



YOUTH AS HEALTH AND WELLNESS LEADERS IN LOCAL PARKS AND RECREATION: BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

The *Youth as Health and Wellness Leaders in Parks and Recreation: Best Practices Guide* is intended to be used by park and recreation (P&R) professionals and their agencies in the planning, design and implementation of youth-led health and wellness engagement initiatives and programs.

Volunteerism is a form of civic engagement which includes participation in deliberate social activities that benefit a cause, another individual or a community. Within the last two decades, volunteerism has become more prevalent and, now, significantly impacts social policy and social well-being around the world. While volunteerism has positive effects for both society and the volunteer, recent studies point out additional benefits associated with youth volunteerism.¹ Communities that utilize youth as volunteers and members of their workforce experience many benefits, including added capacity to carry out programming, increased communication and visibility, and fostering an inclusive environment that engages all stakeholders in the community. While communities as a whole benefit from youth engagement, youth also experience many positive effects, such as:

- Developing leadership and organizational skills
- Developing positive attitudes and self-perception
- Decreasing chance of engaging in risky behaviors
- Engaging in decision making
- Connecting to positive role models and experiences within their communities

Youth volunteerism and leadership can be a viable solution to some of our country's deepest issues, including addressing serious health concerns, such as rising rates of chronic disease, sedentary lifestyles and poor dietary habits in children, as well as helping teens navigate through the daily challenges they face and develop skills for the future.

It's also important for communities to engage all stakeholders — youth voice is powerful, as it brings those most impacted and most vulnerable into the conversation to ensure that decisions are equitable.



To evaluate the role of youth as health and wellness leaders in parks and recreation, NRPA funded three youth-led initiatives in 2016–2017 with support from the Target Corporation (in Chicago, Houston, Mesa). Each of these three communities piloted a Commit to Health: Youth Ambassadors initiative. The agencies were tasked with using youth as the catalyst for implementing healthy eating and physical activity practices and policies in their community.

- **Chicago, Illinois:** The Chicago Park District focused its efforts on creating a healthier environment at its park and recreation sites by educating teens through teamwork, job preparedness, enhancing self-esteem and living a healthy lifestyle. The teens worked directly with youth on implementing physical activity into the existing afterschool curriculum, but also advocated for changes to park and recreation policies that affected fitness center usage and vending machine policies.
- **Houston, Texas:** The Commit to Health: Youth Ambassador initiative served as a youth development and health education program for underserved Houston teens. The primary goal was to prepare teens to lead healthier lives and enhance the existing implementation of the Healthy Eating, Physical Activity (HEPA) standards at six community centers across the city. The teens accomplished this by leading Zumba® fitness classes, working directly with children in afterschool programs at the community center on physical activity and nutrition education, and connecting the existing conservation education program to their work to encourage a love for the environment.
- **Mesa, Arizona:** In Mesa, the park and recreation department utilized its Youth Ambassadors to advocate for, raise awareness and support a healthy culture shift in its youth sports-focused [Positive Play Project](#). The Positive Play Project fosters an inclusive and fun atmosphere for youth sports with an emphasis on positive coaching, injury prevention, hydration, concussion awareness and nutrition. Ambassadors provided education to parents, families, coaches and peers at sporting and community events about the importance of eating healthy and being physically active.



While each agency used unique approaches and worked to address its individual community needs and challenges, all were successful in recruiting a group of youth leaders and inspiring them to be health and wellness advocates and leaders. Their experiences, successes, challenges and lessons learned are highlighted throughout this document and serve as a guide to future youth-led, community-based health and wellness initiatives and programs.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

There are a number of public health concerns that impact communities on a daily basis, including a rise in chronic disease, an increase in health disparities between races and socioeconomic classes, reduced physical activity rates, lack of exposure to the outdoors and a lack of access to healthy foods. In addition to these well-documented health and wellness issues, there are additional teen-centered concerns, such as drug and alcohol use, violence, depression, stress levels and unprotected sex. Youth engagement programs may offer solutions to these critical issues.

Children's Health

This generation of youth suffers from a number of health issues, including physical inactivity, high exposure to digital media and screen time, low consumption of fruits and vegetables, and decreased time spent outdoors. Together, these components and other environmental factors contribute to high rates of childhood obesity, rising healthcare costs and military unpreparedness.

