



CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) AND PARKS AND RECREATION: Response and Recovery

INTRODUCTION



Kathy Kline (left), director of Morgan Grove Family Center, and staff distribute food during COVID-19. Courtesy of West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. Numerous cities around the world imposed stay-at-home orders, businesses closed their doors, schools and workplaces moved to virtual platforms, and public health officials and healthcare providers worked to provide guidance and recommendations to slow the spread while caring for those who needed treatment.

Despite the drastic measures taken, the COVID-19 pandemic surged ahead, and our society fell into a deep health, social and economic crisis. We are grappling with the many traumas and impacts resulting from the pandemic, including skyrocketing unemployment claims and evictions, increased reliance on already strapped social service systems, the harsh reality of worsening chronic disease, substance use and mental health crises, and widening social and economic inequities [disproportionately impacting Black people and low-income communities](#).

[Chronic disease has long been the leading cause of death and disability in the United States](#) and people with underlying chronic health conditions, including diabetes, obesity, asthma and heart disease are at greater risk of developing a severe illness from the COVID-19 virus. Black, Indigenous and people of color — as well as low-income communities — [disproportionately experience](#) chronic disease and, in turn, the impacts of COVID-19 due to our country's deep-rooted history of unjust

policies, practices and systems that create barriers to living the healthiest life possible. At the same time, the nation has been battling growing substance misuse and mental health crises. Drug overdoses, alcohol-related deaths and suicides — known together as the “deaths of despair” — have been increasing across the United States. As these deaths are often associated with poor socioeconomic conditions, loneliness, isolation and uncertainty, [researchers fear that COVID-19 could result in significantly more deaths of despair](#).

With widespread disruptions to our normal way of life, [more people](#) have turned to their local, close-to-home parks, green spaces and trails for essential physical and mental health benefits during the pandemic. Local park and recreation professionals swiftly stepped into new roles to protect, support, strengthen and heal their communities. Responding to the pandemic and their communities' needs — especially those community members who are at the greatest risk — local agencies scaled up childcare programs and learning centers, offered facilities to shelter people without housing, managed food distribution programs, and leveraged park and recreation spaces and staff to provide needed health and social services to the community, including COVID-19 testing and vaccine distribution support. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted — and continues to highlight — what has been true for many years: parks and recreation is vital to ensuring that all people thrive. Parks and recreation **provides essential services and infrastructure** that advance equity, resiliency and well-being.

NRPA defines **essential services** as the services and programs that are absolutely necessary to maintain the health and well-being of the public.

NRPA defines **essential infrastructure** as the spaces, facilities and built environment features, such as parks, trails, open spaces and pools, that are absolutely necessary to maintain the health and well-being of the public.

Cover image: Volunteers in Berea, Kentucky, work to distribute meals to those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing masks and gloves while continually cleaning surfaces to protect program staff, volunteers and participants. Courtesy of Berea College.

About This Resource

NRPA seeks a future in which the full power of parks and recreation is widely recognized for creating a better life for everyone by building strong, healthy and resilient communities. This resource was developed to document the essential role parks and recreation has played and continues to play throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on local agencies, and to expound on parks and recreation's positive influence on its communities. This report also makes the case for the needed investment and policy changes that will ensure equitable access to the health, social, environmental and economic benefits of parks and recreation both now and in the future.

This document is divided into two sections: **Parks and Recreation's Response to COVID-19** and **Leveraging Parks and Recreation to Support Recovery and Prepare for Future Threats**. It presents:

- A summary of data illuminating the roles of parks and recreation and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agencies; and
- Opportunities for park and recreation professionals, local elected officials and federal government officials to catalyze support for parks and recreation to drive access for all, build more resilient communities and advance health and well-being.

