



COVID-19 AND PARKS AND RECREATION: MAKING THE CASE FOR THE FUTURE

A Communications Toolkit

| INTRODUCTION

Park and recreation professionals have proven themselves effective providers of essential community infrastructure and services. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, they swiftly stepped into new roles to protect, support, strengthen and heal their communities, including providing scaled up childcare programs and learning centers; offering facilities to shelter people without housing; managing food distribution programs; and leveraging park and recreation spaces and staff to provide needed health and social services, 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.

Despite park and recreation agencies' positive impacts on health, climate resiliency and economic well-being, parks and recreation has continued to face significant budget cuts since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we look toward a post-COVID-19 future, it is critical that parks and recreation continues its role as a catalyst for equity, climate-readiness and overall well-being, as well as maintains its ability to equip park and recreation professionals, key stakeholders and local champions with the tools needed to advocate for increased support of these vital systems. Indeed, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) envisions a future in which the full power of parks and recreation will be recognized and utilized to create a better life for all people.

“We have parks and recreational facilities that are really capable of providing needed services for the public. But on the other hand, our primary role is to get people back outdoors at these sites. I hope coming out of this, we are seen as not only essential from an emergency standpoint, which we are, but also as essential providers of quality spaces, services and recreation, which is really our mission.”

— Dan West, Director, Broward County Parks and Recreation Division

About This Resource

This resource was developed in coordination with *Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Parks and Recreation: Response and Recovery* report. It provides key messaging to equip park and recreation professionals and advocates with the knowledge and tools to communicate about the essential role parks and recreation has in the overall well-being of communities — especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These messages can help garner support for parks and recreation from communities, philanthropic partners and elected officials.

This resource also presents ways to effectively communicate how parks and recreation has been essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides specific talking points, tips and graphics that can be tailored to showcase the role your agency has played and continues to play in ensuring your community's well-being. Sharing information about your agency's contributions through data, storytelling, imagery and other means is critical to securing necessary support and funding. It is incumbent on the more than 160,000 full-time and the hundreds of thousands of part-time and seasonal park and recreation professionals to help elected officials and key stakeholders understand that well-funded park and recreation systems advance equity, resiliency, and health and well-being.

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.

KEY TALKING POINTS FOR SUPPORT

The following talking points can be used to make the case for park and recreation funding. You can use them when creating a presentation for elected officials, adding copy to your website, creating posts for social media or putting together a fact sheet. Keep in mind, talking points always should be tailored to your audience's interests and preferred learning style (written vs. oral/video, stories vs. data).

General

- **Big Picture Message: *Parks and recreation is essential.*** Park and recreation professionals provide communities with places for people to maintain physical and mental health. They provide places for children to exercise and socialize. Park and recreation professionals serve as first responders by setting up shelters after natural disasters. They provide green spaces to mitigate climate disasters. They offer free meals to low-income children and families. And they have stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide safe spaces for virtual learning. *No other local agency serves communities with this breadth of services so cost effectively.*
- **Communities overwhelmingly view parks as essential.** According to the [2020 NRPA Engagement with Parks Report](#), 82 percent of U.S. adults agree that parks and recreation is an essential local government service, and 72 percent are more likely to vote for a local elected official who makes park and recreation funding a key priority.
- **Park and recreation professionals are first responders and provide essential services.** Parks and recreation provides critical emergency response and disaster recovery services, such as becoming shelters after hurricanes, and they are critical to climate-readiness.
- **Parks are critical to the COVID-19 response.** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, [park and recreation agencies have stepped in to provide essential pandemic response in their communities](#), including distributing meals to older adults, families and youth; opening agency facilities to serve as emergency shelters; providing childcare for essential staff; and utilizing agency facilities and spaces as COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites.
 - o According to the [December 2020 Parks Snapshot survey](#), 83 percent of park and recreation agencies previously offering childcare continued to do so during the pandemic, including providing this valuable service to healthcare providers and first responders. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, park and recreation agencies provided childcare opportunities when many other entities closed.
- **Park and recreation agencies can do more now and in the future.** With more financial support, park and recreation agencies are well-suited to lead communities into a healthier, more equitable and resilient future.
 - o According to the December 2020 Parks Snapshot survey, 7 in 10 park and recreation leaders envision their agency supporting community mental health and well-being more intentionally in the recovery process, including offering in-person and virtual mental health programming, building partnerships with social workers and healthcare providers, training staff to better support mental health and conducting well-being checks with community members.
- **Park and recreation professionals feed and educate the nation's youth.** Parks and recreation is a leading provider of childcare, summer meals and out-of-school time programming. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service estimates that more than 10,700 Summer Food Service Program sites are park and recreation facilities, community centers, local government programs, playgrounds, swimming pools and nature centers. In addition, NRPA — in partnership with the Walmart Foundation through its grant-funded programs — has calculated that 98 million meals have been served to 4.7 million youth in more than 325 communities since 2010.
- **Park and recreation facilities provide access to physical activity for all.** Park and recreation spaces give all families and individuals opportunities to boost physical and mental health and offer young children an opportunity to develop social skills, regardless of their socioeconomic status.
 - o According to the [May 2020 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll, 83 percent of U.S. adults agree that visiting their local parks, trails and open spaces have been essential for their mental and physical well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Specific

