FOUNDER EDITORIAL

Gym Equipment Got a Touchscreen. Blind Members Lost a Button.

Accessibility law can require gyms to provide an accessible route to exercise equipment. But it does not necessarily require the equipment's controls to be independently usable by a blind person once they reach it. As the fitness industry replaces tactile buttons with touchscreen consoles, that distinction is becoming increasingly consequential.

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By Accibly Editorial Team · 12 min read

Executive Summary

In the United States, federal accessibility law requires gyms to give a disabled person a clear path to an exercise machine. It does not require the machine's buttons, screens, or controls to be usable once they arrive. The 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design regulate the accessible route and clear floor space around exercise equipment while explicitly exempting the equipment's own controls from the technical rules that govern operable parts elsewhere in a building. That distinction mattered less while most cardio machines used physical buttons and dials a blind or low vision user could learn by touch. The fitness industry's move toward flat touchscreen consoles is closing off that workaround, a pattern documented in dedicated usability research with blind and low

> vision gym users. A voluntary manufacturing standard exists to address exactly this, and federal legislation aimed at creating accessibility requirements for fitness equipment has been introduced repeatedly without being enacted. Meanwhile, at least one major chain has committed to deploying accessible strength equipment, not out of a legal requirement but following engagement with disability rights legal advocates, showing the barrier is solvable when someone has a reason to solve it. The throughline across all of it: fitness accessibility effort has concentrated on getting a disabled person to the equipment, not on what happens once they are standing in front of it.

The Part That's Already Solved

Walk into most gyms built or renovated in the United States after 2010, and the basics of physical access are, on paper, handled. Federal regulations under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act require an accessible route to at least one of each type of exercise machine, clear floor space beside it sized for a wheelchair, and enough turning room to get in and out of the area without an assist. These requirements come from a specific, citable source: Section 1004 of the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, published by the U.S. Department of Justice.

This is the part of gym accessibility that shows up in an architect's drawings, gets checked off during permitting, and is genuinely, meaningfully better than it was a generation ago. It answers a real question: can a disabled person get to the machine. It does not answer a different question, one this investigation is actually about: once they're there, can they run it themselves.

A Law That Never Asked the Second Question

Section 309 of the 2010 ADA Standards sets technical rules for "operable parts," the buttons, switches, and controls a person interacts with throughout a building: door handles, light switches, elevator panels. Those rules require controls to be reachable, operable with one hand, and usable without tight grasping, pinching, or twisting of the wrist.

Exercise machines and exercise equipment are explicitly carved out of that section. The Standards state plainly that exercise machines and equipment are not required to comply with Section 309 at all. A treadmill's speed buttons, an elliptical's resistance dial, a rowing machine's display: none of it is legally required to meet the same operability standard as a doorknob in the same building.

The result is a clear regulatory distinction: the Standards address whether a disabled person can reach the equipment, but Section 309 does not require the equipment's own controls to meet the same operability rules that apply to many other parts of a facility. Physical buttons and fixed controls can provide tactile reference points that some blind and low vision users learn by touch. As those controls are replaced by flat touchscreens, that informal workaround can disappear even though the underlying legal requirements have not changed.

The Workaround Is Disappearing

The clearest documented evidence of this specific pattern, not proof that it applies to every gym everywhere, comes from a UK study jointly conducted by the consumer research charity Rica, Thomas Pocklington Trust, and Metro Blind Sport. Researchers tested treadmills, exercise bikes, cross trainers, and rowing machines with twenty blind and partially sighted participants, backed by three focus groups and twenty individual interviews, fieldwork conducted in 2017. Twenty participants in one country is a real but modest sample, and the research is now roughly a decade old. It should be read as evidence of a specific, documented usability pattern among the gym users this study

actually reached, not as proof that every modern touchscreen gym console is inaccessible everywhere. With that scale and age stated plainly, the finding is still worth taking seriously because the interface change it documents, replacing tactile physical controls with touchscreens, directly affects the method some blind and low vision users relied on to operate equipment independently.

The researchers' description of that trend is blunt: the rise of the touchscreen on cardio equipment amounts to a step backwards in accessibility for the visually impaired gym users they studied. A physical button has a fixed location and a tactile edge. A touchscreen interface does not. Swapping one for the other removes the exact workaround that had been quietly compensating for the ADA's operable parts exemption.

