

Welcome to Active Inform; a bimonthly research based physical activity newsletter targeting practitioners in the field. Active Inform aims to increase access to the evidence base for physical activity promotion. It will provide a snapshot of the latest physical activity research news, key documents, models and other tools to assist you to promote physical activity.

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## December 2010

# The Leisure centre experiences of people with disabilities: barriers, facilitators and a way forward

The Inclusive Leisure Initiative is a four year (2007-2011), VicHealth funded pilot project, managed by Action for Community Living / Inclusive Leisure Victoria in partnership with Aquatics & Recreation Victoria. The initiative aims to enhance opportunities for people with a disability to become physically active through the development of inclusive leisure centre environments.

People with a disability have been, and continue to be essential partners in the development of the initiative in Victoria. Consultations have occurred through focus group discussions with adults with a disability that regularly use leisure centres and adults with a disability who do not, only occasionally or have, but no longer use leisure centres. Focus group participants identified factors which impact upon their participation in leisure centres and actions that could be taken to increase participation in physical activity.

### Introduction

The Inclusive Leisure Initiative works strategically to develop a set of consistent, inclusive standards for Victorian Leisure centres, with the aim to increase opportunities for people with a disability to become physically active.

In order to meet the needs of people with a disability, consultations with people with disabilities (stakeholders) occurred through focus group discussions. Five focus groups were conducted. Stakeholders that took part in the focus groups included 21 adults with a disability that regularly used leisure centres from metropolitan (n= 15) and rural (n= 6) regions and 13 adults with a disability who did not, only occasionally or have, but no longer used leisure centres from metropolitan (n= 9) and rural regions (n= 4). A range of disabilities, including physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory disabilities and acquired brain injury were represented.

Focus groups aimed to determine the factors which impact upon the leisure centre experiences of people with a disability and determine actions that can be taken to increase participation.

### Key Findings

To determine the issues faced by stakeholders, various concepts were explored in the leisure centre user and non-user groups. The key finding that emerged was the need for leisure centres to focus on the level of customer service provided. Overall findings suggested that whilst a few leisure centres have established some inclusive practices, the sector as a whole needs to take further steps towards becoming inclusive. Additionally, health professionals, family, friends and staff within the disability sector can play a positive and influential role in introducing people with disabilities to leisure centres and in promoting the health benefits of physical activity.

## **A Role for Health Professionals: Promoting the Benefits of Physical Activity to People with Disabilities**

Stakeholders reported that general fitness, exercise, health and weight management were the main reasons as to why people with disabilities began to attend leisure centres. Attending leisure centres to maintain health was important in respect to slowing the deterioration of an individual's physical or degenerative disability and to aid in maintaining mobility. The importance of significant others was reinforced with some stakeholders indicating they began attending a leisure centre because of the suggestion and encouragement of significant individuals (health professionals, caregivers or staff from a disability organisation).

## **Barriers to Participation in Physical Activity for People with Disabilities**

### **1. Cost and Location**

Expense and proximity to the home or workplace were influential factors as to why stakeholders changed or stopped attending leisure centres. Convenience was significant, particularly in the metropolitan region where stakeholders don't always go to a leisure centre because it suited their needs, rather they put up with imperfections which restricted their full participation at the centre.

It was expressed that to effectively use facilities within leisure centres, people with disabilities often require the services of a personal trainer, thus adding to the cost. This expense is a major hurdle. Notable was a discussion around periods of extended illnesses, and the inflexibility in the maximum period of time a membership can be suspended. Lack of inflexibility and the limited disposable income of many people with a disability made stakeholders consider if membership is worth the cost.

### **2. Support from Leisure Centre Staff**

Leisure centres can become very busy during particular hours. Some stakeholders expressed being more comfortable attending a centre during the quieter periods. It was articulated that in the off peak hours, centres either have insufficient staff available or staff lack the attentiveness to provide advice and assistance.

### **3. Customer Service**

A lack of customer service was discussed in detail. It was felt staff often have a poor attitude, are more interested in talking with their work colleagues about personal matters, lack respect and are unapproachable. Stakeholders believed staff required greater awareness on how to communicate with people with disabilities and knowledge on how to adapt exercises or programs accordingly.