Throughout this report, we highlight stories from park and recreation professionals and agencies that, despite

Parks and Recreation's Influence on Social Determinants of Health



challenges, were at the forefront of a coordinated response (with other community and government entities) to COVID-19. These efforts focused on protecting and promoting public health and meeting urgent community needs. Informed by multiple surveys, polls, a roundtable with mayors and interviews with park and recreation professionals (see Acknowledgments on **pg. 15**), this resource provides insights that can help build support among elected officials and philanthropic partners and provide a pathway for increased investment in parks and recreation.

| PARKS AND RECREATION'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The conditions in which we live, learn, work and play — including access to high-quality, close-to-home parks, green spaces and recreational facilities — influence a stunning **50 percent** of our health outcomes, as well as our overall quality of life. It is **well-documented** that having access to quality parks and recreation improves physical and mental health, reduces crime and violence, increases access to healthy foods, drives community connection and boosts economic activity. Yet, more than **30 percent** of people living in U.S. cities do not have equitable access to these spaces or services. Unfair practices, policies and disinvestment in some communities have led to these gaps in park access, and thus, have created additional barriers to achieving optimal health

and well-being for certain populations. For example, Black, Indigenous and people of color are at **increased risk of getting sick or dying from COVID-19**. This is due to systemic injustices that influence a wide range of health, economic and other quality-of-life outcomes, including inequitable access to parks, green spaces and recreational programs and services. The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a spotlight on the harsh realities of systemic racism in the United States as **evidenced by the inequitable access** to good paying jobs, healthcare, housing, education, healthy food and safe environments, intersecting with several high-profile racist incidents and a rallying cry from the public demanding urgent action.

On top of a pandemic, a racial justice movement and growing economic and health crises, 2020 [was a record year](#) in terms of the number of hurricanes, wildfires and severe weather-related events; communities continue to face extreme-heat conditions and worsening air and water quality. During a time when emergency services are working around the clock and funding is limited, these events put additional stress on our infrastructure, environment and communities, especially for Black, Indigenous and people of color and low-income communities that receive fewer resources and support to prepare for, respond to and recover from these weather events. [Our changing climate exacerbates the mental](#)

[and physical health impacts of COVID-19](#), including increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries, food- and water-borne diseases, heat-related illnesses and feelings of isolation and loneliness. These events, particularly in areas that have suffered from wildfires, have limited people's ability to get outside and enjoy one of the only safe places to stay active: local parks. At the same time, COVID-19 physical-distancing guidelines have led park and recreation agencies to reduce their [indoor facility capacity](#) that residents typically use for refuge from extreme heat and severe weather.

Pearland Parks and Recreation Department — Innovative Approaches to Community Engagement Despite COVID-19 Closures

Pearland (Texas) Parks and Recreation plays a large role in providing essential services across the community. One of those critical roles includes operating the Knapp Activity Center (KAC), which serves hundreds of older adults daily. Members of the KAC receive a free, nutritious meal every day and thrive due to social interactions as well as educational and enrichment opportunities with their peers. When the onset of COVID-19 shut down Pearland's facilities, divisional staff immediately determined the priority of essential losses to the community and created manageable avenues to re-establish those services.

KAC quickly realized that with its doors closed, many members would lose access to these daily nutritious meals. Due to rapid and thoughtful planning, KAC staff launched a weekly drive-thru, meal pickup and at-home drop-off. During the spring of 2020, the KAC team provided more than 180 people with five meals each week. In addition to providing vital food services, staff members personally conducted well-being checks through phone calls on more than 450 members on a biweekly basis. These well-being checks provided time for older adults to engage with caring park and recreation staff, addressed challenges they may be having at home, and offered valuable socialization at a time when many people struggled with isolation.

Pearland Parks and Recreation also focused on maintaining engagement with families throughout the pandemic. The department became proficient in developing inclusive, internet-based programming to promote health and environmental awareness. Several series of activities for families and individuals kept homebound viewers entertained. Programmers filmed upbeat, educational segments about the benefits of nature and outdoor activities for people of all ages, demonstrations of easy cooking and craft ideas, fitness videos, virtual scavenger hunts and live animal encounters and hosted virtual trivia nights. Over the summer, a Summer Camp To-Go series and Distance Learning Nature Field Trips were added to keep youth engaged in programming and connect them to the outdoors.