Despite recent declines in the prevalence of obesity among preschool-aged children, obesity rates for children and adolescents have remained consistent. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 17 percent of all children and adolescents are obese, with a higher prevalence among Hispanics (21.9 percent) and non-Hispanic blacks (19.5 percent).² Childhood obesity causes both immediate and long-term health effects for youth. Children who have obesity are more likely to have:

- High blood pressure and high cholesterol, both risk factors for cardiovascular disease
- Increased risk of impaired glucose tolerance, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes
- Breathing problems, such as asthma and sleep apnea
- Joint problems and musculoskeletal discomfort

Childhood obesity is also related to:

- Psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression
- Low self-esteem and lower self-reported quality of life
- Social problems, such as bullying and stigma

In addition, children who are obese or overweight are more likely to become adults with obesity, increasing their risk for developing serious health conditions, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer.³

Sedentary Lifestyles and Screen Time

Children are inactive for a majority of their day. While they receive vital services, including academic support, access to food and social experiences, during school hours, the majority of the day is spent in structured activities that require little to no movement. Physical education in nearly every state has been cut drastically over the last decade. According to the *2016 Shape of the Nation Report*, only Oregon and the District of Columbia are meeting the national recommendation for the time students spend weekly in physical education for both elementary and middle school. In addition, only 25 percent of children (ages 6–11) and adolescents (ages 12–19) engage in the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.⁴

When school is dismissed for the day, more than 10.2 million children attend out-of-school time (OST) programs. These vital services provide parents and caregivers with the additional hours they need to work, care for other children, run errands and tend to domestic responsibilities. While OST programs provide a safe environment with opportunities for children to receive academic assistance, a snack or meal, and to engage in play and unstructured activities, every OST program is not of the same quality. Some OST programs must meet licensing requirements or have adopted standards of care that address health concerns and are inclusive of program scheduling, food quality, screen time and daily physical activity minimums, but others have not. There is a wide range of inconsistency among OST programs and providers due to funding shortfalls, facility quality, transportation and staff capacity, leaving many children without access to quality care. In many cases, these children often reside in low-income, underserved communities.

In addition to children spending a majority of their time in environments that are not conducive to physical activity, there has also been a huge increase in media use among young people over the past decade. With the ever-growing presence of mobile technology and social media, American youth (ages 8–18) are clocking in at more than 7 ½ hours per day of screen time, including television, music, computer, video games and movies, and contributing to an abundance of negative health consequences.⁵ High screen time usage is a risk factor for:

- Increased body mass index and childhood obesity
- Increased food intake during media use
- Less healthy dietary habits
- Irregular sleep patterns
- Exposure to inaccurate, inappropriate or unsafe content
- Emotional and behavior problems⁶

Teen Engagement

American teens face a number of issues on a daily basis. *The 2004 Gallup Youth Survey: Major Issues and Trends* illustrated the wide range of issues teens have on their minds. Responses ranged from alcohol and drug consumption, peer pressure and academic stress, to financial/employment concerns and national and world politics.⁷ Today, according to the American Psychological Association, teens are exhibiting higher rates of stress than adults, with stress impacting healthy behaviors like exercising, sleeping well and eating healthy foods.⁸ In addition to these universal challenges that the majority of American teens face, many teens face added challenges, such as violence, gang and criminal activity, personal safety and racial bias. With so many unique challenges impacting teens, it's important for every community to offer safe places and spaces where they can share their voice, engage with leaders of the community and develop positive relationships. Meaningful civic engagement and workforce-development opportunities can help connect youth to these positive experiences, inspiring new stewards and leaders of the community and developing life skills.



HOW ARE PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES HELPING TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

Park and recreation agencies provide affordable and accessible health and wellness opportunities for all people. From large urban cities to small rural towns, park and recreation facilities unite communities through health and wellness, a connection to nature and a dedication to the idea that all people, no matter race, ethnicity or income level, have equitable access to quality spaces and programs that stimulate the mind and body. Park and recreation agencies are actively working to foster positive change through collaborative programs and policies that address the rising rates of obesity and chronic disease, connect people to nature and stimulate mental health benefits, and increase access to nutritious foods and physical activity opportunities.

