MENTORING
IN PARKS AND
RECREATION

A Best Practice Guide

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INTRODUCTION

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe parks and recreation systems are vital to community health and well-being. Access to these spaces, programs and services remains essential to community vitality and serves as a key factor in advancing health equity, improving individual and community-level health outcomes and enhancing quality of life. Park and recreation professionals and their agencies protect and promote health for all people, especially youth, in the communities where people live, learn, work and play.

Local park and recreation agencies serve as Community Wellness Hubs — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life. In this role, park and recreation agencies provide vital programs and services that address the diverse health and wellness needs of youth. According to the _2021 NRPA Out-of-School Time Report_, more than four in five park and recreation agencies offer out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth — and include programming beyond traditional physical activity and recreational opportunities. Many agencies deliver programing to support young people's social-emotional and life skills, so they can better manage the challenges that come with growing up. According to the report, 37 percent of agencies offer mentoring programs, with 18 percent of agencies planning to offer mentoring within the next two years. Additionally, 35 percent of agencies have social-emotional learning curriculums, and 57 percent implement mindfulness programs (yoga, meditation, arts).[1]

[1] NRPA. (2021). _2021 NRPA Out-of-School-Time Report._ Retrieved from https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/out-of-school-time-survey-results/

BACKGROUND

NRPA recognizes the impact that substance use disorder, specifically opioid use disorder, has on youth and communities across the country. Substance use can negatively impact academic performance as well as physical and mental health and well-being, while placing stress on relationships with peers and family members. Early substance use also may contribute to lifelong challenges such as dependence, chronic health issues, and social and financial consequences.[2] According to the 2018 Monitoring the Future survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), students in the 12th grade reported past-year vape use (37 percent), marijuana use (six percent), binge drinking (14 percent), and misuse of prescription opioids (three percent).[3] While opioid misuse is relatively low compared to other substances, the damage these drugs can impart on the adolescent brain and body is astounding. Our brains continue to develop until we reach early to mid-20s. This is when the ability to make decisions, process abstract information, control impulses, regulate emotions, and the like, become more refined. When substance misuse occurs at such an early age, the ability to perform these functions deteriorates. Judgement and inhibition are also negatively impacted and can lead to additional risky behaviors.[4]

To address this, _NRPA has been supporting local agencies_[5] in their efforts to pilot a mentorship program for youth impacted by the opioid epidemic in rural, central Appalachia. From 2018 to 2022, NRPA worked with five communities to develop and implement their own sustainable mentoring programs targeting at-risk youth.

This resource will build upon MENTOR's _Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™_[6] (recruitment, screening, training, matching and initiating, monitoring and support, and closure) and highlight best practices specifically for park and recreation professionals.

[2] Youth.gov. (n.d.) _Substance Use/Misuse._ Retrieved from https://youth.gov/youth-topics/substance-abuse
[3] National Institutes of Health – National Institute on Drug Abuse. (December 17, 2018). _Monitoring the Future 2018 Survey Results._ Retrieved from https://nida.nih.gov/drug-topics/trends-statistics/infographics/monitoring-future-2018-survey-results
[4] SAMHSA. (April 13, 2022) _Rise in Prescription Drug Misuse and Abuse Impacting Teens._ Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/rise-prescription-drug-misuse-abuse-impacting-teens
[5] NRPA (2019). _NRPA Launches New Initiative Aimed at Assisting Youth Impacted by Opioid Epidemic in Rural Central Appalachia._ Retrieved from https://www.nrpa.org/about-national-recreation-and-park-association/press-room/nrpa-launches-new-initiative-aimed-at-assisting-youth-impacted-by-opioid-epidemic-in-rural-central-appalachia/
[6] MENTOR. (2022). _Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring._ Retrieved from: https://www.mentoring.org/resource/elements-of-effective-practice-for-mentoring/

YOUTH MENTORING IMPACTS

An evaluation determined that the mentoring programs were impactful for both youth mentees and adult mentors. Over the course of the grant, over 100 youth were provided with direct mentoring services through the youth mentoring programs. Of these mentees, more than half increased their involvement in the community, 47 percent increased their social competency and 40 percent reported improved social support. Additionally, 38 percent increased their pro-social[7] behavior, 31 percent improved their attendance at school and 26 percent reported improved family relationships. Self-reported participation in gangs and substance use remained very low throughout the mentees' participation in the program.