Parks and Recreation Is Essential

The past year [underscored the importance of parks and recreation](#) and the essential services, social supports and infrastructure park and recreation professionals provide to enhance community well-being and address many communities' most-pressing challenges. [Most U.S. adults agree](#) that it is important to use park and recreation facilities as emergency distribution centers and shelters during natural disasters, and nearly half of those polled believe park and recreation agencies should contribute equipment and personnel to respond to disasters. Beyond the ways in which agencies support communities facing disasters, parks and recreation also has overwhelmingly supported the physical and emotional health of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Broward County Parks and Recreation Division — Existing Emergency Services Prepare Agency for COVID-19 Response

Because of the county's geographic location and the area's susceptibility to frequent, powerful natural disasters, the Broward County (Florida) Parks and Recreation Division has a long history of providing emergency response services to the community and working closely with the state department of health and other key emergency response sectors. The division is the lead agency for the county's Logistics Section Services Branch, and it has the responsibility for the operation of the county's Points of Distribution, Staging Areas and Emergency Distribution Warehouse. Through years of trials and learnings, the division has refined its approach to emergency response, centering the key practices of leveraging outdoor spaces, establishing clear and consistent communications, demonstrating adaptability and conducting community outreach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Broward County Parks and Recreation Division was called upon to coordinate emergency response efforts across the county, using these best practices as its guide.

The division took over as the logistic services provider for the entire county, with the main roles of establishing "Points of Distribution" sites in collaboration with the county, state and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and scaling up food distribution services. The points of distribution were designed to address common challenges in disaster situations — lack of access to food, water, ice, refrigeration or medical supplies — ensuring residents had necessary life-sustaining supplies. During the pandemic, many of these sites served as testing and/or food distribution points for residents. The division also established a centralized Emergency Distribution Center (EDC) that received deliveries of vital personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical equipment and were responsible for storing, tracking and distributing supplies across 31 municipalities to first responders, healthcare providers, healthcare facilities and others.

As COVID-19 testing was expanded, several county park sites were converted into drive-thru COVID-19 testing locations. By August, more than 80,000 tests had been conducted. Some parks also served as food distribution sites in hard-hit areas in partnership with the local food bank; as of August 2020, food had been distributed to more than 11,200 families across the county. Parks provided logistical support, tents, signage, promotion and staffing to operate the sites. This originally was funded by general tax dollars and now is covered through FEMA funding. Crucial to this unprecedented emergency response was a heavy reliance on partnerships across municipal, state and the federal government, as well as the nonprofit and private sectors.

ACCORDING TO NRPA'S PARKS SNAPSHOT May 27–29, 2020 Survey Results

2 IN 3

park and recreation leaders report increased usage of their agency's parks compared to this time last year (with a median rise of 25 percent)



WHILE MORE THAN 80% report increased usage of their trails (with a median rise of 35 percent)



Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, park and recreation agencies have provided people access to safe spaces for recreation. NRPA and more than 1,000 organizations released a [joint statement](#) in March 2020, encouraging park and recreation professionals to maintain operations of outdoor spaces when they allowed for physical distancing in order to provide essential physical and mental health benefits to their communities. At the height of shelter-in-place orders in late April 2020, [86 percent of agencies](#) kept all of their trails open and three-quarters of agencies made all their parks available to the public. From mid-March through mid-June 2020, [three in five people](#) — more than 190 million adults and children — visited a park, trail, public open space or recreation facility, and [83 percent of adults agree](#) that those visits were essential to their mental and physical well-being.

Mayors from cities across the country participating in a recent focus group noted that public appreciation of parks and recreation is at an all-time high. These mayors, along with interviewed park and recreation directors, have reported significant increases in trail use and park traffic. Also rising have been community participation and satisfaction with the unique, physically distant services agencies provided throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including drive-in movies, outdoor fitness classes and virtual programming. At the same time, mayors report growing challenges attributed to the

COVID-19 pandemic, including a rise in families and individuals facing unemployment, food insecurity, mental health and substance use challenges, and housing insecurity. Parks and recreation can, and do, play a role in responding to these challenges.



Radnor Lake State Park staff member captures photos of the wildflowers to share with their social media followers and provide education on the different wildflowers that are found in their park. Courtesy of Tennessee State Parks.

