

SPINAL MOBILITY EXERCISE PROGRAM

Program Overview

Since its launch in 2012, the Spinal Mobility Exercise Program has evolved through various forms, earning recognition along the way and serving more than 400 individuals with disabilities. As one of the only community-based adaptive fitness programs of its kind in New York City, it continues to provide a vital resource for people seeking long-term, inclusive exercise opportunities.

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program serves individuals with spinal cord injuries (SCI) and neuromuscular disabilities, providing a structured way to continue their progress after formal rehabilitation and to integrate exercise into their post-rehabilitation lives. Many people with disabilities face limited opportunities for physical activity once formal therapy ends, and as a result, often do not exercise enough to maintain their health and mobility. This program fills that critical gap by offering ongoing adaptive exercise opportunities designed to build strength, confidence, and independence.

Developed in collaboration with a team of clinicians, physical and occupational therapists with over forty years of combined experience in SCI and neuromuscular rehabilitation, the program is operated by Wheeling Forward, a 501(c)(3) organization. It draws upon a corps of volunteers from local physical therapy schools and the broader community, working side by side with participants to ensure individualized support and encouragement. The program takes place in a fully accessible space in New York City, empowering participants to learn effective exercise techniques, develop sustainable fitness habits, and incorporate greater physical activity into daily lives.

The Need

Individuals with disabilities often face significant barriers to maintaining an active lifestyle and accessing regular exercise opportunities in the community. Once formal rehabilitation ends, many lack consistent, affordable, and accessible options for physical activity, making it difficult to sustain progress or to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. In conversations with participants, several common challenges consistently emerge:

- Limited access to accessible fitness facilities or the high cost of memberships at those that do exist.
- Insufficient knowledge about how to safely use standard gym equipment or adapt exercises to meet needs.
- Lack of staff support for transfers or setup assistance, making participation unsafe or impractical.
- Feelings of exclusion in traditional fitness environments that are not designed for people with disabilities.
- Limited opportunities for peer connection, leaving individuals without the encouragement and shared motivation that come from exercising alongside others with similar experiences.

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program addresses these barriers by creating an inclusive, supportive environment where individuals can exercise safely, build confidence, and incorporate movement into everyday life.

Goals and Objectives

By offering access to equipment, professional clinicians, and support from trained volunteers, we hope to achieve the following objectives:

1. Educate individuals with disabilities on how to exercise properly;
2. Promote self-development, encourage sense of well-being, improved mood, and physical fitness;
3. Assist persons with integrating exercise into their daily routines with current infrastructure; and
4. Offer a supportive environment for persons with disabilities to meet and interact.

Recruitment / Target Population

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program serves individuals with disabilities who want to incorporate safe, regular exercise into their lives. The program especially focuses on those who have completed rehabilitation and seek to maintain or improve their health through community-based fitness. It welcomes participants who have limited access to adaptive exercise opportunities or are transitioning from long-term care into community life. This includes individuals living in nursing homes or group facilities, who often have few opportunities for physical

activity, and those from low-income or under-resourced communities, who face the greatest financial and environmental barriers to maintaining their health and independence.

Program Description

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program is run in eight-week sessions and led by professional therapist Lawrence Harding, MSPT. It combines group and individualized activities that engage trained volunteers and utilize proper adaptive equipment, all tailored to meet each participant's unique needs. The program focuses on providing clear, structured, and practical guidance to help individuals with disabilities safely integrate exercise into their daily lives.

A) Program Schedule

The program operates in several annual eight-week clinics, each consisting of weekly sessions. Every cycle includes 20-35 participants with disabilities. Each session emphasizes consistency, safety, and measurable progress toward personal fitness and wellness goals.

B) Our Team

The program is led by Lawrence Harding, MSPT, a licensed physical therapist with extensive experience working with individuals with paralysis and neuromuscular conditions. He is supported by a team of aides and volunteers who provide individualized instruction and adaptive training. Together, they help participants identify and address personal and environmental barriers that limit regular exercise.

C) Group Activities

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program fosters a community-centered environment where participants can connect, share experiences, and learn from one another. Group sessions combine structured exercise with peer interaction, encouraging participants to stay motivated, support one another, and gain confidence in maintaining an active lifestyle.

D) Proper Accessible Equipment

Participants train using appropriate adaptive fitness equipment under professional supervision, learning safe and effective techniques they can replicate in community or home settings. The program introduces adaptive strategies, equipment modifications, and practical tips that help participants build strength and independence through exercise.

E) Individualized Activity Program

A hallmark of the program is its personalized approach. Each participant collaborates with therapists to develop a custom exercise plan that aligns with their goals, abilities, and environment—whether that means exercising at home, at a local gym, or with adaptive sports programs. Through hands-on guidance, participants learn how to safely adapt exercises, track progress, and overcome barriers to consistent physical activity.

Unique Program Structure

The Spinal Mobility Exercise Program stands out for its highly individualized and supportive structure. Each participant receives a personalized assessment and exercise plan, ensuring that routines reflect their unique abilities and goals. With a nearly 1:1 aide-to-participant ratio, individuals receive continuous guidance from experienced clinicians, aides, or trained volunteers throughout every session. The program's clinical team brings over forty years of collective experience working with the SCI and neuromuscular community, providing a level of expertise rarely available in community-based exercise settings.

Spinal Mobility emphasizes practical strategies participants can continue at home or in community gyms. The program fosters an energetic, group-based environment that encourages peer motivation and connection while promoting independence. Participants also receive optional home exercise assessments and post-program access to team members for continued support—ensuring that the skills and confidence developed during the eight-week clinic translate into lasting, active lifestyles.