National data support parks and recreation's contributions to communities and show how they reflect local initiatives. But it is important that park and recreation professionals share data points that are specific to their communities – highlighting their successes and impacts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The following talking points are examples of data you can use in your marketing and communications:

- Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, **[AGENCY NAME]** has played an essential role in our community by **[LIST ESSENTIAL SERVICES SUCH AS PROVIDING CHILDCARE, PROVIDING TESTING SITES, ETC.]**
- Since March 2020, **[AGENCY NAME]** has provided more than **[NUMBER]** meals to community members facing food insecurity due to COVID-19.
- **[AGENCY NAME]** saw a **[NUMBER]** percent increase in park and/or trail usage during the pandemic, illustrating the vital role these public spaces play in our community's health and well-being.
- In addition to taking on additional responsibilities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, such as **[LIST ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES]**, **[AGENCY NAME]** has continued to provide our core services, including **[LIST CORE SERVICES SUCH AS MAINTAINING TRAILS AND OPEN SPACE, OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS, ETC.]**
- Since the pandemic began, **[AGENCY NAME]** has increased our services and offerings, including **[X,Y and Z]**, that we plan to incorporate into post-COVID-19 programs and services. However, our budgets have been cut by **[NUMBER]** percent. An investment in our community's park and recreation programs and services is an investment in the continued health, vitality and resiliency of the people who live in **[COMMUNITY NAME]**.



Natural and Cultural Resources Manager Joe Pruitt distributes water during COVID-19. Courtesy of Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation, Georgia.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATION

As you use this toolkit to craft your communications, consider asking yourself the following questions and tailoring your message appropriately to ensure that the message is getting across. Think about your intended audience and identify what topics matter to them to boost the odds that you can change attitudes, behaviors or beliefs. Use language, stories and data that align parks and recreation with the issues most important to that audience. Finally, be concise in written materials — elected officials and other stakeholders are usually trying to balance several priorities at once.

- **Who is your audience?** Elected officials may have different priorities than a neighborhood association or potential funder.
- **What does your audience care about?** Different groups of people have different priorities. Tying your message to your audience’s values will help you connect with them in a way they can understand.

When constructing message points in support of parks and recreation, consider constructing them in the following way:

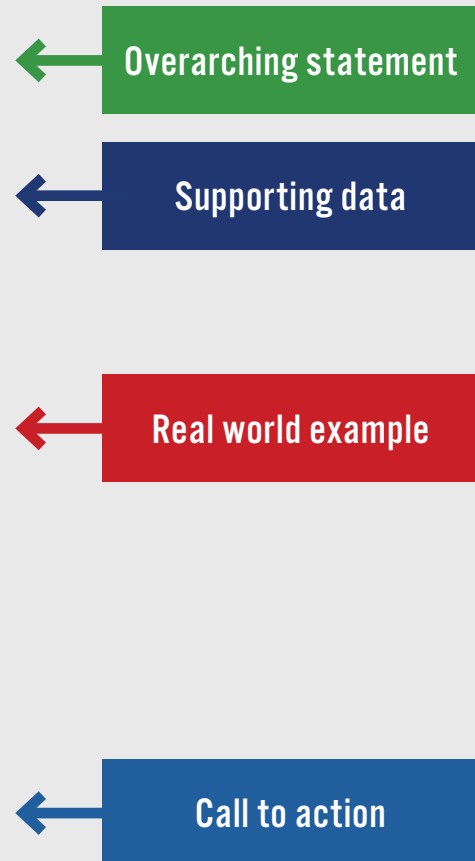
- Overarching statement or idea (what do they need to know?)
- Supporting data (how can this be proven?)
- Real-world example and story (where has this happened?)
- Importance of statement or idea (why does this matter to them?)
- Call-to-action (what can they do about it?)