Seattle Parks and Recreation — Providing Shelter and Promoting Hygiene to Unhoused Populations

As the demographics across the city have shifted over the years and disparities have widened, the Seattle Parks and Recreation agency has implemented new measures to identify and address gaps in access to parks, green spaces, and critical programs and services, including assessing acreage, infrastructure and routes to parks, changing policies to center equity and inclusion, and providing safe, enriching spaces and programs for youth in underinvested neighborhoods. The data collected, partnerships built and policies adopted through these efforts helped inform the agency’s response and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When COVID-19 began to spread in Seattle, the city quickly identified gaps in shelter capacity and healthy hygiene supports for a significant population of unhoused residents. In King County, Washington, on a single night in January 2019, a total of [11,199 individuals were unhoused and among that population, 47 percent were unsheltered](#). Seattle Parks and Recreation helped the city of Seattle create several “de-intensification” shelters and hygiene and sanitation stations across the city to ensure unhoused individuals could access needed shelter and protection (physical distancing, handwashing, access to healthcare, etc.) against the virus. New portable toilets, handwashing resources and public shower sites were added and maintained to address the urgent needs of the city. Together, King County and the city of Seattle created 709 expansion spaces and 137 hygiene stations spread across the city. In addition to leveraging park and recreation facilities, Seattle Parks and Recreation also provided additional staff at these shelter sites, [maintaining a 1:25 staff-to-resident ratio](#) to help with physical distancing guidelines and assist with access to hygiene and sanitation supplies.

While park and recreation facilities and amenities were subject to [various closures and reopenings](#) over time, park and recreation professionals were central to their [community's pandemic response](#) with 60 percent of agencies actively supporting emergency services, including distributing meals to older adults, vulnerable families and youth, opening agency facilities to serve as satellite COVID-19 testing and vaccine support sites, providing emergency shelter, and caring for the children of public safety staff — all while adhering to state and county health and safety guidelines to ensure the [mental and physical well-being of employees](#). Agencies [supported virtual programs](#) aimed at promoting mental health and well-being, such as meditation, fitness classes, and health and safety courses, while providing safe summer and after-school care options. Agencies also have [facilitated back-to-school education](#) for youth — enabling virtual education, allocating outdoor space for classrooms or activities, and providing Wi-Fi access for students, among others.



Baltimore City Health Department provides meals to youth and families across the city. Courtesy of Baltimore City Public Schools.

Baltimore County Department of Recreation and Parks — Leveraging Resources and Community to Address Food Insecurity

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity was a major issue across the county. According to [Feeding America](#), between 2016 and 2018 Baltimore County, experienced an average annual food budget shortfall of nearly \$49 million, with 11 percent of the overall population and 16.1 percent of children (nearly 30,000) being food insecure. To address hunger across the community, the Baltimore County Department of Recreation and Parks (BCRP) has long been a provider of summer meals at parks and recreation centers and through a mobile meal program, utilizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to provide healthy meals and snacks to food insecure youth when school is out of session.

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, schools were forced to close their doors and cease traditional operations, while many families lost access not only to critical learning and social opportunities, but also to a vital source of food and economic relief for many caregivers. At the same time, businesses closed, unemployment skyrocketed, and more families found themselves in need of social supports. In October 2020, Feeding America estimated that by the end of 2020, the rate of food insecurity in Baltimore County would grow to 14.2 percent of the overall population and [22.4 percent of children](#). To fill these widening gaps, BCRP stepped into a new role — organizing and leading a county-wide food distribution initiative.

Beginning in March, the department quickly formed relationships with and mobilized resources from other governmental agencies, companies, local producers and the community as a whole. Vehicle-for-hire companies, such as Uber and Lyft, stepped in to help with transport and delivery. Producers, grocers, farmers and community members donated non-perishable goods, local produce and needed essentials. One Saturday morning, BCRP was surprised to receive 1,100 pounds of potatoes at their distribution sites. A few weeks in, BCRP — taking advantage of its open space and dedicated team members — expanded its food distribution initiative beyond serving only students to serving all people seeking support across the county. The agency grew the program from one meal per day on weekdays to breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and weekend meals. As of January 2020, the agency had served nearly 2.5 million meals, and the initiative is still in full momentum.