The Role of Parks and Recreation in Out-of-School Time

One of the areas where park and recreation agencies can make significant health and wellness impacts on their communities is through out-of-school time programs. Parks and recreation is one of the largest providers of OST programs, with nine out of 10 agencies reporting that they offer some form of OST program (before/after school, summer camp, youth sports, tutoring, etc.)⁹. They offer vital child care services for families, especially in low-income communities, where having a safe place to be outside of school, access to a healthy meal or snack, educational and enrichment activities, and employment and volunteer opportunities available for older youth are essential.

90 percent
of park and recreation agencies offer
at least one type of out-of-school-time (OST) programming

The most common programs offered are



Summer Camps



Organized Youth Sports Leagues



Afterschool Care

In addition to providing **engaging activities** and **educational enrichment**, **57 percent** of these OST programs **provide healthy meals and snacks** through USDA child nutrition programs

76 percent of agencies in metropolitan areas and **72 percent** of agencies that serve a majority of children of color **provide healthy meals and snacks**



OST programs are also taking steps to address childhood obesity and other child-health-related issues like screen time and sugar consumption. They are creating healthier environments for youth and adopting healthy policies throughout their programs. Over the last three years, more than 1,270 park and recreation OST sites have pledged to implement a set of HEPA standards within their programs, reaching more than 228,000 youth. The HEPA standards include topics such as ensuring children receive a fruit or vegetable at every meal, providing drinking water for children and staff at all times, providing evidence-based nutrition education, and ensuring that children are getting 30 minutes of physical activity in a half-day program and 60 minutes in full-day program. Sites continually evaluate their progress, set new goals and develop action plans to ensure they are creating the healthiest environments possible for children in their programs.

Healthy Eating & Physical Activity Standards
Serve only foods with no artificial trans fats
Serve a fruit or vegetable at every snack and meal
Serve only whole grain-rich products
Serve only non-fat or reduced fat dairy products
Serve only lean protein, beans/legumes, eggs
Serve only packaged snacks that meet USDA Smart Snacks standards
Serve only frozen desserts that meet USDA Smart Snacks standards
Provides drinking water at no cost to youth and staff
Serves only low-fat plain, or plain or flavored non-fat milk
Serves only 100% fruit or vegetable juice
Prohibits full-calories sodas, sports drinks, or juice drinks
Prohibits diet/low-calories beverages elem-only allows for high school
Serves only non-caffeinated beverages
Offer evidence-based nutrition education to youth
Offer evidence-based education materials about nutrition to families
Dedicate at least 20% of program time to physical activity (30 mins for a half-day program, 60 mins for a full-day program)
Provides activities in which youth are moderately to vigorously active for 50% of physical activity time
Ensures PA takes place outdoors whenever possible
Do not permit access to television or movies
Limits digital device time to less than one hour per day and activities that engage youth in physical activity
Share educational materials with families

Connecting Kids to Nature

Parks and recreation is not only leading the way to healthier OST environments, but it is also advocating for a greater connection to our natural habitats and ecosystems. Wildlife Explorers is NRPA’s nature discovery program, aimed at getting children (ages 5–10) in underserved communities across the country outside, exploring and connecting to nature. The program leverages the existing out-of-school time audience in community park and recreation centers to reach children who typically lack access to environmental education opportunities. The program addresses one of the largest barriers to outdoor play and exploration: fear and discomfort in nature.

Park and recreation agencies are perfectly poised to increase outdoor time, however many out-of-school time program leaders are young adults, who may also have had insufficient time outside and lack the prior experience needed to implement outdoor programming. Many of these young leaders may be facing the same discomfort outdoors as the children in the community. The Wildlife Explorers program provides resources and training for young program leaders to increase their capacity and comfort level to successfully implement nature-based programming outdoors.