Fictional Example of How to Construct a Message

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down our senior centers, park and recreation staff served an essential role in ensuring the physical and mental well-being of Smithville’s older adults. Park and recreation staff placed more than 5,000 calls to older adults in our community and increased meal service to older adults by 20 percent.

Mary Washington, a 90-year-old Smithville resident, said that without park and recreation staff, she may have not made it through the pandemic. “Not only did their phone calls make me feel less lonely, on one call, Shonda from the parks department detected a slur in my speech and was able to direct medical attention to me. Without her, I may not be here.”

Given their existing relationship with Smithville older adults, park and recreation staff were best suited to provide this essential support during a critical time. Currently, the park and recreation department faces a budget cut of 25 percent, putting our older adult services at risk. Given your interest in increasing services for Smithville’s older adults, I urge you to support Bond Measure 221 to protect critical park and recreation funding.



As always, it is best to be as specific as possible in your messaging based on the audience. The example provided above might be great for a city council member who has championed older adults, but not as effective for someone who is focused solely on economic opportunities for the community. Tailor messaging based on a person's interests and preferred communication style.

Graphics

Having a visual representation of your data also can be critical in engaging with your target audience. By using your agency's COVID-19 response information as well as related statistics (e.g., 2 million meals served), you can tailor the graphic on the right to showcase the vast number of services your agency provided to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The templates to the right are set up in Canva, a free, online graphic design tool. There are a few versions to choose from and customize. By using this template, you agree to keep NRPA's branding and source information in place. You will need a free Canva account to access the templates.

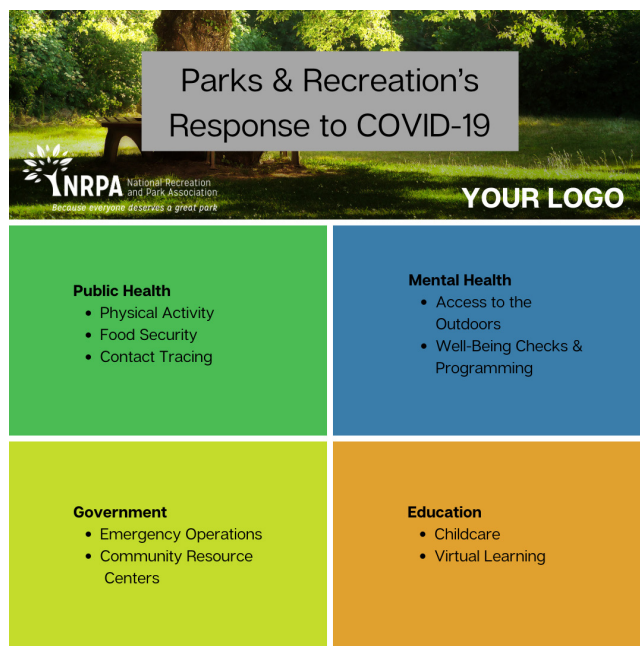
The template can be accessed at: bit.ly/3szRJ7N



Advocacy

Communicating the essential role of your agency goes hand-in-hand with more intentional and strategic advocacy efforts. Park and recreation professionals and advocates can champion additional investment and support of parks and recreation by increasing engagement and advocacy of local elected officials and key decision-makers. It is important to remind people in positions of power of your agency's response efforts during the pandemic, as well as the unique opportunities parks and recreation presents to advance social justice, strengthen environmental resiliency, and improve health and well-being, preventing future health, social, environmental and economic challenges. In order to achieve this, park and recreation professionals and advocates should:

- Establish relationships with new champions from diverse sectors (other governmental sectors, private institutions, businesses, etc.) to advocate for shared priorities and goals.
- Focus on building authentic partnerships to generate grassroots support by engaging strong community voices, leaders and youth, and ensuring that all are represented.
- Schedule meetings or send relevant reports to your community's elected officials and their staff to ensure they fully understand the importance of your agency's work. You can tailor the messaging (with suggestions from the communications section above) and provide key statistics and stories from your community to help strengthen your points.
- Design a coordinated public/social media campaign that presents data to elected officials that highlight how your agency has provided critical services and infrastructure to communities during the pandemic and how these services may change post-pandemic.



| NEXT STEPS

We encourage you to use this toolkit to help galvanize support and funding for the critical work being done by park and recreation professionals and their agencies. As NRPA continues to advocate for resources and funding, we hope you will join us by sharing your agency's story with your local elected officials, business councils, state officials and other decision-makers.