Dominating the conversations were issues around accessibility and how a lack of customer service discourages patrons from returning to a leisure centre. Although recognising the need, frustrations were expressed that staff focus too much on the need to know about an individual's medications rather than focusing on developing a program. Stakeholders relayed how first experiences are confronting and intimidating, making individuals uncomfortable in a leisure centre setting.

### **4. Marketing Opportunities**

Focus groups indicated that after the initial induction at a leisure centre, areas of a leisure centre not utilised by stakeholders become quickly forgotten. Thoughts on how to overcome this included extended or ongoing inductions or familiarisations on a semi regular basis, free come and try days or take home information. The availability of a DVD for patrons utilising the centre was a popular suggestion. It was expressed that such a tool should not only include general information about the centre but information on the benefits of people with a disability being physically active.

Health professionals can play a key role in providing people with disabilities and their caregivers with greater knowledge and education about the facilities available at leisure centres and the associated health benefits. Stakeholders wanted knowledge about what centres offered through the print and electronic media. Discussions surrounded the need for easy to read advertising materials located in a variety of services including local libraries and medical centres.

Another factor raised by stakeholders was the role of local councils, mainly through Access for All Abilities officers. It was felt that councils need a greater knowledge and should play a more proactive role in advertising leisure centre opportunities. Stakeholders aware of Access for All Abilities officers felt they did not adequately promote services and facilities, including leisure centres, available to adults. This is an important gap that centres have not appeared to tap into.

## Facilitators to Participation in Physical Activity for People with Disabilities

### 1. Understanding Health Benefits

The positive impact of leisure centres in maintaining stakeholder's mobility, independence, physical and social health was expressed. In discussing how this is achieved, the availability of staff on the floor and more importantly, their approachability and awareness of disability or willingness to listen and work with a person with a disability were raised. This extended to the need for management to listen and respond to concerns raised by stakeholders. The appearance and atmosphere of leisure centres, the friendliness and approachability of management and staff were also raised as important factors.

### 2. Providing Choice

Stakeholders commented that a variety of disability and/or beginner and normal mainstream classes and programs should be offered, to enable adequate choice and the possibility for people with disabilities to move into a mainstream class or program as they become confident and comfortable undertaking physical activity.

### 3. Disability Awareness

Throughout the focus groups it was expressed that if leisure centre staff had a greater understanding and knowledge of disability, had a greater knowledge on modifying programs and communicating with people with disabilities, patrons with a disability would feel more comfortable in participating in physical activity at a leisure centre.

### 4. Physically Accessible Environments

A need to improve access to the physical environment of leisure centres through adequate directional signage; adequate lighting, sufficient heating and cooling, and easy access in and around all areas of the centre were expressed. The desire for signage explaining how to use equipment in the gym and adequate equipment including water chairs and flotation devices in wet areas were also expressed by various stakeholders as important for centres to be disability friendly.

### 5. Partnerships

It was suggested that leisure centres need to liaise more closely with health professionals and disability networks to raise awareness and provide greater information and advertising materials to people with disabilities. Disability networks included day training agencies, schools, Access for All Abilities and other larger, well known disability agencies. Local councils and Access for All Abilities officers are seen as an important source of information.

### 6. Accessible Information

Stakeholders overwhelmingly mentioned they required information on the services offered by leisure centres. It was expressed that stakeholders did not only want a general awareness of the facilities on offer, but information about the type and accessibility of programs. The importance of knowing if staff had undergone disability awareness training was also expressed by stakeholders.

### A way forward: Future Directions

A number of future directions arose out of the key findings from the focus groups:

**Disability Focused Advertising.** Advertising needs to be targeted towards adults with disabilities and their significant others to encourage people with disabilities to utilise leisure centres. Significant others which include parents, caregivers, health professionals and day placement agencies have an important influence on the actions of people with disabilities.

Electronic and print media are mediums utilised by adults with disabilities to research leisure centres. Advertising should include images of people with disabilities, be easy to read with minimal words that are also represented in a pictorial format. Disability advertising should focus on reasons why adults with disabilities attend leisure centres. Examples include health and fitness, mobility and social benefits. Other important information to include in advertising is accessibility, peak and off peak hours, disability awareness amongst staff, cost and the variety of groups (mainstream, disability or beginner) available for programs offered.