Over 100 adults also participated in the youth mentoring program. Of these mentors, 48 percent reported an increase in overall mentoring knowledge. They gained the highest levels of knowledge in providing direction in regard to substance misuse (41 percent).

KEY FINDINGS AND METHODOLOGY

NRPA staff identified best practices in a variety of ways. Primarily, NRPA identified best practices by speaking directly with park and recreation staff from the five agencies participating in the OJJDP-funded grant. These focus groups discussed topics such as establishing mentoring programs, developing partnerships, recruiting, matching mentors with mentees and providing advice for fellow park and recreation agencies involved in youth mentoring. NRPA staff also drew on input provided during technical assistance sessions and success stories shared by grantees. In-person and virtual site-visits to grantees and other evaluation data collected throughout the duration of the grant provided additional best practice insights. NRPA determined a best practice based on the impact of the practice, it's alignment with other published materials on mentoring and how widespread its implementation was across the different grantees.

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[7] R. Knickerbocker. (n.d.) *Prosocial Behavior.* Retrieved from https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/prosocial-behavior

BEST PRACTICES TO DEVELOP A YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAM THROUGH PARKS AND RECREATION

ESTABLISHING THE PROGRAM

- Form and/or strengthen partnerships. These connections are important when establishing a youth mentoring program — particularly with local school systems. Guidance counselors, principals and other school administrators are invaluable in helping to advocate for the development and implementation of mentoring programs and supporting community buy-in.

- Hold a program kick-off event. This is a great way to establish your program and introduce it to the community. These types of events often can lead to productive partnerships with other entities, including local business owners, community leaders, local government representatives and nonprofit organizations.

- Take time to identify what resources already exist in your community. An "asset mapping" activity is a great way to inventory the available supports and services, as well as to identify existing gaps. This activity helps not only identify potential partners and needs, but also bring to light the underserved areas and populations.

- Establish specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based (SMART) goals[8] and an action or implementation plan to guide your program. You will want to work with your core stakeholder or advisory group, as well as your broader group of partners to gather input on the best strategies or solutions for the development of an action/implementation plan. It also is important to outline how your overall goals, outcomes and short-, medium- and long-term objectives align with your action plan. Within your action plan, define the objectives that contribute to your hub's goals and anticipated outcomes. Make sure also to establish how you will measure progress toward your anticipated outcomes by identifying and documenting the key indicators and metrics and timing most appropriate for evaluation of your action plan. Once your action plan is written, make sure to disseminate it widely in your community to partners and stakeholders.

- Utilize existing trainings, peer networks and other materials when working to establish and develop your mentoring programs. Together, NRPA and MENTOR have developed many resources and trainings to support all stages of a mentoring program including:

  - _NRPA Youth Mentoring Framework_[9]
  - _MENTOR's Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring_[10]
  - _Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework_[11]
  - _NRPA Connect forum_[12]
  - _NRPA Mentor Training Resource_[13]

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[8] University of California. (2016-2017). _SMART Goals: a How to Guide._ Retrieved from https://www.ucop.edu/local-human-resources/_files/performance-appraisal/How%20to%20write%20SMART%20Goals%20v2.pdf

[9] NRPA. (2020). _Youth Mentoring Framework._ Retrieved from https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/mentoring-in-parks-and-rec/nrpas-youth-mentoring-framework/

[10] MENTOR. (2022). _Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring._ Retrieved from: https://www.mentoring.org/resource/elements-of-effective-practice-for-mentoring/

[11] Search Institute. (1997). _Developmental Assets Framework._ Retrieved from https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/

[12] NPRA. (n.d.) _NRPA Connect Forum._ Retrieved from https://connect.nrpa.org/home

[13] NRPA. (2022). _Mentor Training Resource._ https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/mentor-training-resource-2022.pdf

■ Ensure you are taking into consideration community needs when structuring your program. Hold focus groups and/or disseminate a survey to community members to better understand their wants and needs. Parents/Caregivers may want their children to participate as mentees but lack transportation or unreliable work schedules can prevent it. Perhaps potential mentors would prefer to participate in a group setting rather than a one-on-one relationship. Many components of your mentoring program can and should take into consideration the perspectives of people in your communities. A community needs assessment[14] can help inform your program design.

■ Incorporate the youth voice! When designing your mentoring program, it is vital to understand what appeals to the youth in your community. Visit your local schools and/or out-of-school time programs to gather information about what youth would like to see in your program, what challenges they are experiencing, and where they are seeking mentorship and support. For example, what sports are popular in your town? Do youth prefer to ride bikes or play video games? Collecting this valuable input will increase the participation and retention rates of mentees, as well as the overall satisfaction of those participating in your program.