NRPA has many additional free and/or low-cost learning opportunities as you work to expand your advocacy efforts, including:

- [Advocacy by Design: Innovations in Parks and Public Places for Building Diverse Constituencies](#)
- [Public Relations: Communicating More with Less](#)
- [How to Talk Persuasively about Greener Parks](#)

NRPA is constantly updating our resources for advocacy and COVID-19 recovery efforts. See the latest at nrpa.org.

| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

COVID-19 and Parks and Recreation: Making the Case for the Future was developed as a tool for park and recreation professionals to translate the information from the *Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Parks and Recreation: Response and Recovery* resource into key messaging. To view the latest research, position statements, infographics, learning opportunities and more as they relate to COVID-19 and parks and recreation, please visit nrpa.org/COVID-19.

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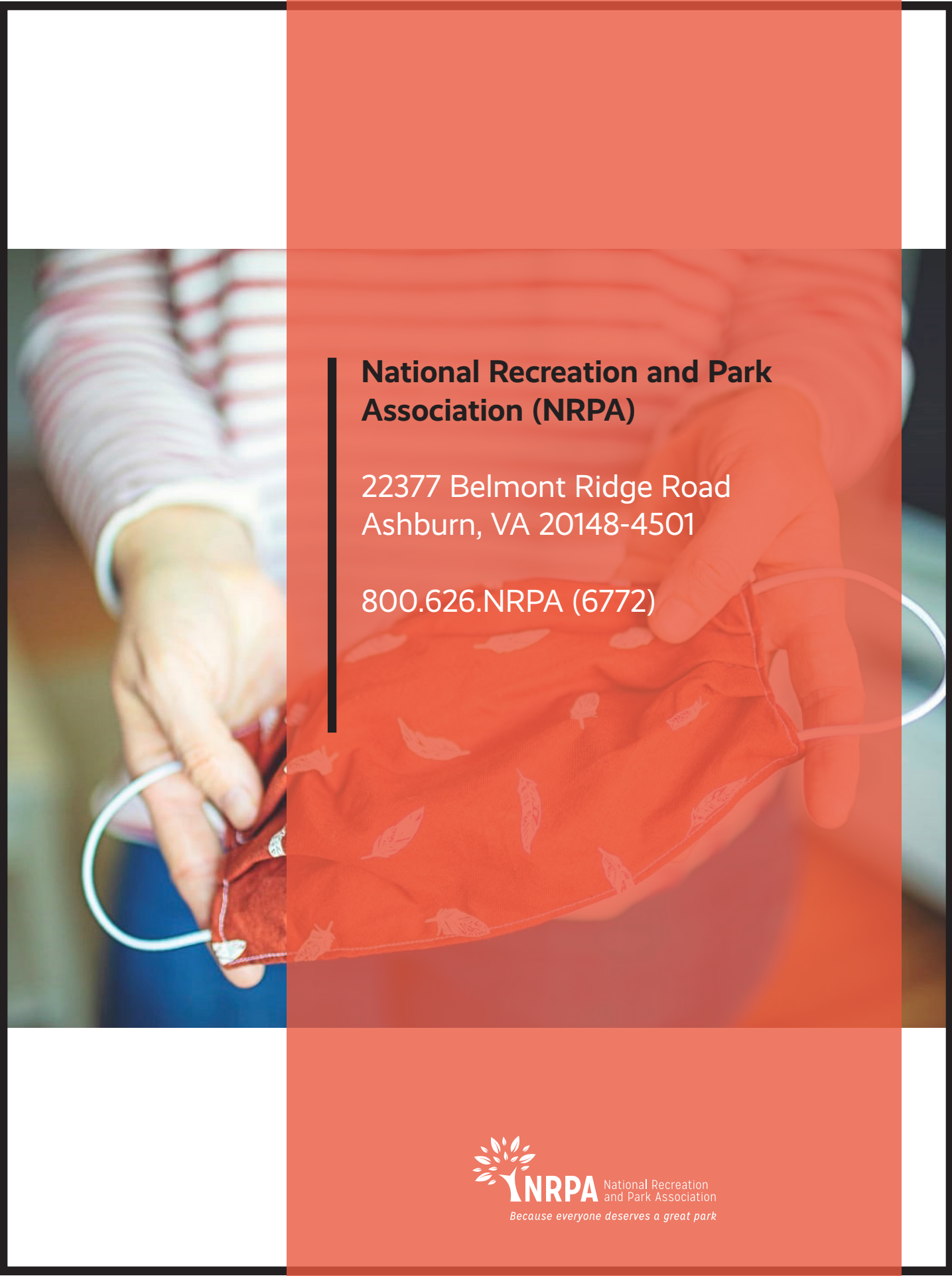


Berea Kids Eat Program Director Martina Leforce helps prepare food for children in need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Courtesy of Berea College.

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