**Liaison with disability agencies and councils.** Greater collaboration between leisure centres, health professionals and disability networks including day training agencies, schools, local councils and their Access for All Abilities officers, along with larger well known disability agencies is required to raise awareness and promote the opportunities available at leisure centres.

**Disability Awareness Training.** The industry needs to raise staff's awareness of disability and how to work effectively with people with disabilities. Various levels of staff within leisure centres, from a management level, trainers, to reception staff need to undergo disability awareness training. Disability awareness training will aid in improving customer service, promote a friendly environment, allow staff to adapt, thus catering for a range of individual needs, promote respect and dignity and allow staff to effectively communicate with adults with disabilities.

The presence of trained staff that patrons could consult with would not only assist people with disabilities to feel more comfortable, but reduce their need for personal trainers and hence the cost, encouraging participants to participate in physical activity in leisure centres more frequently.

**Improving Customer Service.** Practices need to be developed within the industry to improve customer service skills. This will encourage both patrons with and without disabilities to frequent a leisure centre. Leisure centres with approachable, attentive staff that have good communication skills, are aware of individuals needs and openly offer advice and assistance would help patrons feel more comfortable, confident and safe in using equipment or partaking in various programs offered.

**Improving the physical environment and its accessibility.** Leisure centres need to consider adaptations to the physical environment of their centres to promote an accessible, inclusive environment. It is important that centres ensure cosmetic items (e.g. pot plants) do not become hazards for patrons with vision impairments or in wheelchairs, and that areas are easily accessible with adequate spacing for patrons in wheelchairs to manoeuvre, while also considering patrons using a walking stick. Centres need to be more aware of potential dangers, including steps, wet areas and handlebars on gymnasium equipment. Many easy, low cost steps can be taken to alert patrons to these dangers. There is a need for directional and informative signage and adequate resources, including information on utilising equipment in the gym and the availability of equipment including water chairs.

#### **About Action for Community Living:**

Action for Community Living is the auspice organisation for Inclusive Leisure Victoria. AFCL provides empowerment, leadership and advocacy services to any person with a disability. We make a special effort to provide advocacy support for people with an acquired brain injury.

#### **Action for Community Living current priorities include:**

- Leadership and empowerment programs for people with disabilities
- Individual advocacy
- Emergency management
- Inclusive sport and active recreation

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## Related Resources

### **Embracing Inclusion Report: The experiences of people with disabilities at Victorian leisure centres**

Inclusive Leisure Victoria, 2008.

[http://www.aquaticsandrecreation.org.au/images/data/Embracing\\_Inclusion\\_Stakeholder\\_Consultation.pdf](http://www.aquaticsandrecreation.org.au/images/data/Embracing_Inclusion_Stakeholder_Consultation.pdf)

### **Leisure Centres and People with a Disability Fact Sheet**

Inclusive Leisure Victoria and Aquatics & Recreation Victoria, 2010.

<http://afcl.org.au/ilv/resources/Documents/People%20with%20Disabilities%20and%20Leisure%20Centres%20Fact%20Sheet.doc>

### **Promoting Physical Activity to All Abilities**

Go for your life, In partnership with Inclusive Leisure Victoria et al, 2010.

[http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/hav/articles.nsf/pracpages/Promoting\\_physical\\_activity\\_for\\_all\\_abilities?Open](http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/hav/articles.nsf/pracpages/Promoting_physical_activity_for_all_abilities?Open)

### **People with a disability benefit from physical activity Fact Sheet**

Government of South Australia, 2010.

<http://www.beactive.com.au/tips-disability.htm>

### **Increasing Physical Activity in Individuals with Disability**

The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability, USA, 2007.

[http://www.fitness.gov/publications/council/increasingactivity\\_ncpadfinal.pdf.pdf](http://www.fitness.gov/publications/council/increasingactivity_ncpadfinal.pdf.pdf)

### **Sport and Physical Recreation Participation Among Persons with a Disability**

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002.