■ Play to your strengths as a local park and recreation agency. You already are connected to your community — as a trusted and valued service provider, many existing relationships, programs and policies can support the establishment of a mentoring program.

[14] NRPA. (n.d.) *Community Needs Assessments*. Retrieved from https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/evaluation-resource-hub/community-needs-assessments/

PARTNERSHIPS

■ Engage your partners. Partnerships sit at the core of a successful Youth Mentoring program. It is very important to engage partners that are connected to the community and can serve as champions for your program. Common partners may include (but are not limited to) local school systems, libraries, local government entities, businesses, local nonprofits, clubs and housing authorities. These partnerships can translate into increased awareness in the community and visible support from trusted institutions.

■ Create partnerships, either big or small. Support can range from providing free meals for an event to providing program participants (mentees and/or mentors). Partners can be vital in smaller communities with scarce resources and limited funds. An example of this type of smaller-scale partnership provided by previous NRPA grantees includes a local outdoor store providing fishing and other equipment (kayaks, canoes, paddle boards, etc.) for mentors and mentees to use as part of the program.

■ Be creative! Don't be afraid to think outside the box regarding what a partner can and cannot be, or where mentor/mentee support may arise. Some key partners may not have titles, but be influential leaders in specific neighborhoods, communities and faith-based organizations.

■ Participate in a network of related service providers to form and strengthen partnerships. Is there a local collaborative in your community focusing on social services or providing a social safety net? This would be a great way to introduce your mentoring program, swap resources and garner support from like-minded organizations.

During a focus group, one grantee said their greatest assets for their mentoring program were "unofficial partners or organizations, like those community leaders in the neighborhoods and people that are doing that work," but who did not have an official title or work for an organization. These community leaders served an integral role in the recruitment of both mentees and mentors when other "traditional" partnerships did not work out.

■ Engage in strategic, mutually beneficial, value-aligned partnerships to advance equity, health and well-being, and resilience through the power of parks and recreation. Partnerships should place equity at the center, incorporate trust, continuous learning, and diversity and inclusion.

■ Focus on networking and building positive relationships in your community. Do not rely on a small circle of partners — this can lead to instability.

After struggling to gain traction with their original desired partners, one grantee advised others to hit partnership building hard. They explained: "At first, I think we were a little too timid trying to not go out with too many partners, but that was a learning opportunity for us."

Tip: Maintenance and longevity of partnerships are important. Keys to sustaining a long-term partnership include ensuring consistent communication and a mutually beneficial relationship. Leveraging existing partnerships can benefit your mentoring program. In the park and recreation field, partnerships are typically very common; consider including these partners to help bolster your program. For example, do existing partners have extra supplies that could be donated? Are there content matter experts that could host a session on a specific topic? Could partners help provide books, arts and crafts materials or activities?

STAFFING

- Properly staffing the mentoring program is fundamental to its ultimate success. Agencies should strongly consider identifying at least one full-time staff person dedicated to lead the mentoring program. A well-run program takes time and effort to manage all the various components such as recruitment, training, matching, monitoring, event planning and administrative duties.

"You just really need to have at least one, if not more, dedicated full-time staff. It does get kind of difficult at times [because] you're dealing with paperwork and parents. You definitely need somebody's full-time attention to it." Shannon Payne, director, PEAK Mentor Program, Elizabethton Parks and Recreation

- Agencies should consider hiring the RIGHT person — one of the most important qualities a new hire should have is passion for helping youth. Ideally, this person should be a champion for and care deeply about improving the lives of young people. This staff person also should be (or be willing to become) well-known in the community. Developing a strong relationship with community members builds trust and rapport — qualities that are vital during mentee/mentor recruitment and training.

- Leverage the expertise from other park and recreation department staff in supporting, temporary

roles. Staff within your agency can contribute to your mentoring program on a non-recurring basis. They can contribute specific expertise to lead an event or activity. While these ancillary staff will not be part of regular mentoring activities, park and recreation agencies are uniquely positioned to leverage expertise from its staff. For example, an agency's athletic coordinator can lead a basketball experience that incorporates relationship building. Other staff that could provide support include those working in family services, out-of-school time programs, health and wellness programs and supervisory positions.

- Representation matters! Ensure program staff are representative and understanding of your community as well as the various backgrounds, experiences and cultures of the target population being served.