COVID-19 significantly impacted critical community systems and social resources. Park and recreation professionals have responded to support these systems and meet community needs. The framework below outlines how park and recreation professionals provided a cross-sector response to COVID-19 centered on promoting health and well-being for all.



Parks & Recreation Response to COVID-19, NRPA 2021

For park and recreation professionals who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, COVID-19 has created a deeper understanding of the health and social inequities across communities, emphasizing the importance of [centering equity](#) to ensure that access to facilities and programming, policies for public health and communications around COVID-19 and future events are prioritizing disinvested communities and reaching everyone.

“Our mission statement to serve as stewards of parkland, build healthy and resilient communities, and advance social equity and cohesion has really come to life in a deeper way in the past seven to eight months. Simultaneously, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the way the agency provided essential services, which are critical to the community, fundamentally changed the perspective of the parks in the eyes of the public.”

— Norma García, Director of Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation

Gaps in Funding

While park and recreation agencies have stepped up their services, they also have faced significant budget challenges and constraints, not only as a result from declining tax support and revenues but also from the rising expenses of providing emergency response support and instituting new health and safety measures. More than [90 percent of all agencies](#) have decreased their expenses by reducing outside services, placing hiring freezes, laying off part-time and seasonal staff and/or deferring or canceling capital projects. This is especially concerning as there is significant investment in park infrastructure and social resources needed in communities that are the most vulnerable to COVID-19, as well as a need to maintain staff capacity to continue operating existing spaces and services. To mitigate these budget implications, a majority of agencies has [tapped into additional funding sources](#) from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security

(CARES) Act; FEMA; community volunteer hours; and/or in-kind donations from the private sector. Still, more investment is urgently needed. The 2020 Menino Survey of Mayors found that 38 percent of mayors expect dramatic cuts to park and recreation budgets due to lingering economic challenges, with 80 percent of mayors expecting racial health disparities to widen.

A global pandemic, an economic crisis, a racial justice awakening and the changing demographics and needs of our communities call for a reimagined, diversified and expanded park and recreation sector capable of meeting this moment and forging a pathway to recovery. Investment is needed to confront health and economic disparities, rebuild our infrastructure, stimulate economic activity, strengthen and broaden our community and public health systems — including parks and recreation — and heal our communities.

LEVERAGING PARKS AND RECREATION TO SUPPORT RECOVERY AND PREPARE FOR FUTURE THREATS

Park and recreation professionals can leverage the power of parks and recreation to advance social justice, strengthen environmental resiliency, and improve health and well-being so all people can thrive. To do this, professionals — as well as our federal, state and local elected officials — should prioritize the following five principles in current and future policy opportunities:

1. [Center Equity and Challenge Structural Racism](#)
2. [Invest in Parks and Recreation as a Social Determinant of Health](#)
3. [Combat Climate Change With Green Infrastructure](#)
4. [Establish Community-Based Supports That Focus Holistically on Health](#)
5. [Strengthen and Prepare the Workforce and Champion Economic Opportunity](#)

At the federal level, NRPA is committed to representing parks and recreation's essential services and infrastructure by advocating for funding and legislation that improve access to open spaces, recreational opportunities and community support services for all people. With the support and advocacy of those in the park and recreation field, NRPA will continue to urge federal elected officials to adapt these principles and legislative actions.

“If the public didn’t know how important parks were, they now know that we are. We need to build on this momentum.”

— Roslyn Johnson, Director, Baltimore County (Maryland) Department of Recreation and Parks

1. Center Equity and Challenge Structural Racism. We must collectively center equity to harness the full potential of our communities, in partnership and in power with those who are most impacted by racist systems, policies and institutions, so we can achieve justice and all people can truly thrive. We must engage our leaders to identify and promote widely the policies, trainings and programs that are centered in the strengths and assets of communities and promote inclusion.

