

2018 Recreation and Conservation Leadership Summit

Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society and
Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

The Status of Community Health and Wellness in Pennsylvania

As Pennsylvanians of all ages continue “to face serious health issues, including rising rates of chronic disease, an increased prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, and poor nutrition habits”, local park and recreation agencies can offer crucial, affordable, and accessible wellness opportunities for all (NRPA, n.d.-b). Supporting research that links healthy living with abundant access to parks and recreation is very strong, and documents diverse value-added benefits to the healthcare community. In a nationwide study conducted by National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), frequent park users were more likely to report high levels of self-rated health than non-frequent users—even after controlling for socio-economic/demographic characteristics and park proximity. Likewise, those who participated in organized recreation programs sponsored by local parks and recreation were more likely to report high self-rated health than non-participants (Pitas et al., 2017).

In Pennsylvania, several health relationships have been identified in the 2014 research for the state’s Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). For example, 73 percent of a statewide sample of Pennsylvanians agreed that parks, trails, and open space are an essential element of the healthcare system. This result indicates widespread belief in parks as a solution to contemporary health challenges facing society (Mowen et al., 2017). Regarding local park and recreation services in Pennsylvania, an estimate from the SCORP’s economic report indicated that the total health cost savings attributable to outdoor recreation at local or county parks (excluding indoor recreation, and youth activity) exceeds \$275 million (Mowen, Graefe, Elmendorf, & Barrett, 2015).

Pennsylvania municipal parks and recreation departments most readily identify with the promotion of physical health and wellness. Emerging trends include health and wellness fairs and community-wide initiatives. An example of a successful community-wide initiative is Willistown Township’s GoWilma! program that blends a youth summer reading program with hiking in various parks in Chester County. The Lancaster Recreation Commission’s Red Tornado program offers free and reduced fee sports to its resident: in 2016 nearly 5,000 children participated and \$75,000 in scholarships were distributed. The Centred Outdoors program, a partnership between the ClearWater Conservancy and over a dozen local non-profits and state agencies, acts as the Centre Region’s answer to Mount Nittany Health’s 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment. Centred Outdoors goals include battling chronic disease and improving mental health through guided outdoor adventures; the program has helped over 2,000 participants lead happier and healthier lives. The WalkWorks program, a collaboration between the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, seeks to increase opportunities for physical activity through community-based walking routes and walking groups. Communities in rural counties such as Blair, McKean, Monroe, Schuylkill, and Tioga have developed 30 fun, fact-filled walking routes and adopted five plans or policies that include language in support of environmental changes for enhancing places for physical activity with an emphasis on walking. Trail use continues to grow, and park and recreation leaders view them as vital

components of the health and wellness system, and are working to incorporate them into future planning efforts.

Obesity

Pennsylvania park and recreation agencies stand at the forefront in addressing the rising tide of obesity. As owner-operators of free public parks, trails, and facilities, we are uniquely positioned to help residents address this issue. Obesity was identified at the 2010 Leadership Summit as a key problem facing Pennsylvanians. After two decades of consistent increases, the percentage of residents who are overweight or obese has plateaued at 64 percent, when analyzing 2011-2016 (*CDC, 2016*). While this information is available at the state and county levels, most local municipalities do not know their obesity statistics or trends nor understand its need or potential impacts. At the national health care system level, the definition of obesity is changing. The shift is towards a more holistic approach to the problem, seeking to understand mental and emotional health challenges as contributing factors in obesity. Park and recreation agencies should continue to educate, motivate, and promote healthy living through vibrant programming and clean, safe, and accessible parks and trails.

Out-of-School-Time

Park and recreation agencies have been successful in providing wonderful out-of-school-time (OST) activities to youth in Pennsylvania. Nationally, more than 10.2 million youth attend an OST program daily (Colman, 2018). More specifically, many OST activities also serve to provide and promote healthy snacking options for those who otherwise would go without proper nutritive foods. In fact, “park and recreation agencies are the largest public provider of healthy meals and snacks to children outside of schools” (NRPA, n.d.-c). In 2014, NRPA launched Commit to Health, a campaign devoted to creating healthier OST programs in local parks and recreation. The Health Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) standards were created to provide evidence-based practices to support nutrition and physical activity children in grades K-12 attending OST programs (NRPA, n.d.-a). In Pennsylvania, Silver Spring Township has created a “culture of health” program at its summer camp that includes a turn-key curriculum for its camp staff that encourages children to eat better, be active and make better food and exercise choices. Associated cooking demonstrations give kids the tools to not only identify and taste fruits and vegetables, but incorporate them at home at mealtime. The Allentown Department of Parks and Recreation sponsors a fruit and veggie truck every summer, making weekly stops at all its playground sites. Many Pennsylvania school districts have wellness committees, with the goal of promoting wellness in their student populations. This could be an additional area of opportunity for community engagement and partnerships.