A mentoring program coordinator at a park and recreation agency shared how agencies need to "find the right leader for the program." He explained that his life story and connection with the community helped to quickly establish a rapport with youth and potential mentors. As he said, "a lot of the kids know I grew up in a similar situation [as them] and went the right way instead of the wrong way." By being relatable and earning their respect, this individual exemplifies the type of staff member who would be successful in leading the daily activities of the mentoring program.

RECRUITMENT
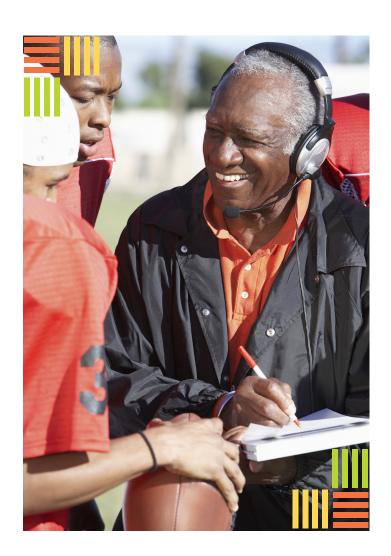
RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Mentors are often more challenging to recruit than mentees. Prospective mentors typically struggle with long-term commitment for programs lasting longer than six months. Uncertainty related to conflicting/changing schedules, competing priorities, unexpected barriers and life changes contribute to a potential mentor's ability to commit.

One grantee described some of their difficulties recruiting mentors: "It's really hard for people to commit to that one-year commitment. Just that question alone during the interview process is like, Oh, what do you mean? I could probably do a few months or six months, but a year I don't know if I can."

Other challenges for mentor recruitment include:

- Requirement for mentor background checks
- Recruitment of racially diverse mentors; recruitment of male mentors
- Instilling confidence in community members to become mentors

Prioritize recruitment of mentees and mentors from areas in your community where resources do not currently exist. Approach these specific neighborhoods and their respective community leaders, share about the mentoring program and seek community buy-in/support for mentoring. This focused approach could be more successful than larger, more traditional recruitment strategies (i.e., local news, open recruitment initiatives). Regardless, focusing on underserved/under-resourced communities will be one step towards reducing inequities in access to mentoring opportunities.

Focus on some of the most successful avenues for mentor recruitment, which include personal connections, word of mouth and networking. Additional sources of mentor recruitment include local schools, faith-based communities, philanthropic organizations (Rotary or Lions Club) and kickoff events.

■ Find mentees through partnerships. Mentee recruitment is generally not as challenging as mentor recruitment. Partnering with local schools and guidance counselors often provides an ample amount of youth — whether from staff referrals or program promotion. Additional sources of mentees include mental health professionals, social workers, community leaders, juvenile court systems and existing participants in park and recreation programming.

■ Explain the necessity of background checks and how they are vital for the safety of the mentees. Background checks are not meant to expose an individual's past or cause them trouble. Rather, these checks are performed to ensure the safety of youth participants, program staff and community members.

■ Recruit diverse mentors of varying races, ethnicities, backgrounds, experiences and genders/sexes.

■ Build the confidence of community members to participate in your mentoring program. Host virtual or in-person learning sessions, attend various local events or fairs to promote the program, hand out fliers and share information on social media platforms. The more you talk and share with community members, the more likely they will want to get involved.

MATCHING

■ Wait for the right match to present itself. Do not rush into matching mentees and mentors together. The success of these relationships depends upon characteristics, qualities, interests and values of both mentors and mentees. This may mean a mentor or mentee is placed on a waitlist until the appropriate match is found.

■ The matching process should focus primarily on the mentee and not the mentor. Focus on finding the right mentor for the youth participant (and not the other way around).

One staff member explained how their thinking about matching changed while leading their mentoring program: "I always thought it was that the kid would match up with the mentor, but that wasn't the case. It never really lasts like that. It was what mentor would match up with the kid. You need to adapt to this kid's lifestyle and what they bring and what they're coming with. So that, that's what really got the ball going for me as far as matching."

■ When recruiting, training and integrating mentees and mentors into your programs (pre-match), work to identify common interests and goals. For example, when onboarding a new mentee — ask what type of mentor they would like to be paired with. Note the mentee's likes, dislikes, hobbies and goals for what they hope to achieve through mentoring. Other strategies include using matching checklists and resources provided by MENTOR and NRPA. All this information can be used to proactively identify commonalities among potential mentees and mentors to facilitate the best match.