The same research is specific about what would close the gap: voice output and screen reader style audio guidance, wireless connectivity to a phone or headphones, adjustable font size for anyone with usable but limited vision, tactile buttons instead of flat glass, and high contrast displays. Metro Blind Sport's director, Roy Smith, connected the fix to a technology his members were already using elsewhere: voice assistants like Amazon Echo and Google Home had shown what an audio first interface could do, and gym equipment had not caught up to it.

It is worth being precise about who this evidence speaks to. The documented barrier here is specifically about blind and low vision users and equipment interface design, in the population this one study reached. Evidence for other groups, wheelchair users navigating equipment layout, Deaf and hard of hearing members in group fitness classes, people with cognitive or dexterity differences using multi step digital consoles, exists but is thinner in the primary research this investigation was able to locate. That is a real limit on how far this finding generalizes, not a reason to overstate it.

A Standard Nobody Has to Follow

A fix already exists on paper. ASTM International, the standards body behind widely used specifications in construction and consumer products, publishes F3021, the Standard Specification for Universal Design of Fitness Equipment for Inclusive Use by Persons with Functional Limitations and Impairments, alongside a companion testing standard, F3022. It sets real design requirements: compatibility with wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, prosthetics, and communication devices, plus specific color contrast requirements relevant to low vision users, and it covers commercial fitness equipment intended for indoor use by people age 13 and up.

The catch is in the word "standard." ASTM specifications are voluntary unless a regulator or a law adopts them by reference, and neither the ADA nor its implementing regulations currently do that for fitness equipment. A manufacturer can build to F3021 as a selling point. Nothing requires them to.

Legislators have tried to close that gap directly. The Exercise and Fitness for All Act would direct the U.S. Access Board to develop accessibility guidelines for exercise equipment and would establish a path toward federal implementation. Versions of the proposal have been introduced repeatedly across multiple Congresses without being enacted. Recent versions include H.R. 4561 in the 116th Congress, H.R. 4756 and S. 2504 in the 117th Congress, and H.R. 10560 and S. 4782 in the 118th Congress. The repeated introductions show that lawmakers and disability advocates have identified equipment accessibility as a policy problem for years while the underlying federal requirements for exercise equipment have remained unchanged.

What Happens When Someone Decides to Go Further

The clearest proof that equipment level access is achievable, not a permanent technical ceiling, comes from Planet Fitness. In September 2021, the chain announced a commitment, developed with the Coalition for Inclusive Fitness, whose members include Paralyzed Veterans of America, the National Council on Independent Living, and the American Council of the

Blind, to expand accessible strength equipment across its footprint: in all new locations going forward, and in existing clubs as approved inclusive commercial equipment becomes available and franchise owners replace current machines. The centerpiece was an inclusive dual cable machine that lets a person perform multiple exercises from a seated position, including from a wheelchair, without transferring to a separate seat.

It matters where this commitment came from. It followed engagement with Disability Rights Advocates, a nonprofit legal center that has litigated equipment access cases, not a purely voluntary corporate initiative undertaken with no external pressure. That context does not make the outcome less real: real accessible equipment exists and is being installed under a real, named commitment. It does mean the honest version of this story is "achievable when there is a reason to act, and rolling out in phases," not "solved everywhere, immediately."

Outside the United States

Accibly does not treat U.S. law as a global default, and the gap documented here is not a uniquely American one, even though the clearest legal citation for it is American.

In the United Kingdom, the relevant law is the Equality Act 2010, which imposes a duty on gyms, as service providers, to make "reasonable adjustments" so a disabled person is not placed at a substantial disadvantage. Section 20 covers this duty, including physical features. Critically, the UK's framework does not contain an equipment specific technical exemption comparable to the ADA's Section 309 carve out; it is built around a general, anticipatory "reasonable adjustments" standard instead, applied case by case rather than through a fixed technical checklist. That is a different kind of gap from the American one: not a codified exemption, but enforcement that depends heavily on individual complaint and interpretation, with far less specific guidance for what a compliant treadmill console actually

looks like. The Rica and Thomas Pocklington Trust research documented earlier, notably, comes out of exactly this UK regulatory environment, and its findings should be read as evidence of the practical outcome that framework has produced so far, not as evidence about ADA compliant equipment.

This investigation did not find evidence sufficient to rank the U.S. and UK approaches by member outcomes. A jurisdiction by jurisdiction comparison of fitness equipment accessibility law is outside this piece's evidence base. The UK research is useful here for a narrower reason: it documents touchscreen usability barriers for blind and partially sighted gym users under a different legal framework, showing that the design problem is not confined to the wording of U.S. accessibility standards.