Park Prescriptions

People who walk, run, bike, and play outside are healthier. By partnering with health care professionals in a parks prescription program, recreation professionals can position their parks and programming as essential aspects of a well-rounded wellness lifestyle. This can include incentive-based programs that partner with local businesses and healthcare providers to offer prizes for taking part in healthy activities outside. Many parks and recreation departments have tried to begin a partnership with their local health care system. These partnerships are time and resource intensive, and results have been mixed. A state-wide partnership or templated resource may benefit local municipalities with limited resources to begin a parks prescription program. Similarly, an emerging trend towards corporate wellness programs and incentive-based health insurance policies presents another area to address community health and wellness. A family-centered method connects kids and families to their local parks through in-school and out-of-school activities and resource guides. Finally, a clinical model brings outdoor play into the

doctor's office, where integration with electronic health records allows healthcare providers to connect families with local park resources (DCNR, 2014).

Accessibility

While many park and recreation agencies have outstanding parks and facilities, accessibility is an issue facing many Pennsylvania municipalities. Communities built in the 1960s and 1970s continue to lack sidewalks or trail connected park systems. Compounding this problem is that Millennials, the largest American generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) are choosing to live in communities where municipal land uses are connected. "A survey by the American Planning Association found that more than half (56 percent) of Millennials desire to live in walkable communities with nearby amenities. Three times more Millennials, according to the survey, would rather live in a suburb with walkable amenities than a suburb where people drive most places" (Dutzik et al., 2014, p.25). Millennials aren't the only population group looking for outdoor connections. Pennsylvania has one of the largest 60+ populations in the country, who increasingly look for options to remain active, while aging in place. Communities lacking land use connectivity will need to address planning, zoning and walkability to meet the needs of current and future residents, who will be looking to live within a 10 minute walk to a park. Specifically, communities should be looking at their municipal land development ordinances to improve walkability through dedicated trail and park space requirements.

To address community accessibility and walkability, NRPA launched the "10-Minute Walk" campaign in 2014, with the intention of ensuring all Americans live close to a park. Additional outcomes include the promotion of long term healthy living lifestyles and obesity management. Within Pennsylvania, urban communities tend to have more accessible parks. Suburban communities, as noted above, are looking at long term solutions to noted connectivity deficiencies. Interestingly, it may not be feasible for rural Pennsylvania to apply this concept to their communities, given the distance between parks. NRPA's "Safe Routes to Parks" program has good resources available to help communities develop safer connections.

Addictions, Mental and Social Health

An emerging challenge for park and recreation agencies will be preparing for the new definition of community health and wellness that includes opioid addiction, mental health, and social isolation. Our profession's health and wellness vernacular has long focused on promoting physical wellness. While physical wellness remains of the utmost importance, the rising wave of drug addiction and highly visible school shootings challenges the park and recreation professional to understand socially taboo subjects and then allocate already stretched resources across new community needs. For 2018 Leadership Summit attendees, there was general agreement that the opioid epidemic was a serious problem, yet impacts in the state ranged from unseen to ever present. Of concern to the vast majority of parks staff was how to tackle cleaning up drug paraphernalia in public parks. For communities hit hardest by the opioid epidemic, the statistics are startling. In 2016 alone, 4,642 drug overdose related deaths were reported statewide, a 37 percent increase over 2015 (DEA Philadelphia Division & University of Pittsburgh, 2017). Moreover, public parks can become a haven for those battling with addiction as they offer "a free place to interact with other users, sell or use drugs, and even potentially hide from law enforcement" (Ibrahim & Cort, 2017). The rise of drug use in parks has created health and safety issues for other users as well, with many areas being littered with drug paraphernalia (Ibrahim & Cort, 2017). In Bristol Township for example, drug overdoses at playground sites have become so frequent, drug use deterrence has become a deciding factor in playground design, to include limiting places to hide, removal of tube slides, tube connectors and play panels.

Park and recreation departments can also affect positive change by supporting community efforts in advocacy and prevention. This can come in the form of offering meeting space, hosting Narcan training, giving community recovery groups off peak sports field time, as well as joining county level task forces. Jackie Dwyer, Executive Director for the Gettysburg Area Recreation Authority, sits on the Healthy Adams County Board of Directors. From this position of leadership, GARA is able to assist the Health Adams County opioid task force in a number of capacities.

Parks and recreational programming can also promote mental health well-being. In fact, “physician-diagnosed depression was 33 percent higher in the residential areas with the fewest green spaces, compared to the neighborhoods with the most” (NRPA, n.d.-d, p. 1). “People who lived in close proximity to natural space had significantly improved mental health even up to three years after their move” (NRPA, n.d.-d, p.1). While these numbers are impressive, many parks and recreation staff do not know how to identify or articulate perceived mental health benefits from current programming. Mental health training, similar to CPR training, may be beneficial at the state level.