- **Park and recreation professionals** must examine their own relationships with power and privilege in society and within their organizations. Professionals should invest in their own individual diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) journeys to better understand and identify opportunities to embed a racial justice lens into all aspects of their work.
- **Local elected officials** should prioritize an [equity-based master plan](#) to better understand the history and current barriers to park access and create a plan to ensure that everyone has equitable access to quality parks, green spaces, recreation facilities and programs that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming.
- **Federal government officials** can support and advance relevant legislation and programs that increase equitable access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Some examples of pertinent legislative actions include:
 - Support the Public Health Funding Restoration Act to increase funding for the Prevention and Public Health Fund to improve our nation’s chronically underfunded public health system.
 - Support the Outdoors for All Act, which would increase funding for the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Grant Program.
 - Support the Transit to Trails Act to fund projects that connect underserved communities to green spaces.

Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation — Prioritizing Racial Equity in the Midst of Two Pandemics

At the same time the United States became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, a second pandemic sparked new conversations. In the spring of 2020, the murders of [George Floyd](#), [Breonna Taylor](#) and [Ahmaud Aubrey](#), along with the shooting of [Jacob Blake](#) (all of whom were unarmed) sparked new conversations about police brutality, the movement for Black lives, and how Black and brown people experience the United States in vastly different ways than their white counterparts. With 51 percent of residents lacking access to a park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home, Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation has known this to be true for many years, taking several steps to acknowledge, challenge and dismantle systemic racism. The confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the burgeoning racial justice awakening further ignited a sense of urgency across the county and reinforced the agency’s commitment to leading with equity in their COVID-19 response and in the future.

Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation passed an equity measure (Measure A) focusing more than 30 percent of the resources to high-park need communities and communities of color in 2017, which positioned the agency to understand and address the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 through its response efforts. The agency supported county-wide emergency response efforts with a focus on communities of color, often those same communities that lack access to a quality park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home and those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. These services included food distribution, COVID-19 testing sites, activating 24 shelters for unhoused individuals, providing air-conditioned indoor cooling centers during hot summer days, and scaling up emergency day camp and childcare programs for essential workers capable of serving 1,700 youth. This past summer, they provided more than 84,000 lunches and snacks to youth. In partnership with the Los Angeles Food Bank, 20 food distribution events were conducted at parks in the summer and fall serving 28,420 households. Each food kit is approximately 50 pounds, which feeds a family of four for a week. To date, more than 1,421,000 pounds of food has been distributed at parks.

Despite funding challenges and an \$18.5 million budget cut, the agency’s staff harnessed their commitment to equity and is prioritizing essential services, as well as park investments and infrastructure in communities with high need, putting projects in communities with adequate park access on hold. As the agency looks toward the future, Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation recognizes that parks and recreation have the power to heal communities not only from the trauma of COVID-19, but also from the trauma of racism — our longest-lasting pandemic.

2. Invest in Parks and Recreation as a Social Determinant of Health. As more people discovered the essential value of parks, green spaces and trails during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stark inequities associated with access to quality parks and recreation services were further highlighted. Elected officials support investing in parks and recreation as a vital community service and an upstream, preventative solution that advances health outcomes and overall well-being.

- **Park and recreation professionals** can create authentic partnerships with Black, Indigenous and people of color-led organizations and communities to prioritize funding for community-driven projects and programs in high-park need areas, so that everyone has the full benefits of parks and recreation.
- **Local elected officials** can create a task force that brings together partners from key sectors — housing, healthcare, parks and recreation, education, social services, transportation, etc. — to better understand community conditions, cultivate trust, analyze data and create upstream solutions that leverage city resources.
- **Federal government officials** can support relevant legislation and programs that improve the distribution and analysis of data on health outcomes from COVID-19 to identify and advance policy solutions that expand usage of community-based programs. Some examples of pertinent legislative actions include:

- Support the Improving Social Determinants of Health Act, establishing programs to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities by addressing community conditions.
- Support Child Nutrition Reauthorization to ensure that all food-insecure youth have access to healthy food in community-based settings.
- Support growth of the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program and SNAP-Ed program to connect low-food-access communities to fresh, healthy and local foods.



In Berea, Kentucky, volunteers from community organizations, such as Berea Kids Eat, Berea Community School and the local park and recreation department, work together to distribute food to those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Courtesy of Berea College.

Parks, trails and open spaces serve important functions for recreation and green space in communities, but incorporating green infrastructure into parks can help boost their overall benefit to communities through increased health, environmental, social and economic benefits.

