



‘Improving leisure centre access for people with a disability in Victoria, Australia’

EMBRACING INCLUSION

Stakeholder consultation of Leisure Centre user and non-user groups with a disability

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In consultation with The Victorian Network on Recreation and Disability (VICNORD) for the Inclusive Leisure Initiative.

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CONTENTS

Preamble.....	4
Acknowledgements	5
Key Terms.....	6
Introduction	7
Key Findings	8
1. LEISURE CENTRE USERS	8
1.1 Concept: Finding out about Leisure Centres.....	8
1.1.1 How stakeholders enquire about the services of leisure centres	8
1.2 Concept: Why go to a Leisure Centre?.....	9
1.2.1 Why stakeholders started to attend leisure centres	9
1.2.2 Why stakeholders return to leisure centres.....	9
1.2.3 Why stakeholders have changed or stopped attending leisure centres.....	10
1.2.4 Experiences that have discouraged stakeholders from attending leisure centres	10
1.2.5 Why stakeholders continued to attend leisure centres..	11
1.3 Concept: How Leisure Centre’s can encourage people with disabilities	12
1.3.1 Stakeholder’s beliefs on how to encourage people with disabilities	12
1.3.2 Becoming aware of unknown programs at leisure centres	13
1.3.3 Support and equipment	14
1.3.4 How leisure centres can become disability friendly.....	15

2. LEISURE CENTRE NON-USERS	15
2.1 Concept: What do you know about the activities and opportunities at Leisure Centres?.....	16
2.1.1 Awareness of leisure centres	16
2.2 Concept: Leisure Centre experiences.....	16
2.2.1 Past experiences.....	16
2.2.2 Why stakeholders did not continue to attend leisure centres	17
2.3 Concept: Information Availability	17
2.3.1 Obtaining information about leisure centres	17
2.4 Concept: Reasons to attend a Leisure Centre	18
2.4.1 Encouraging stakeholders to attend leisure centres	18
2.4.2 Support and equipment required	19
2.5 Concept: How Leisure Centres can encourage people with disabilities	19
2.5.1 Stakeholder’s beliefs on how to encourage people with disabilities	20
2.5.2 Information required by stakeholders before attending leisure centres.....	21
2.5.3 How stakeholders find out about becoming involved at leisure centres.....	21
2.5.4 How leisure centres can become disability friendly.....	22
Future Directions	23

Preamble

The Inclusive Leisure Initiative, is a four year (2007-2011), Vichealth funded project, managed by the Victorian Network on Recreation and Disability (VICNORD) 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 environments. Leisure centres are integral in realising the aim of the Inclusive Leisure Initiative.

Stakeholders with a disability have been 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 by the leisure industry to increase participation through exploring key concepts.

This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations from people with a disability. Future directions are provided to assist leisure centre's management to have a greater understanding of what an inclusive leisure centre is.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank focus group participants for sharing their leisure centre experiences. The information obtained will be used to assist the Inclusive Leisure Initiative to develop resources for the leisure industry to promote inclusion for people with a disability in Victorian leisure centres.

Thankyou to the Ballarat Aquatic Centre and The Victorian Network on Recreation and Disability (VICNORD) for providing central venues for each of the focus group interviews.

We would like to acknowledge Vichealth for without their support through the PICSAR program, we would not have been able to undertake this important research. We would also like to thank Aquatics & Recreation Victoria, a major partner of the Inclusive Leisure Initiative.

Data Analysis and Transcription

The focus group discussions were transcribed by Hullchester Pty Ltd. Transcription Services and analysed by Dr Kerrie Lante, Independent Consultant.

For More Information

A more detailed report providing a breakdown of the results per region, including stakeholder quotes and the focus group transcripts can be obtained from The Victorian Network on Recreation and Disability (VICNORD) by emailing vicnord@advocacyhouse.org or calling (03) 9489 2999.