Those suffering from decreased mental health may also suffer from feelings of social isolation and loneliness. As former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (2017) put it, “Loneliness is a growing health epidemic” in the United States, affecting “people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds.” Seniors with mobility issues may feel disconnected from those around them, and children spending endless hours on social media may not be developing impactful connections to their communities. In a recent study, 46 percent of Americans reported sometimes or always feeling alone (Cigna, 2018). Taking it one step further, feeling isolated negatively affects our health, in fact, “loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it even more dangerous than obesity” says Douglas Nemecek, MD, Cigna’s chief medical officer for behavioral health (Tate, 2018) Park and recreation programming can encourage meaningful social interaction and foster friendships through activities, social clubs, sports and community-wide events. In addition, communities can incorporate “town square” concepts into future facility planning to encourage social interactions.

Technology

Technology today is not a part of our lives; it is a part of *everything* in our lives. While smart devices help us live efficiently in numerous ways, the amount of time spent glued to our phones is problematic. School-aged children today spend an average of seven hours in front of a screen (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). It is not surprising then, that these children are more likely to be overweight, experience social development delays, inhibited sleep patterns, exercise less, and make poor food choices. But it is not enough to simply reduce screen time; to be healthy, kids need to be physically active (Towe, 2018). As park and recreation agencies, the dilemma is harnessing the power of technology and screen time in positive ways, to elevate the health of our communities. The most successful example to date was the Pokémon Go phenomenon, which organically thrust millions of kids out into parks and public spaces and set their daily step counts ablaze.

While technology can be problematic in ways, it may also serve as catalyst to solve an ever present problem in the field of parks and recreation – quantifying impacts. Less than half of all departments currently track park use. When completed, this generally comes in the form of tracking numbers in fitness classes or car counts at special events, but no further analysis as to what those numbers mean. While all departments acknowledge the need for more insightful and comprehensive statistics, most simply do not have the manpower, time or financial resources to meet the need. The SOPARC (System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities), an iPad-based free application, may help to address

this issue. It tracks exercise intensity, gender and age with a user friendly format that can utilized to quantify health benefits.

Park and recreation agencies have a wonderful mission—to make the lives of Pennsylvania residents wonderful, memorable, and healthy. How will you make that happen over the next ten years?

Local/Regional Strategies

1. **Health Assessments.** Identify and analyze local and regional community health assessments for applicability within your department (obesity, OST/healthy foods, opioid use, parks prescription programs).
2. **Connectivity & Compliance.** Examine your current built environment for trail connectivity, accessibility and compliance with NRPA's "Ten-Minute Walk" to a park initiative (accessibility, built environment).
3. **Education.** Educate park maintenance staff regarding drug paraphernalia clean up BMPs and partner with doctors, hospitals or community organizers in drug use prevention efforts (opioid use, mental health).
4. **Gap Assessments.** Identify gaps in healthy food accessibility in your community and develop partnerships to address shortcomings (OST, healthy foods).
5. **Tech Programming.** Develop programs that utilize technology in an immersive, physically active platform as well as "tech-off" programming (technology).
6. **Diversify Expertise.** Recruit a pediatrician or healthcare provider to serve on your local Parks and Recreation Board within five years.
7. **Measurement Tools.** Develop quantifiable measurement tools to communicate benefits of parks and recreation in your community.

Statewide Strategies

1. **Support and advance campaigns.** Create a statewide campaign to partner with a major health care institution. Encourage park and recreation directors to get their elected officials to support the national "10 Minute Walk" campaign.
2. **Provide training and resources.**
 - a. Develop a park prescription tool kit municipalities can take to a health care institution to help them get their foot in the door.
 - b. Create a "Culture of Health" curriculum for OST/summer camp programs.
 - c. Offer training for staff and/or partnership building for mental health and wellness programs.
 - d. Create a SOPARC webinar to address need for quantifiable data collection and develop a fact sheet for how park use counts benefit parks and recreation and how to do counts.

- e. Develop opioids-related park maintenance and general communication tool kits and identify ways municipal parks and recreation departments can support on-going opioid advocacy and prevention efforts.
3. **Healthy Foods.** Sponsor a healthy vending machine/traveling fruit stand pilot program.
4. **Rural Connectivity.** Develop a rural walkability/connectivity recreation strategy and provide guidance for creating a safe 10 minute walk in urban and suburban communities and ideas for how to encourage park connectivity in rural areas.
5. **Update Grant Incentives.** Update DCNR's statewide grant program criteria to better incorporate park accessibility and health in planning and development grants.

Personal Strategies

1. **Prevention/Advocacy.** Add a drug use prevention and/or advocacy piece to your community-wide special events within six months. Host a Turn Your TV Off event within one year.
2. **Evaluate.** Conduct an evaluation of your area's most recent community health assessment report within one year. Evaluate your parks, facilities and programs for ease of access within two years.
3. **Contribute.** Serve on your local school district's wellness committee or another health/wellness group.

Further Reading/Viewing

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