

The Mentoring Program

Lewiston, Maine, places a high priority on supporting youth to reduce incidents of drug use and gang violence. Across the city, community institutions are rallying to this call. The Lewiston Recreation Department has stepped up to the plate by providing low-barrier youth mentoring experiences. The mentoring program takes place at the Lewiston Armory and occurs every Wednesday and Thursday from 2:15 p.m. to 3:45 p.m. Primary activities revolve around sports, such as providing an open gym for basketball and volunteering opportunities to support the department's programming or special events. Department staff serve as the mentors for the program. By listening to the participants, they learned that instead of having a rigid schedule for discussing mentoring-related topics, they needed to let conversations arise organically. Over time, the youth opened-up to share what they wanted to share, when they wanted to share it.

Staff understanding of how to implement mentoring within their community evolved throughout their involvement in an NRPA-led youth mentoring grant. Staff originally set-out to provide both group and one-on-one mentoring to youth in their community. But, because of difficulties recruiting mentors and hiring a staff member to lead a formalized program, this program shifted over time to reflect a less structured, more youth-led group mentoring approach. The resulting model leans heavily on some of their department's greatest assets – their recreation center and staff expertise. This approach up being the best fit for their mentoring program designed to serve a core group of youth (ages 12 to 17) who see the recreation center as a safe space.

Impacts and Successes

When the grant started in 2022, many of the young people continued to experience the negative social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Acting out and engaging in inappropriate behaviors were commonplace. But over time, staff have seen these behaviors fade away. They have observed improvements in managing emotions, opening up/sharing more, and an overall increase in enthusiasm. As participants have grown to know the staff/mentors better they have developed a great level of respect for them, the space, the rules and the program. A new culture has taken over; older students are now modeling positive behaviors for the younger participants.

Many of the older participants who graduated from the program have been hired back as employees. These employment opportunities evolved from their engagement as program participants when they volunteered with other programming in the evenings supporting youth and adult sports. These hiring practices have also helped to diversify the department staff.

"I get excited about them [participants] getting an inside look at recreation because you hope they grasp onto it and say, yes, this can be a career. Having those kids come through our mentoring program and now having that 'Staff' shirt on makes us feel good." – Nicole Welch, Director of Lewiston Recreation

Advice for Professionals

Encourage staff involvement. Having staff involved in the mentoring program is gratifying. It provides a direct opportunity to impact the lives of young people. In many aspects of a recreation professional's job, that direct impact is not as readily observable. Being involved in this kind of mentoring experience gives the staff member with validation and pride in the work they are doing.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Lean into the current programs being offered and see how mentoring can be layered on top of them. Agencies might not need to start a brand new program to provide mentoring.



Mentees operating the basketball scoreboard.
Photo Credit: Lewiston Recreation Department



Mentees playing basketball.
Photo Credit: Lewiston Recreation Department



A mentor and mentee connecting over basketball.
Photo Credit: Lewiston Recreation Department

A Safe Space Story: During the first year of the program, a middle school participant walked out of school and headed to the recreation center. He didn't run home, he didn't go out on the streets, he came to the rec center lobby to calm down. In that moment, the rec center and staff provided a safe space to re-center himself before returning to school.

Mentoring within Parks and Recreation

Parks and recreation is a natural fit for mentoring; the profession already offers a variety of opportunities for young people to get involved. Additional advantages include: 1) staff are highly connected within communities and can quickly and creatively make things happen and 2) staff can stretch budgets to do a lot with a little.

The department will continue to offer the mentoring program relatively unchanged on Wednesdays and Thursdays. However, they are prioritizing more opportunities for girls and look to implement a similar program specifically for this group on Fridays.