Green infrastructure is a set of natural features (e.g., trees, bioswales and rain gardens) that provide environmental benefits to a community (e.g., reducing flood risk, storing and treating stormwater, reducing the urban heat island effect and filtering air). Done well, green infrastructure also can enhance human health and provide environmental and social benefits through increased economic development, reduced energy use and other functions that communities need.

3. Combat Climate Change With Green Infrastructure. Climate change is causing major physical, chemical and ecological changes to the planet, while concurrently impacting human health — physically and mentally — and disease across the globe. **Greener parks** serve as essential infrastructure capable of combating the causes and mitigating the impacts of climate change, while providing additional environmental, health, social and economic benefits to communities.

- **Park and recreation professionals** can partner with other municipal departments, such as water utilities or public works, transportation and environmental and public health, to catalyze greener parks as a solution to climate change. Together, municipal departments can share project costs, construction and/or maintenance of these projects.

- o **Local elected officials** should prioritize and incentivize green infrastructure in parks as a multi-benefit approach to mitigating climate impacts. At the local level, cities also can establish a resiliency officer (at the cabinet level) to work with municipal leadership or a task force to examine your community’s response to the global pandemic. Lessons from your community’s response can be repurposed for other disasters, both man-made and natural.
- o **Federal government officials** must prioritize relevant legislation and programs that remove barriers, incentivize and fund projects that increase resilience and the connection to parks. Some examples of pertinent legislative actions include:
 - Increase green infrastructure investment and local expansion projects via an infrastructure-focused post-COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery package.
 - Fund FEMA’s Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, which will fund non-structural flood mitigation projects and resilient infrastructure.
 - Expand the use of funding and financing under the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) and the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) to increase investment in green infrastructure projects.

For resources on additional policy solutions, communications tools and advocacy support for greener parks, please visit nrpa.org/GreenerParksforHealth.

4. Establish Community-Based Supports That Focus Holistically on Health. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already alarming chronic disease, substance use and mental health crisis, while plunging many communities and individuals further into poverty, social isolation, food insecurity and general uncertainty. Parks and recreation offers a solution to many of these challenges — supporting those experiencing adversity and trauma by providing spaces and programs that provide access to physical activity, healthy foods, social connection and social-emotional learning, green spaces and social resources.

- o **Park and recreation professionals** can build more purposeful and intentional partnerships to co-locate holistic health programming and services, transforming agencies into [community wellness hubs](#).
- o **Local elected officials** should adopt community-wide training for frontline staff, including park and recreation professionals, to better support community members and build a deeper understanding of mental health and substance use disorders, trauma, adverse childhood experiences and adverse community environments.



Animated video explaining parks and recreation's role as community wellness hubs. Courtesy NRPA.

- o **Federal government officials** should support relevant legislation and programs that expand access to community healthcare services. Some examples of pertinent legislative actions include:
 - Increase funding for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Youth Mentoring programs and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Drug-Free Communities program, supporting community-wide and prevention-focused interventions to the substance use crisis.
 - Support the Mental Health Services for Students Act and the RISE from Trauma Act to provide comprehensive mental health services to youth and address trauma in communities.
 - Support reauthorization of the Older Americans Act to provide resources for local communities to combat loneliness and social isolation in older adults.

West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department — Prioritizing Mental Health by Leveraging Technology

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department already had begun to place mental health at the core of its work. Recognizing growing concerns across the community, particularly among youth regarding mental health conditions like depression and anxiety and substance misuse, the department leveraged its unique relationship with the school district to train staff via school psychologists to improve their ability to better serve youth and families experiencing mental health challenges. The department also joined a community-wide mental health coalition, which supported access to new, innovative ideas, additional resources and staff training. In partnership with the local health department, along with hospitals and health service agencies, the department hosted events to increase awareness of mental health disorders each May (Mental Health Awareness month). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these relationships were crucial as the department adjusted and expanded its existing programming to serve the rising mental health needs of community members.