What the Evidence Actually Supports

None of this evidence supports a claim that fitness facilities are broadly or uniformly inaccessible. The entry level requirements this piece opened with are real and codified in the U.S., and Planet Fitness's committed inclusive equipment shows that equipment specific improvement is genuinely underway, not merely theoretical. The accurate, defensible claim is narrower and more specific: for blind and low vision gym members in particular, the industry's shift toward touchscreen equipment consoles is actively working against a legal and design framework that already left equipment operability unaddressed, and the tools that could close that specific gap, a voluntary manufacturing standard and legislation introduced repeatedly without passing, both exist without either one currently having force.

That is a design and policy story, not a story about any individual gym's intentions. A facility can meet every applicable accessibility law and still hand a blind member a machine they cannot operate without help, because the law was never written to prevent that outcome. Closing the remaining gap requires manufacturers to build to a standard that currently has no legal teeth,

or lawmakers to give it some, or enough gyms to decide, the way Planet Fitness did, that reachable was never actually the same thing as usable.

Key Findings

KEY FINDINGS

The 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design require gyms to provide an accessible route and clear floor space to exercise machines, but explicitly exempt exercise machines and equipment from Section 309's technical requirements for operable parts.

A 2017 UK study from Rica, Thomas Pocklington Trust, and Metro Blind Sport, testing twenty blind and partially sighted participants on real cardio equipment, found that the industry's shift to touchscreen consoles represented a step backwards in accessibility for the users it studied, a specific documented pattern rather than a universal claim about all gym equipment.

ASTM International's F3021 standard defines real, specific universal design requirements for fitness equipment, but remains entirely voluntary because no regulator has adopted it by reference.

The Exercise and Fitness for All Act, which would create federal accessibility requirements affecting exercise equipment and fitness services, has been introduced repeatedly across multiple Congresses without being enacted.

Planet Fitness's September 2021 commitment to accessible strength equipment, developed with the Coalition for Inclusive Fitness, followed engagement with disability rights legal advocates and is rolling out in phases (new locations, plus existing-club replacement as approved equipment becomes available), not a purely voluntary initiative completed all at once.

The United Kingdom's Equality Act 2010 addresses gym accessibility through a general, anticipatory "reasonable adjustments" duty rather than a codified technical exemption like the ADA's, a structurally different legal approach that has not produced clearly different practical outcomes in the equipment research this investigation reviewed.

Evidence

Evidence Reviewed

6 statements support this investigation, drawn from 6 sources.

KEY EVIDENCE

VERIFIED · September 15, 2010

The 2010 ADA Standards require an accessible route and clear floor space to at least one of each type of exercise machine (Section 1004.1), but exercise machines and equipment are explicitly exempted from Section 309's operable parts technical requirements. Source

VERIFIED · September 1, 2017

A 2017 study by Rica, Thomas Pocklington Trust, and Metro Blind Sport tested cardio equipment with 20 blind and partially sighted participants, plus 3 focus groups and 20 interviews, and found the shift to touchscreen consoles represented a step backwards in accessibility for the users studied. Source

VERIFIED

ASTM F3021 is a real, published voluntary specification setting universal design requirements for inclusive fitness equipment, including mobility/communication device compatibility and color contrast, for commercial equipment used by people age 13 and up. Source

VERIFIED · December 24, 2024

The Exercise and Fitness for All Act has been introduced in the U.S. House and/or Senate across at least three Congresses (116th: H.R.4561; 117th: H.R.4756/S.2504; 118th: H.R.10560/S.4782) without being enacted. Source

VERIFIED · September 21, 2021

Planet Fitness announced a commitment in September 2021, developed with the Coalition for Inclusive Fitness following engagement with Disability Rights Advocates, to add accessible strength equipment to new locations and, over time, existing clubs. Source

View all 6 evidence items

Analysis

> *The consistent pattern across the regulatory history, the UK research, and the voluntary standards landscape is that accessible fitness design effort has concentrated on the journey to the equipment rather than the interaction with it. That is a defensible starting point for accessibility law generally: unreachable equipment is a strictly worse problem than equipment that is reachable but only partly operable, and there is a real argument that regulators addressed the more urgent gap first. But since the 2010 Standards were finalized, and since ASTM F3021 was first developed, the second gap has not closed on its own, and the touchscreen shift documented in the UK research is actively widening it for one specific, studied group, blind and low vision users, faster than any voluntary standard or unpassed bill is closing it. The Planet Fitness case shows the gap is not a hard technical ceiling; it shows it is a prioritization problem that responds to pressure, whether legal, regulatory, or competitive.*

