

Forging Connections Across Generations

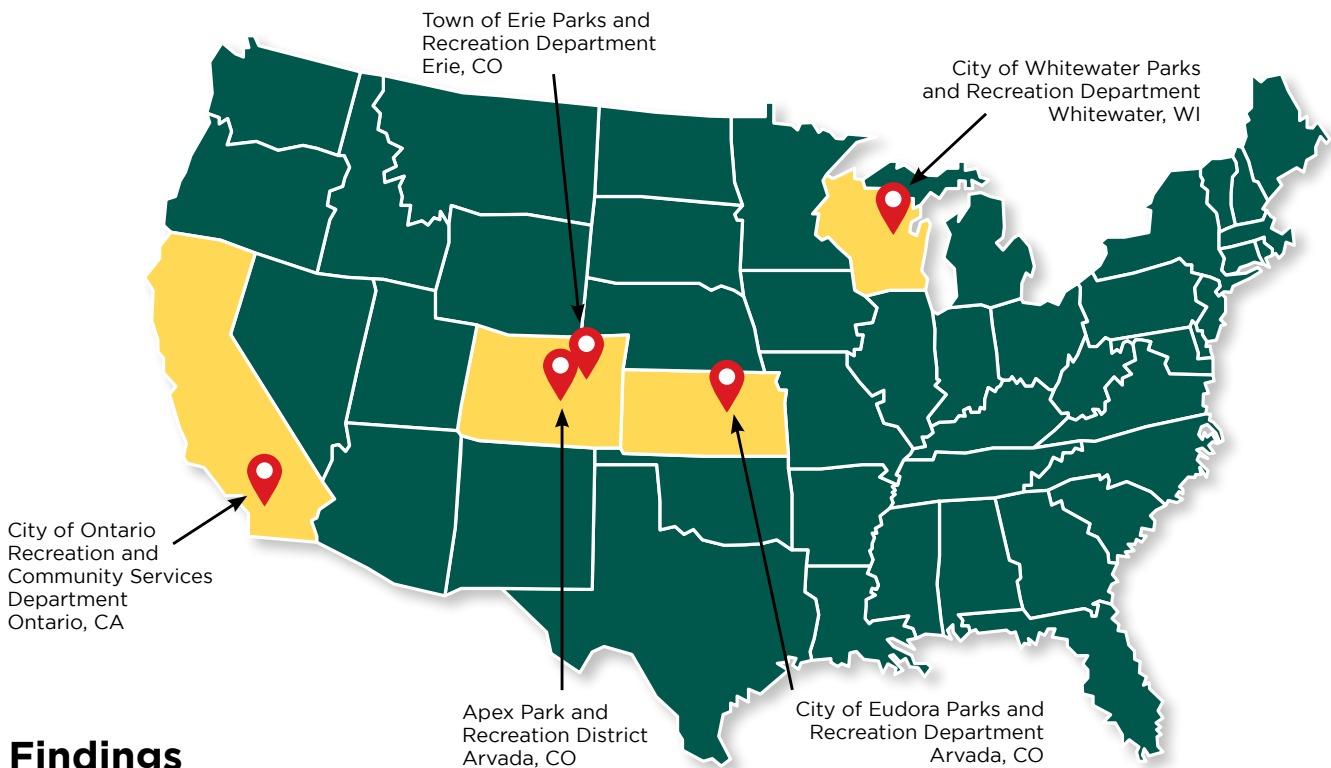
A Case Study Resource

Introduction

From community centers to community events, park and recreation departments are an essential provider of older adult programs and services. The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) conducted research to understand the role of park and recreation spaces and services to support older adults and foster social and intergenerational connections. This case study resource highlights research findings from five park and recreation agencies that have demonstrated excellence in supporting older adults and forging connections across generations.

Approach

NRPA researchers conducted interviews with staff at five park and recreation sites. The discussions centered on the kinds of older adult programming their agency offers, how these programs provide opportunities for social and intergenerational connections, perceived gaps/challenges, opportunities and emerging trends, and how park and recreation agencies are uniquely positioned to support healthy aging. Researchers also interviewed community members involved in the five agencies' older adult programming to understand the benefits received from involvement in these programs and how the programs have provided opportunities for social and intergenerational connections.



Findings

Social Connection

Older adult programs provide ample opportunities for social connection. Often, connecting socially with others is as big of a draw for participants as the program itself. Providing programs (e.g., fitness classes, sewing and bingo), settings (e.g., game/reading rooms and shared spaces for meals) and amenities (e.g., refreshments) are strategies to encourage these kinds of informal connections.

“Everything we do gives [older adults] time to talk before, after and during the program. A lot of seniors need to be able to socialize.”
 – Erie (Colorado) Parks and Recreation Department.



Parks and recreation combats social isolation among older adults through intentional outreach to those who are unsure about how to get involved. For many agencies, an overarching goal is to get older adults through the front door. This is achieved through word of mouth (e.g., “bring a friend”) or more structured programs that connect older adults to the agency’s programming, services and broader community offerings.