To stay true to its mission throughout COVID-19, the department had to adjust to continue supporting community and maintain engagement. It developed a 30-day yoga program, offering a free yoga session every morning and serving everyone from youth to older adults. In lieu of a fee for the class, donations were accepted and provided to local charities offering COVID-19 relief services. The yoga class provided the opportunity for community members to engage in physical activity and mindfulness and to connect with one another. Knowing how powerful movement and laughter can be, one of the other creative innovations supporting community health and cohesion were driveway dance parties. Department staff drove through the community with music playing, encouraging people to dance along from the safety of their driveways.

One of the main roles of the department is to provide out-of-school time programming for youth, serving a high percentage of low-income families. Adjusting to COVID-19 physical distancing and shelter-in-place guidelines, the department ran several virtual camps over the course of the spring and summer of 2020. This allowed youth to continue to socialize with caring adults outside the home as well as their peers, while providing educational and enriching content. Staff supported these programs in group settings and via one-on-one catering to each individual student's needs — extra help with reading or math, or just spending time talking. In the fall to support the back-to-school transition, the department scaled up in-person childcare options for students in the school district's special education program. These creative opportunities provided support for parents and caregivers who were not able to work from home and looking for solutions to balance a new normal.

The department learned many lessons from scaling up virtual programming, including how vital the virtual platforms have been to continue reaching stakeholders and supporting community members and what broader challenges families are navigating during this challenging time. This information will be invaluable and used to inform future community-wide efforts and family engagement opportunities.

5. Strengthen and Prepare the Workforce and Champion Economic Opportunity. A global pandemic, an economic crisis, a racial justice awakening, and the changing demographics and needs of our communities call for a reimagined, diversified and expanded workforce that can meet the challenges of this moment and forge a sustainable pathway to recovery. Parks and recreation provides a viable mechanism through which a more fair and just workforce can be created to prepare emerging professionals for rewarding jobs, and jump start local economies while healing our communities.

- o **Park and recreation professionals** can identify “shovel ready” projects that could be implemented quickly and put people back to work to help revitalize communities and strengthen infrastructure capacity, climate resiliency and public health benefits for all. Simultaneously, parks and recreation can leverage community events and activities to support the economic revitalization of small businesses while enhancing ties across the community.
- o **Local elected officials** can establish programs and policies that leverage educational and workforce opportunities to grow and empower the next generation of public service providers and close the racial wealth gap.
- o **Federal government officials** can support and advance relevant legislation and programs that provide the necessary resources and educational tools, as well as pave the way for public-private partnerships. Some of these policy actions include:
 - Renewing the Conservation Corps Act, which provides financial resources to local parks to handle deferred park maintenance as a means to put people back to work.
 - Promoting thoughtful and equitable economic opportunities via the reduction of maintenance backlog on public lands through the unprecedented funding provided by the Great American Outdoors Act.
 - Incorporating workforce development funding opportunities via an infrastructure-focused, post-COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery package.

For the latest information on NRPA’s legislative priorities, activities and advocacy efforts, as well as legislative issues impacting parks and recreation, please visit [NRPA’s Advocacy webpage](#).

| THE FUTURE OF PARKS AND RECREATION

While the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significant inequities across our communities, it also has clearly demonstrated how park and recreation agencies’ role has expanded to support not only outdoor recreational opportunities, but also essential community services and infrastructure. Park and recreation professionals swiftly mobilized to keep parks, trails and green spaces open to support physical and mental health, while coordinating with other government and private-sector entities to deliver vital services and programs to support their communities, even while facing declines in revenues and budgets. Park and recreation professionals are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic — and will continue to be in the months and years to come. In planning for a post-COVID future, significant lessons can be gleaned

from the local innovations, demonstrated leadership dynamics and expanded capabilities that are helping park and recreation agencies contribute to creating stronger and more resilient communities.

NRPA is dedicated to rallying park and recreation professionals, advocates and decision-makers to champion parks and recreation and secure the investment, recognition and dedication needed to sustain the spaces and services it provides. While this report is merely a summary of what has been learned during the first year of COVID-19, NRPA will continue to study how the pandemic is shaping the future of the field while developing resources, advocating for investments and recovery, and facilitating dialogue among park and recreation professionals.

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In Berea, Kentucky, meals prepared by Berea College and Berea Community School food service kitchens are distributed to children in need using a school bus. Courtesy of Berea College.


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