



## One of the world's most accessible buildings can be found right in the heart of Durham Region

By Jennifer Foden

If you were to drive by Abilities Centre, a non-profit organization in south Whitby, you may not know about its world-class reputation. The multi-award-winning 125,000-square-foot facility was lauded as the most accessible building in the world during the 2015 Pan American Games in Toronto. This accolade is thanks to its many accessible design features like handrails lining all the hallways and inner lane of the facility's track, colour-contrasted floors for people with low vision, tactile walking surfaces, wide automatic doors, ramps and elevator access to all levels, Braille, text, colour and icon signage, plus so much more. "This place is really a hub for trying to set an example of how all of Canada should be in terms of its inclusivity," says Michael Cvitkovic, president and chief executive officer of Abilities Centre. "So that's part of our opportunity here is to really become an incubator for the rest of the country."

And while the building is certainly a sports and fitness facility—there's three basketball courts, a 200-metre indoor track, cardio and free-weight areas, an in-house sports medicine clinic, children's playground, aerobics and fitness rooms and a range of gym equipment that folks of all abilities can work out with—they run plenty of arts and life skills programming, too. For instance, there's Project Search, a 10-month transition-to-work internship program for high school students with disabilities, and post-rehabilitation exercise and educational classes to support individuals recovering from stroke, brain injury and multiple sclerosis.

The facility, inspired by the vision of local accessibility champions and politicians Christine Elliot and the late Jim Flaherty, opened in 2012; and the impact is huge. Each year, Abilities Centre engages more than 100,000 people living with and without disabilities. "Yes, 22 per cent of people from Ontario identify as having a disability," says Cvitkovic. "But one of the things that really inspires us every single day is the fact that the entire community can participate here." Cvitkovic points to their fitness classes, where all staff are trained to run programming for anybody who wants to participate, whether they're in a wheelchair, walker, have an oxygen tank or don't have a disability.





“On any given day, you’ll find high-performance athletes here, parasport athletes here, Special Olympics athletes here, people with lived experiences in our day programs and seniors playing pickleball... it’s just a snapshot of what our society is.”

And Abilities Centre’s impact isn’t just for the staff—20 per cent of which have a disability—and local residents who frequent the facility. Not only do six organizations, like Neurochangers and Grandview Children’s Centre, have their offices here, but they have played host to events like Access IO, where 15 to 20 accessibility start-ups pitched their ideas to a room full of investors, an annual accessibility awards gala, plus the Parapan American Games, Ontario Parasport Games and next year’s Wheelchair Rugby Championships. “Durham Tourism’s Sport Durham team bid twice for the Ontario Parasport Games, once in 2019 and again in 2023. Both times Durham Region was chosen,” says Simon Gill, Director of Economic Development and Tourism at the Region of Durham. “Our success at hosting these games reflects our determination to promote accessibility, inclusion and collaboration in Durham Region.”

These events not only promote economic development in the area, but highlights Durham Region as a leader in accessibility. “We see this as an opportunity,” says Cvitkovic. “Not only for our own community, but to bring other communities here to set an example of what they could be one day as well.”

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at [durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities](https://durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities) and [IntelligentCommunity.org](https://IntelligentCommunity.org).