Industry Impact

For equipment manufacturers, Section 309 does not impose its operable parts requirements on exercise machines and equipment. ASTM F3021 therefore remains a voluntary design standard rather than a federal requirement under that provision. Legislation aimed at creating federal accessibility requirements for exercise equipment has been introduced repeatedly across multiple Congresses. Operators that wait for a legal mandate before evaluating equipment accessibility risk responding only after regulation, litigation, or changing member expectations make the issue harder to ignore.

Practical Takeaways

Meeting ADA Section 1004's route and floor space requirements is necessary but not sufficient for genuine equipment accessibility; it says nothing about whether a member can operate the machine once they reach it.

Touchscreen console upgrades should be evaluated for accessibility loss, not just feature gain; replacing tactile buttons with glass can remove an existing, if unofficial, accessibility workaround even when no law required it to exist.

ASTM F3021 compliance is a genuine, checkable purchasing criterion operators can specify to equipment manufacturers today, without waiting for it to become legally mandatory.

Disabled members' own reported experience, not just architectural compliance checklists, is the evidence base that actually surfaces console level and interaction level barriers.

Recommended Actions

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

When evaluating a facility's accessibility, assess equipment operability separately from route and space compliance; the two are legally distinct and a facility can pass one while failing the other entirely.

When sourcing new cardio or strength equipment, request the manufacturer's ASTM F3021 conformance documentation directly, since compliance is voluntary and not guaranteed by default.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does the ADA require gym equipment itself to be accessible?

It requires an accessible route and clear floor space to reach the equipment. It explicitly does not require the equipment's own controls to meet the accessibility standard used elsewhere in the building; exercise machines are named exceptions to that rule.

Is there any accessibility standard that does cover equipment controls?

Yes. ASTM F3021 sets real design requirements for inclusive fitness equipment, including contrast and compatibility with mobility and communication devices. It is voluntary, and no regulator currently requires manufacturers to follow it.

Has any gym chain actually addressed this?

Planet Fitness committed in 2021 to accessible strength equipment in new locations and, over time, in existing clubs, following engagement with disability rights legal advocates. It is a real, named commitment with real installed equipment, rolling out in phases rather than completed everywhere at once.

Source Appendix

1. U.S. Department of Justice, 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, Section 1004 (Exercise Machines and Equipment) and Section 309 (Operable Parts)
   ada.gov
2. ASTM International, F3021 Standard Specification for Universal Design of Fitness Equipment for Inclusive Use by Persons with Functional Limitations and Impairments
   astm.org
3. ASTM International, "Two New Standards for Inclusive Fitness Equipment Approved by ASTM International"
   astm.org
4. Congress.gov, H.R.4561, Exercise and Fitness for All Act, 116th Congress
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5. Congress.gov, H.R.10560, Exercise and Fitness for All Act, 118th Congress
   congress.gov
6. Congress.gov, S.4782, Exercise and Fitness for All Act of 2024, 118th Congress
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7. Congress.gov, H.R.4756, Exercise and Fitness for All Act, 117th Congress
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8. Congress.gov, S.2504, Exercise and Fitness for All Act of 2021, 117th Congress
   congress.gov
9. Office of Representative Mark DeSaulnier, press release on the Exercise and Fitness for All Act
   desaulnier.house.gov
10. American Council of the Blind, "Call to Action: Exercise and Fitness for All Act"
    acb.org

11. Thomas Pocklington Trust, "Fitness equipment isn't fit for us, say visually impaired gym users" (reporting on Rica/Thomas Pocklington Trust/Metro Blind Sport research, fieldwork July to September 2017)
pocklington.org.uk

12. Disability Rights Advocates, "Planet Fitness, Home of the Judgement Free Zone, and the Coalition for Inclusive Fitness, Announce Accessible Exercise Equipment Commitment"
dralegal.org

13. Disability Rights Advocates, case page, Planet Fitness
dralegal.org

14. legislation.gov.uk, Equality Act 2010, Section 20 (Duty to Make Adjustments)
legislation.gov.uk

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