Key Terms

Interpretations of commonly used terms throughout this document are described below:

Stakeholders: People with a disability, who attended the Inclusive Leisure Initiative focus groups.

Physical Environment: Reference to a leisure centre's physical environment encompasses the following areas and aspects; reception, change rooms, dry and wet areas, overall appearance, signage, spacious layout and the external premises including the car park.

Accessible: In the context of this document, accessibility relates to; visual and audio aids, large print, pictorial informational and directional signage, lighting, programs that cater for individuals of varying abilities as well as providing pathways to access mainstream programming, how easy it is to enter and exit the centre's facilities or amenities, adaptability of equipment, spacing between equipment in the gymnasium, and accessible (disability) car parking.

Easy to read signage: This relates to signs that are simple, clear, large print, bold and have few words with pictorial additions.

Adequate Spacing: This term is in reference to there being enough room for patrons in wheelchairs to move around gymnasium equipment, yet equipment not being spaced too far apart so patrons that use frames or walking sticks can move from one apparatus to another without requiring additional support.

Compic: A way to convey information through clear and easily understood drawings

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. The initiative endeavours to create a one stop shop for information, guidelines and good practice for the leisure industry and provide leisure centres and associated professionals with tools and resources to develop inclusive sites.

In order to meet the needs of people with a disability, consultations with stakeholders occurred through focus group discussions. In May 2008, 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.

This report provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations of stakeholders. Future directions are provided to aid leisure centres in taking some initial steps towards providing an inclusive leisure centre environment.

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 need to take further steps towards becoming inclusive.

1. LEISURE CENTRE USERS

The focus groups with stakeholders who had reported using leisure centres explored concepts including how people with disabilities find out about leisure centres; why people with disabilities go to leisure centres; and how leisure centres can encourage people with disabilities to participate at their centres.

1.1 Concept: Finding out about Leisure Centres

1.1.1 How stakeholders enquire about the services of leisure centres

“...I found it better to meet with an instructor face to face rather than on the phone so if you ring them up and say I’m a disabled person, can I come and have a look at your gym they say no...”

When enquiring about the services of leisure centres and their services stakeholders reported receiving a greater degree of satisfaction from visiting a centre in person, in comparison to speaking with a staff member on the phone. Stakeholders suggested face to face contact aided in staff understanding a patron’s disability and their needs. Stakeholders felt a strong need for staff training to

increase the overall awareness of disability and how to relate this to the leisure centre environment. While some stakeholders initiated contact with a centre, significant others, including caregivers played an important role in introducing stakeholders to a leisure centre.

1.2 Concept: Why go to a Leisure Centre?

1.2.1 Why stakeholders started to attend leisure centres

“I started putting on weight and couldn’t do what I used to do and didn’t feel good about it.”

Stakeholders reported that general fitness, exercise, health and weight management were why they 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 a significant individual (health professionals, caregivers or staff from a disability organisation) in their life.

1.2.2 Why stakeholders return to leisure centres

“I feel much better – I don’t feel as stressed.”

“...you also have a bit of a social catch up.”

Stakeholder’s health remained an important factor in why they continued to attend leisure centres. Mobility was an essential component of maintaining health. In addition, psychological and psychosocial health were reasons stakeholders continued to attend leisure centres. The positive impact of a fitness instructor was mentioned as to why one stakeholder still attended a leisure centre.

1.2.3 Why stakeholders have changed or stopped attending leisure centres

“...you have times when you get sick and you can’t use it so you’re still paying for it and you can’t go.”

Expense, proximity to the home or workplace and customer service 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. 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.

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.

1.2.4 Experiences that have discouraged stakeholders from attending leisure centres

“I’ve been standing on the treadmill and I’ve been putting the level up and I’m not sure what the level up means and what it’s doing to my program and I’ve never been able to ask a gym staff member person...other than the person at the reception desk, who doesn’t know.”