■ Another common and effective strategy is to enlist the help of others who know one or both people involved in the match. A prime example of this are school guidance counselors, who often have in-depth knowledge of the mentee and potential knowledge of the prospective mentor. Seeking out input from one (or more) of these sources provides even more information to help form a successful match.

■ Important to note: Smaller communities might have a leg up in this kind of intentional matching process because many people already know each other in these communities.

EVALUATION

Evaluation serves as an important tool to continuously improve your mentoring program and demonstrate its value to key stakeholders. Below is a simplified sequence of best practices regarding how to conduct an evaluation of your youth mentoring program. For more detailed information, check out *NRPA's Health Impact Evaluation Framework*.[15]

- First, develop a Logic Model that represents how the program resources and activities will work together to produce the desired outcomes. The National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) website[16] provides example logic models.

- Next, determine the key questions that you would like to answer about your program based on the outputs and outcomes outlined in the logic model. This process will help focus your evaluation efforts on the most important priorities.

- After that, you will need data to answer those key questions. Data either will be quantitative (numeric) or qualitative (descriptive). If possible, integrate both types of data to answer evaluation questions. When designing your data collection, be sure to reference the NMRC's Measurement Guidance Toolkit.[17]

- Then, collect the data via quantitative (usually surveys) and/or qualitative (usually interviews or focus groups) approaches. Consider providing incentives to participants in your data collection to thank them for their time. When funds are lacking or insufficient, inexpensive options for incentives may include entrance into drawings for one or more

of the following: gift certificates, swag, donations from local merchants/restaurants or movie tickets. Sometimes, incentives can be donated by local businesses — do not be afraid to ask!

- After collecting data, it is time for analysis. Analysis may be relatively simple (handled via Microsoft Excel) or require more complex knowledge and/ or tools (see Section Four of the *Health Impact Evaluation Framework*). If you need help, be sure to seek assistance from experts within your department or in your community. Partnerships with local colleges/universities could be particularly helpful in completing analyses.

- Finally, interpret your findings and communicate them both internally and externally, including to those who participated in data collection. Internal communications are particularly helpful in guiding programmatic decision-making and adjusting program activities to ensure maximum effectiveness. External communications can help garner support from key people and groups in your community. Tailor your communications (i.e., reports, infographics, press releases) to your intended audiences.

- Evaluation typically occurs on a recurring, cyclical process and does not stop once you have generated data and interpreted the analysis. Often evaluation findings generate recommendations and fresh ideas for program improvement and enhancement for the next phase of the program, which you also will want to evaluate. Continuing the evaluation life cycle through the next phase of your program can help improve programs, demonstrate impact, and justify future support for your mentoring programs.

[15] NRPA. (n.d.) *Health Impact Evaluation Framework*. Retrieved from https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/best-practice-resources/health-impact-evaluation-framework/

[16] National Mentoring Resource Center. (n.d.) *Example Logic Models and Theories of Change for Youth Mentoring Programs*. Retrieved from https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/research-tools/logic-models-theories-of-change/

[17] National Mentoring Resource Center. (n.d.) *Measurement Guidance Toolkit*. Retrieved from https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/resource/measurement-guidance-toolkit/

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, it is important to be in contact with the community in which your program aims to serve. Develop partnerships that will help provide an enriching mentoring experience for both youth and adult participants. Staffing the program with a full-time professional who is known in the community will help establish local credibility and trust in your mentoring program. While recruitment is not easy, there are strategies proven to get mentors involved and ensure consistent youth engagement and participation. Matching must be done thoughtfully and purposefully, informed by shared commonalities and interests between mentors and mentees. Also evaluate your program for continuous improvement and advocacy purposes.

As park and recreation professionals, you are uniquely positioned to establish and operate a youth mentoring program that will positively impact your community and provide life-changing experiences for mentees and mentors. Launching a new program takes time, dedication and patience, all skills in which park and recreation professionals excel. Use the best practices presented in this resource as a guide to help you along this journey.

One grantee reflected, "It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. You're not going to see these happy results right away. It may be a year from now, two years from now, three years from now, you just gotta keep trusting the process, 'cause it'll work."

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Contact NRPA's health and wellness team at health@nrpa.org with any questions or comments.

About the National Recreation and Park Association
The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org. For digital access to NRPA's flagship publication, Parks & Recreation, visit parksandrecreation.org.