Many Fitness Facilities May Not Be Fully Accessible to People with Disabilities

Being physically active is an important part of staying healthy. Running and walking outdoors are popular options, but people with disabilities, especially mobility disabilities, may not have full access to traditional parks and trails. Fitness facilities, such as gyms and health clubs, can offer alternative ways for people to be physically active, but those facilities may still present barriers to getting a workout since many fitness facilities may lack critical features that would enable people with disabilities to fully use the facilities and equipment to exercise.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires fitness facilities to have some essential access features, such as having ramps and doorways wide enough for wheelchair users, the ADA does not require other accessibility features that promote usability of facilities, programs, and equipment for people with disabilities such as having exercise equipment that can be used without needing to transfer out of a wheelchair, braille and large-print signage for equipment, or disability sensitivity training for facility staff. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at the accessibility of a large sample of fitness facilities throughout the United States. They wanted to find out how accessible the fitness facilities were overall, which parts of the facilities tended to be most and least accessible, and whether there were differences between facility types or facilities built before vs. after the ADA.

Researchers at the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center for Interactive Exercise Technologies and Exercise Physiology for People with Disabilities (RecTech RERC) examined data on the accessibility and usability of 227 fitness facilities in 10 U.S. states between 2007 and 2010. Facilities included private health clubs, park-managed community centers, and fitness facilities on hospital or college campuses. Trained evaluators or facility staff evaluated each facility using the Accessibility Instrument Measuring Fitness and Recreation Environments (AIMFREE), a tool designed for fitness and recreation facility owners and managers to evaluate the accessibility of their facility, equipment, and programs.

The evaluators scored each facility based on how many accessibility features were present in each of 15 areas, resulting in scores ranging from 0 (no accessibility features) to 100 (all possible accessibility features). Eleven areas focused on physical parts of the facility including entrances, parking, equipment, information and signage, locker rooms, spas (such as hot tubs/saunas), bathrooms, water fountains, telephones, swimming pools, and elevators. For example, evaluators checked whether or not there were entrances at an appropriate width for wheelchairs, accessible parking spaces, treadmills and other exercise equipment with raised buttons detectable by touch, and drinking fountains and telephones that were low enough to be reachable from a
wheelchair. Four areas focused on staff and services including programs, policies, professional training, and professional behavior. For example, facilities received higher scores if they had exercise classes that allowed people to go at their own pace, if they had written policies supporting accessibility and inclusion, and if they provided their staff with training on interacting with and assisting patrons with disabilities. The researchers analyzed the scores for 13 of the 15 areas. Professional behavior and elevators were not included in the analyses because there was not enough data. In addition, the researchers recorded the date when the facility was built, the type of facility, nonprofit status, and whether it was located in an urban community (a city with at least 50,000 residents) or a suburban community (a smaller city or town).

The researchers found that:

- Accessibility has room to improve: When looking at overall facility scores, most of the facilities had scores below 70%, meaning that they lacked at least 30% of the accessibility features evaluated.
- Accessibility varied by area: The researchers found that spas, telephones, and bathrooms had the lowest scores for physical features across facilities. Water fountains and parking had the highest average scores. Policies had the lowest scores among the service-related features, while programs had the highest scores across facilities.
- There were some differences between types of facilities: The facilities in suburban communities had higher parking accessibility scores than those in urban communities, but otherwise, these two types of facilities were similar. Nonprofit facilities generally had higher accessibility scores than for-profit facilities. Hospitals' fitness areas had higher accessibility scores for equipment, information/signage, and locker rooms compared with the other facility types. Facilities built after 1992, when the ADA went into effect, had higher scores than older facilities in six areas: entrances, equipment, information/signage, bathrooms, locker rooms, and pools. Otherwise, the scores in other areas were similar between the newer and older facilities.

From these findings, the authors concluded that many fitness facilities may not be optimally accessible for people with disabilities. Many of the facilities in the current study had some, but not all, of the desired accessibility features, or only incorporated accessibility features into some parts of their facility. Some aspects of accessibility such as that of exercise equipment and information and signage are not explicitly covered by the ADA. However, those aspects may be determining factors whether people with disabilities can optimally use the facilities.

The authors also noted there are additional components, besides the physical environment, that are needed to achieve full accessibility and usability of a fitness facility. The accessibility of formal programs like exercise classes, presence of access policies, and adequate training for facility staff all contribute to the access experience for people with disabilities. Improving access to fitness facilities and their
programs can have a positive impact on the health and wellness of people with disabilities, as well as those aging into disability. Improving access may also have a positive impact for facilities themselves by increasing their marketability to a broader community of potential members. Fitness facility owners and operators may want to examine the accessibility strengths and limitations of their current facilities and to develop innovative access improvements, in collaboration with people with disabilities.

To Learn More

AIMFREE, the evaluation tool used for this study, is available to fitness facility managers and operators. Learn more in this webcast from the Center on Knowledge Translation for Technology Transfer: http://mediastream.buffalo.edu/Content/cat/Aimfree/industry/

Consumers can also use AIMFREE to evaluate their local gym. Check out this factsheet: http://sphhp.buffalo.edu/content/dam/sphhp/cat/kt4tt/pdf/ckp-aimfree/kt-intervention-study-tools-consumer-version-series-b5.pdf

The RecTech RERC continues to research and develop technology and standards to promote inclusive fitness for people with disabilities, including:

- Developing uniform standards for accessible fitness equipment: http://www.rectech.org/projects/development/standards-accessible-fitness-equipment/

Fitness professionals and program managers may be interested in the Inclusive Fitness Coalition, an expanded group of organizations and individuals representing a cross-section of the disability rights, sports, health/fitness and civil rights communities: http://www.incfit.org.

To Learn More About This Study

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at www.naric.com or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

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