[http://www.ausport.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/276935/ABS-Sport\\_and\\_Physical\\_Recreation\\_Participation\\_Among\\_persons\\_with\\_a\\_disability.pdf](http://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/276935/ABS-Sport_and_Physical_Recreation_Participation_Among_persons_with_a_disability.pdf)

### **The Inclusive Fitness Initiative (in the UK)**

<http://www.inclusivefitness.org>

### **Including People with a disability in sport and active recreation**

NSW Sport and Recreation, in partnership with the Australia Sports Commission

<http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/assets/pubs/industry/sportsconnect.pdf>

### **Promoting Physical Activity for All Abilities: Information Pack**

Kinect Australia et al, 2008.

[www.kinectaustralia.org.au/.../PA\\_for\\_All\\_Abilities\\_Forum\\_infopack.pdf](http://www.kinectaustralia.org.au/.../PA_for_All_Abilities_Forum_infopack.pdf)

### **Physical activity participation among persons with disabilities: Barriers and Facilitators**

James H. Rimmer, PhD, Barth Riley, PhD, Edward Wang, PhD, Amy Rauworth, MS, Janine Jurkowski, PhD

[http://www.rectech.org/publications/AIMFREE3\\_04.pdf](http://www.rectech.org/publications/AIMFREE3_04.pdf)

### **Promoting the Participation of people with disabilities in physical activity and sport in Ireland**

National Disability Authority, Ireland

[http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/7020D28F7F65773A802570F30057F05E/\\$File/activity\\_sport\\_07.htm](http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/7020D28F7F65773A802570F30057F05E/$File/activity_sport_07.htm)

### **Disability and Physical Activity: An overview of issues related to active living**

Active Living by Design, USA

[http://www.aquaticsandrecreation.org.au/images/data/Disability\\_Physical\\_Activity\\_US\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://www.aquaticsandrecreation.org.au/images/data/Disability_Physical_Activity_US_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

## Useful Contacts

Action for Community Living / Inclusive Leisure Victoria  
<http://www.afcl.org.au>

Aquatics & Recreation Victoria  
<http://www.aquaticsandrecreation.org.au>

VicHealth  
<http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au>

**Contact your local Access All Abilities Officer:** Access for All Abilities is a Victorian Government initiative coordinated by Sport and Recreation Victoria. Based predominately within local councils, Access for All Abilities providers are professionals working at a community level to develop inclusive sport and recreation opportunities for people of all abilities.

## Related 'Go for your life' articles

### From the Health Professionals Section

#### [A Strategic Inclusive Model for Leisure for People with Disabilities from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds](#)

This project provides research on the leisure opportunities for people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds who live within the City of Greater Dandenong. It recognises the importance of providing equity of access and increased participation by people with a disability from a CALD backgrounds, and that increased community involvement will provide improved quality of life for the individual, as well as enrichment and strengthening of the overall community. This project report outlines the findings, including barriers for those with a disability from CALD communities to engage in leisure activities and the strategies, model and action plans used to address these issues.

#### [Promoting physical activity for all abilities](#)

This resource includes information on how to ensure a more inclusive approach is taken when promoting and developing opportunities to increase physical activity and addressing the barriers to participation in physical activity.

#### [City of Greater Dandenong: An inclusive model for leisure](#)

This document provides a Strategic Inclusive Model for Leisure for People with Disabilities from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds. The model can be used by sports and leisure providers alike to address the issues raised by the project.

#### [RecLink](#)

RecLink was established to assist people experiencing social and economic disadvantage access sporting and recreational opportunities as a form of social therapy.

## From the Public Section

### [Mobility Centre at Federation Square](#)

The Melbourne Mobility Centre, located at Federation Square, is dedicated to improving access for everyone in the heart of Melbourne. It loans equipment and has services for people with disabilities, older persons, and those with temporary disabilities.

### [Gardening - people with disabilities](#)

Gardening is a fun and healthy activity for people of all ages and abilities. It can have many health benefits. People with disabilities may also enjoy spending time in the garden and growing their own food. With a little planning you can create an accessible, productive and pleasant garden.

### [Access for all abilities - Inclusive sport and recreation](#)

Access for all abilities is a Victorian Government initiative coordinated by Sport and Recreation Victoria which supports and develops inclusive sport and recreation opportunities for people with a disability throughout Victoria.