“It is truly heartwarming ... to see the bonds and relationships formed organically by just being in the same space/building because of programs or opportunities we can provide.”
- Eudora (Kansas) Parks and Recreation Department

Connecting Generations

Parks and recreation links generations. One way agencies facilitate intergenerational connections is by providing opportunities for families to have experiences and make memories together. Offering programs for older adults and younger loved ones is a specific focus for agencies. While many of these “within family” experiences center on special events around major holidays, others — such as movie nights, day/overnight trips and volunteer experiences — provide year-round opportunities for families to bond:

“I think the younger generation sometimes can be intimidated by older people. To do those kinds of programs, especially within families, helps build a little bit more continuity within the family.”
- C.M. age 68, Arvada (Colorado) resident

Another strategy is engaging school-aged children. Staff shared how they have integrated older adults into existing youth-centric programs, such as summer camps, community-wide special events and teen programming:

“Teens and older adults were able to go back and forth to see how their experiences were different, how much our seniors have viewed their past experiences like life achievements, goals and stories. They could teach the younger population how to get where they are, and vice versa.”
- Ontario (California) Recreation and Community Services Department

Intergenerational connections also arise when older adults interact with younger park and recreation professionals. While trust might take time to develop between older adults and younger staff, these hesitations can be overcome by staff through demonstrations of competence and compassion. Friendships that develop between older participants and younger staff/instructors are a real driving force for regular intergenerational contact.

While challenging, it is important for communities to move beyond the belief that older adult programs are strictly for those ages 55 and older. Where it makes sense, strive to engage participants of all ages in programs. This will allow for more intergenerational opportunities:

“There [are] a lot of programs that we leave broad on purpose because we don’t care if you’re interested in hiking if you’re 13 or you’re 94 and want to participate.”
- Eudora (Kansas) Parks and Recreation Department



Challenges and Opportunities

Stigma, building awareness/communication and the timing of programs are common challenges to providing intergenerational connections:

“I think just getting the word out that we’re not just a senior center. We do have programs that 18 and older can come to. I think it’s just removing that stigma.”

- Apex (Colorado) Park and Recreation District.

The differing schedules of older adults and younger generations (both youth and working adults) hinder the ability for many to provide intergenerational experiences.

There also are opportunities and emerging trends that enhance the prevalence of intergenerational programs within parks and recreation. Key opportunities included providing cross-generational programs within the family unit, leaning into volunteerism and developing new programs — both big community events and smaller-scale programs.

“I think finding community events that draw the entire community and figuring out which subjects and which things will bring everybody together and not have people think, ‘Oh, that’s just for older adults.’”

- Whitewater (Wisconsin) Parks and Recreation Department

The five case studies delve deeper into ways each agency has successfully implemented intergenerational programs. However, one trend was apparent across all agencies: the priority placed on providing intergenerational experiences is growing.

“One of the biggest new kinds of programming is how to involve these two different generations and how to really honor our older adults.”

- Apex (Colorado) Park and Recreation District

Conclusion

Parks and recreation is uniquely positioned to support older adults and provide opportunities for intergenerational connections. Across the country, parks and recreation offers safe, familiar, affordable, adaptable and supportive services that promote the health and vitality of older adults. For many, park and recreation programs and spaces have become a second home where older adults have a community that cares for them.

Park and recreation services are essential — providing younger and older generations critical opportunities to connect, learn and grow. No other public service brings the community together and has such a lasting impact:

“This center has made a huge impact in my life. When I started, I was in my 50s and I didn’t know where I was going to go once I was on disability. Coming here has made all the difference in my life.”

- C.M., age 68, Arvada (Colorado) resident



A Menu of Older Adult and Intergenerational Programs

The five participating agencies offer a wide variety of general older adult programs, as well as programs targeted at creating opportunities for intergenerational connections. The menu below can serve as an inspiration for park and recreation professionals looking to bolster their older adult and intergenerational program offerings.

General Older Adult Programs	Intergenerational Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Art Classes and Shows• Blood Pressure Checks• Cooking Classes• Dance Classes• Dinner Theater Experiences• Daytrips (educational, experiential)• Fitness Classes<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Balance+ Fit and Strong+ SilverSneakers+ Small Group Training+ Spinning+ Strength Bands+ Tai Chi+ Walking+ Warm Water Wellness+ Yoga+ Zumba• Games<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Billiards+ Card Games (variety)+ Mahjong+ Puzzles• Lunch Program/Meal Service• Movies (Indoors and Outdoors)• Outdoor<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Cookouts+ Day Hikes+ Garden Talks+ Paddling/Rafting+ Snow Shoeing• Pickleball• Picnic in the Park• Self-Defense Class• Special Events• Technology Classes• Toenail Clinics• Volunteer Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Art Shows• Birding Walks• Bingo• Book Reading• Cooking With Grandma• Dancing<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Folklore Dancing+ Line Dancing• Dinner and Dances• Fitness Classes<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Aquatics+ Walking/5Ks+ Yoga• Holidays/Special Events<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Cottontail Festival/Easter Egg Hunts+ Family Luau+ Family Valentine's Day Dance+ Pumpkin Patch+ Santa Pajama Party+ Winter Palooza and Polar Plunge• Music Concerts• Outdoor Movies• Pickleball• Recording a Podcast• Summer Camp• Teddy Bear Tea• Trips Specifically for Grandparents and Grandchildren• Visiting Lectures (in collaboration with a nearby university)• Weekly Fellowship With Students