Negative experiences, including accessibility, lack of respect and poor customer service were related. Stakeholders believed many of their experiences were associated with staff’s lack of general knowledge and training about people with disabilities. The importance of a welcoming entrance with adequate signage or the presence of an information desk was discussed. First impressions have impacted on individual experiences and decisions to continue to attend a centre. The importance of the leisure centres physical environment, the need for easy to read signage, adequate accessible parking, sufficient lighting in gymnasium areas and the need for sufficient spacing around equipment in gyms were also discussed.

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.

1.2.5 Why stakeholders continued to attend leisure centres

“...the environment and the friends you make and what you actually do there feels good.”

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.

1.3 Concept: How Leisure Centre's can encourage people with disabilities

1.3.1 Stakeholder's beliefs on how to encourage people with disabilities

"... a lot more advertising is needed... a lot of gyms they have some advertising but most is for able bodied people... but also I'd like to know whether the staff have any experience whatsoever as to how to help..."

The need for advertising materials targeted towards people with disabilities was spoken about. There was no preference over print or electronic advertising however it was expressed that advertising materials needed to be clear, easy to read and include not only information on location and programs offered, but if staff had disability awareness training, if a disability officer is on site, the leisure centre's off peak times and accessibility. Stakeholders firmly believed that some staff needed to have undertaken disability awareness training.

Within the leisure centre it was suggested that the physical environment and its accessibility, along with the staff's customer service skills could be improved. Stakeholders suggested various low cost solutions to some accessibility issues. Suggestions included removing cosmetic hazards (i.e. pot plants) from walkways, utilising materials such as coloured tape to place on the end of handlebars on gymnasium equipment and adequate spacing between equipment. It was also expressed centres need adequate and ample equipment freely available, sufficient amounts of accessible parking close to the entrance and a drop off/pick up area. The need for large, bold and clear signage was also expressed.

1.3.2 Becoming aware of unknown programs at leisure centres

“You could say do one area of induction which could cover all the different areas but then you could have the open day option ... and something to take away so you can then refer back to it.”

Focus groups indicated that after the initial induction or familiarisation areas of a leisure centre not utilised by stakeholders become 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 a take home, instructional DVD. 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 active and using such a community facility, an orientation to all areas of the centre, examples of how to use the equipment and ways to adapt an activity. It was expressed that

ongoing familiarisations need to focus on only one program or area of the centre at a time. To avoid segregation and promote numbers it was felt that sessions need to be offered to not only people with disabilities, but new members or other groups (i.e. older adults) that would also benefit from such a session. Stakeholders also expressed the desire for a disability officer or trained staff member to be available to assist individuals to orientate to an area, service or program as required.

1.3.3 Support and equipment

“..just someone to show you how to use the equipment and a sign on the next one to show you how to use the next one [piece of equipment].”

It was expressed that many people with disabilities require the assistance of a personal trainer to enable them to get the most out of attending a leisure centre, however, the added expense is prohibitive. Recognising this may be difficult to overcome, stakeholders commented that improvements in the level of customer service and the use of audio (i.e. cd's) and visual (i.e. easy to read posters) aids explaining how equipment works may be a comparable solution. The desires for mainstream or disability specific programs were raised with opinions varying. Stakeholders commented that when disability classes were offered, people with disabilities can be made to feel uncomfortable and staff discourage participation in mainstream sessions. Consensus was 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 in the activity.

1.3.4 How leisure centres can become disability friendly

“Training and understanding.”

Throughout the focus groups it was expressed that if 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 attending a leisure centre. It was expressed this could be overcome through disability awareness training. 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.

2. LEISURE CENTRE NON-USERS

The focus groups with stakeholders who had reported not using, only occasionally or in the past but no longer using leisure centres, from metropolitan and rural regions, explored concepts including awareness of leisure centres; leisure centre experiences; information availability; reasons to attend a leisure centre; and how leisure centres can encourage people with disabilities to attend their centre.

