for individuals experiencing disability or mobility impairment include:

- improved physical health;
- enhanced sense of control, independence and self-efficacy;
- an opportunity to focus on physical abilities, not disability or reduced mobility;
- opportunities for social interaction;
- enhanced energy and strength to complete activities of daily living; and
- improved mental health.

Alberta's Leading Resource

The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement (The Steadward Centre), at the University of Alberta, is a leading resource for services and information on physical activity for persons living with impairment. The Steadward Centre develops research and disseminates knowledge through education. Their vision is to support independence and inclusion of children, youth and adults living with impairments in their communities by inspiring:

- excellence and leadership,
- achievements in personal fitness, motor skill development and athletic performance,
- meaningful, innovative and applied advancements in adapted physical activity, and
- passion for learning and discovery.

One aspect of their work is the provision of education and support for community recreation facilities to support individuals living with impairment.

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AIMFREE

Through the support of the Human Rights, Education and Multiculturalism Fund (HREMF), The Steadward Centre was funded to assist fitness professionals and management improve their understanding of the unique barriers that exist in community fitness centres for people experiencing disability. The Accessibility Instruments Measuring Fitness and Recreation Environments (AIMFREE) tool focuses on 15 common areas with accessibility issues found in most community recreation centres. The tool examines:

- access routes and entrance areas
- equipment
- information
- locker rooms and showers
- hot tubs, whirlpools, saunas, steam rooms
- elevators
- bathrooms
- professional behaviour
- professional support/training
- policies
- programs
- parking
- telephones
- water fountains
- swimming pool



This tool was used to conduct 25 accessibility audits in community fitness facilities in the Greater Edmonton area. Each facility received a detailed report outlining:

- Areas of Excellence, where the facility met or exceeded survey standards; and
- Barriers, where the facility did not meet minimum standards and required action to improve the overall accessibility or user-friendliness.

The report also provided suggestions for both temporary and permanent solutions to address areas of concern for inaccessibility.

These reports are useful as:

- a benchmark for current accessibility that can be revisited over time;
- a resource for strategic planning;
- a tool for budget allocation;
- a resource for inclusion policy development;
- an educational tool for fitness staff;
- a foundation document for the writing of grants;
- a basis for communicating your accessibility features on your website; and/or
- a disability awareness tool.

Many facilities can easily increase their low average accessibility ratings through small, affordable fixes.

Accessibility ratings range from 0% (poor score) to 100% (exceptional score). The average accessibility rating for Edmonton's various community fitness facilities was 23%, ranging from 0% to 84%. Generally, the most accessible areas included hot tubs/saunas, professional behaviour, policies, professional support/training, and access routes. Whereas, the least accessible areas included parking, telephones, locker rooms/showers, information and bathrooms.

Many facilities can easily increase their low average accessibility ratings through small, affordable fixes.

Short-term Recommendations to Improve Accessibility in Facilities:

These simple modifications will create more accessible and welcoming environments for individuals experiencing disability or mobility impairment.

Professional Behaviour

- Talk to the person living with impairment, not their aid.
- Do not make assumptions; ask customers if they require assistance prior to attempting to assist.
- Encourage new customers to try various exercise equipment during an initial visit to the facility.

Professional Support

- Provide staff with a list of key resources.
- Train staff on how to provide exercise and equipment adaptations for individuals experiencing disability.
- Provide staff with opportunities to access training specific to persons experiencing disability.

Policies

- Allow customers with impairments to bring a personal aid into the facility and facility programs without incurring additional charges.
- Ensure at least one person with a disability serves on your facility's advisory board.
- Have information available in alternative formats (e.g., braille, large print, audio).
- Use images of people living with impairments being active in your program guides and advertisements.

Programs

- Make chairs and hand rails available in all exercise classes.
- Allow preparation time for individuals to set up in the class before the program starts and extra time at the end of class.
- Ask all individuals if they need accommodations when they enroll or before the class begins.



Awareness of Environment

- Be aware of objects in front of, below or blocking accessible areas (e.g., objects below water fountains and hand dryers or portable signs or message boards).



Exercise Equipment

- Provide at least one upper body cardio equipment.
- Ensure lightest weights are stored in the most accessible area.
- Provide a raised stretching area to accommodate people that are unable to get on and off the floor.

Based on the findings from this work, an infographic and a two-page summary were developed outlining 12 relatively simple changes to increase accessibility. The full report with more complex changes on how to improve the accessibility of fitness centres is available at www.steadwardcentre.ualberta.ca/en/CommunityTransition/12%20Ways%20to%20Make%20Your%20Facility%20Accessible.aspx.

The Steadward Centre continues to work with Alberta facilities to ensure adequate access to recreation facilities is achieved for individuals experiencing disability by conducting audits and making recommendations. The Steadward Centre is available for questions or information requests from facilities across Alberta and other parts of Canada.

References

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About the Authors

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