2.1 Concept: What do you know about the activities and opportunities at Leisure Centres?

2.1.1 Awareness of leisure centres

“There also needs to be the flexibility and training of staff in the general activities so that they know how to program the people that might need a slight variation”

Focus group results indicated that stakeholders were aware that leisure centres included swimming pools and gymnasiums. Many were unaware if these facilities were accessible. Knowledge of centres also focused around the lack of disability awareness, the need for training of staff and the cost of attending a centre.

2.2 Concept: Leisure Centre experiences

2.2.1 Past experiences

“...they show you what they think you can use and put a program together for you and then that’s it you’re on your own.”

Dominating the conversation were issues around accessibility and how a lack of customer service discourages patrons to return to a leisure centre. Examples included poor staff attitudes, a lack of respect, an unwillingness to provide advice, staff’s unprofessional approach, and a lack of knowledge of how to work with people with disabilities. 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. Some stakeholders expressed opposing views, reporting that

they had found staff friendly and approachable, thus enhancing their experience.

2.2.2 Why stakeholders did not continue to attend leisure centres

“...I felt uncomfortable and there wasn’t anybody that was approachable...”

The main contributing factor as to why stakeholders did not go to or make return visits to a leisure centre was because of the level of customer service received. Examples included not knowing who to ask for assistance, being shown little or no respect and staff not being available to ask for assistance. Having the confidence to approach staff for advice was seen as important, however was lacking for stakeholders. It was also reported that the added cost of attending a centre restricted visits altogether or to only occasionally. Discussions revealed that the added cost is borne from the notion that people with disabilities must have a personal trainer, imposed either by the leisure centre or the individual’s own feelings and beliefs. Initiatives to reduce costs including the companion card were mentioned, however it was expressed by one stakeholder that this is not a solution for all people with disabilities as many are not eligible for a companion card. Other factors reported to hinder stakeholders’ return to a centre were accessibility and a degree of anxiety, due to feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable and intimidated when at a centre.

2.3 Concept: Information Availability

2.3.1 Obtaining information about leisure centres

“... there needs to be more education on this... whether it’s advertising in the newspaper or school newsletters.”

Focus groups revealed people with disabilities and their caregivers need greater knowledge and education about the facilities available at leisure centres. 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. The desire for personal contact came through strongly in the rural region with stakeholders mentioning centre advertising, information nights and contact with a disability officer as a preferred way to be informed. 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 centres. 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.

2.4 Concept: Reasons to attend a Leisure Centre

2.4.1 Encouraging stakeholders to attend leisure centres

“Well for me I just want to be – I want the staff to be understandable and a bit more straightforward.”

Stakeholders believed they would be encouraged to return to leisure centres if they had a greater understanding of what to expect before attending a centre, had access to a variety of facilities and made social contacts at the centre. It was expressed that the presence of a disability officer or availability of a trained staff member to talk to and

ask for advice or assistance would not only assist participants in feeling more comfortable but reduce the need for a personal trainer and hence the cost. The need for improved customer service skills, including approachability, communication, and having a greater awareness of patrons' needs and approaching them to provide advice or assistance were also important factors raised. Stakeholders indicated improved customer service would assist patrons with a disability to feel safe, thus encouraging them to return to a leisure centre.

2.4.2 Support and equipment required

“...he'll [a particular staff member] come over and say 'you can do more than that – c'mon' and encourages me along which is really good but he only works a certain amount of days ... and I'll go to the gym if he's working.”

Sharing from past experiences and their own perceptions, stakeholders shared how approachable, attentive staff that openly offer advice and assistance will help them feel comfortable and safe, therefore wanting to return to a leisure centre. The desire for centres to have a person with experience with disabilities 'floating' around, whether a disability officer or trained staff member, were reinforced throughout the discussion. In addition to improvements in customer service, the need for enhanced and accessible physical environments, including the accessibility and cleanliness of change rooms and accessible toilets were raised.

2.5 Concept: How Leisure Centres can encourage people with disabilities

2.5.1 Stakeholder's beliefs on how to encourage people with disabilities

“To get people in and to get people comfortable with the centre, it's got to be tackled by the staff and some training but it also needs to become a more inclusive entity itself.”

Focus groups revealed leisure centres needed to improve on customer service skills and accessibility. Stakeholders expressed that upon entering leisure centres they can feel lost or vulnerable. It was thought that adequate, easy to read signage indicating the direction to the various facilities or an information desk would overcome this. Improved accessibility also covered the need for increased accessible car-parking, shelters to and from car-parks, improvement with signage and in some instances removal of hazards such as pot plants from the front entrance, through to adequate spacing around equipment in gymnasiums.

The focus groups also revealed that people with disabilities would be encouraged to attend centres if staff had undergone disability awareness training or if a disability officer was available. Also important was the need for extended or ongoing familiarisation sessions, improved physical environment, for example signage, and if there was a choice between mainstream and non mainstream classes or programs. Opinions varied over the type of programs centres should offer. Some stakeholders indicated the desire to engage in mainstream programs and classes and others wished to have a choice between mainstream and non mainstream (disability specific) programs and classes. Overall a greater number of individuals indicated their preference for specific disability programs.

2.5.2 Information required by stakeholders before attending leisure centres

“Just to know exactly what they have and what they offer as a program...”

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 available. More specific information about programs including if there were gender, disability or age specific groups and any type of support available was required. It was also felt that an awareness of facilities including accessible toilets, change and cafeteria areas and their physical accessibility would be beneficial. The importance of knowing if staff had undergone disability awareness training was also expressed by stakeholders.

2.5.3 How stakeholders find out about becoming involved at leisure centres

“There is access for all disabilities officer ... she used to send it [information] out ... and you use to be able to ring her...”

Noteworthy was the suggestion that leisure centres need to liaise more closely with 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 were

also seen as an important source of information. Print media were the preferred, however not the only method for information to be received. The importance of print media being in an accessible format was discussed. Consensus was that print materials need to be clear, simple, easy to read and include as few words as possible with compic type pictures. One stakeholder highlighted the need for leisure centres to be aware of the needs of a wide range of people and have materials in a variety of formats, reminding the focus group that not everyone can read.

2.5.4 How leisure centres can become disability friendly

“...first off the cleanliness, the friendly staff – approachable, directions to where the toilets..., the showers..., the change rooms are, even if they had a little café or something.”

Focus group discussions revealed that for leisure centres to encourage people with disabilities that do not commonly attend centres, improvements in customer service are required. It was felt that staff lack in providing support to patrons. Stakeholders raised the need for staff to be friendly, approachable, and willing to assist patrons with a disability when required. It was felt staff need to show greater understanding of disability and how to, where necessary adapt so that needs of individuals are met. Stakeholders believed these steps would make patrons with a disability feel more comfortable, confident and safe in using equipment or partaking in various programs offered by leisure centres. Accessibility and affordability was also raised as factors leisure centres need to consider. Many stakeholders expressed that with their often limited income the cost of membership is just too expensive.

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 this population 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 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 facilities of leisure centres.

Disability Awareness Training. The industry needs to raise staff's awareness of disability and how to work effectively with this population. Various levels of staff within leisure centres, from a management level, trainers, to reception 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. It is important that this training is updated at regular intervals.

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 attend 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 do not become hazards for patrons with sight disabilities 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.

Accessibility of leisure centres extend to the outside of the vicinity. Sufficient accessible parking spaces close to the entrance of centres need to be provided, a drop off and pick up point and the possibility of shelter from the carpark into the centre, protecting patrons from the rain and heat are factors that need to be considered. The overall accessibility and cleanliness of a centre are important aspects of inclusive environments that also need to be considered.