Studies have shown that witnessing and exploring nature alongside children can actually amplify the experience for adults. On an NRPA site visit, one of the youth leaders described how this program gave her the opportunity to learn more about nature and wildlife alongside the children. She shared: “I was impacted by the children the most. I was excited for the opportunity to lead and learn about the Wildlife Explorers program, but had no idea that I’d be learning so much from the children themselves.” In this way, the program not only connects kids to nature, but also connects young adult program leaders to nature and increases their environmental leadership opportunities within park and recreation agencies.

Youth Engagement in OST Park and Recreation Programs

In the NRPA 2016 Out-of-School Time Survey, agencies reported that the biggest challenges keeping OST programs from greater success and being able to serve more children are funding shortfalls, facility-space shortages and inadequate staffing.¹⁰ Older youth can help to offer a solution to each of these challenges, while enjoying the benefits of learning new skills, developing new relationships and a connection to community, staying away from negative risks and temptations, and gaining valuable work experience.

Park and recreation agencies are the perfect outlet to engage teens, as there are so many opportunities to be involved. OST programs need support — academic assistance, technology guidance, physical-activity leadership, social-emotional support and nutrition education — and teens can offer this added capacity while contributing to the bigger goal of reducing childhood obesity and chronic disease, and getting families to eat healthier and move more. Teens can help spread positive health and wellness messaging among their social media networks, at community and family events, by serving as examples for their peers and serving as positive role models for youth in OST programs.

Youth Volunteerism

Youth volunteerism can help park and recreation agencies deal with daily challenges in a number of ways:

We want more people to use our park —

Engaging youth volunteers from less involved communities gets more people into our park and utilizing our services.

Our budget always seems to be on the chopping block — Engaging youth to tell stories of how recreation helped low-income students gain financial literacy and workforce skills could influence our city council to be more supportive of our work.

Our mayor rarely comes to our family events —

Engaging youth volunteers in park outreach and publicity might attract more public officials to events and encourage business sponsorships.

We know the sidewalk/lighting between our recreation center and the local school/low-income housing needs maintenance —

Engaging student volunteers can help us advocate for improvement.

We want to promote water safety in diverse communities —

Engaging underserved students as volunteers creates stronger linkages/mission messengers to our intended audience.



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

This generation of teens and “tweens” (fourth–seventh grades) is more connected and in touch with the national and world landscape than ever before. Social media outlets, such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, provide a connection to the world and a constant newsfeed of current events. Teens are motivated by current events and fueled by a desire to foster positive change around issues ranging from race relations and women’s rights, to protecting the environment and fighting hunger. Connecting teens to a program about which they are passionate can help them focus their energy into action and provide multiple benefits for all parties. Utilizing youth in park programming also leverages young people’s skill with digital devices as a promotional tool. Imagine what would happen if more kids tweeted positive messages about their parks!

What We Know About Youth Volunteers

Over the years, a lot of research has been conducted on youth volunteers: what motivates them intrinsically and extrinsically; what, if any, social determinants exist; and how are they influenced? Youth are motivated by a number of factors, including teachers, peers, religious institutions and role models. Ultimately, they are influenced by a desire to do good, and to have a personal connection to their community.¹³ Fostering these connections from a younger age is imperative to successfully engaging them as adults later in life. Studies show that females and those with higher incomes are more likely to volunteer than males and low-income individuals. In addition, people who indicate a higher sense of community belonging, have positive self-esteem and perceive themselves as intelligent are also more likely to volunteer.¹⁴ That said, greater benefits are often observed in individuals and communities when low-income, underserved youth are engaged. Additional responsibility falls on educators and community leadership to engage the children who need it most.

Generational Differences

An important part of understanding youth volunteerism is understanding the differences between generations over time. Each generation is impacted by different experiences, world events and economic times. These experiences help shape their values and motivations. From Baby Boomers to Millennials, and now to Generation Z, it’s important to understand the challenges and life events each generation faces and how they shape its values.

- Influenced by the suburbia phenomenon, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, Baby Boomers are often associated with high levels of optimism, a belief in equality, loyalty to their children and a belief that everyone can have “The American Dream.”
- Generation X grew up during the Watergate scandal, with women entering the workforce and a growing divorce rate. Many Gen Xers come from dual-income families or single parent homes. Gen X is often associated with being independent and self-reliant, but their experiences with Watergate and the energy crisis cause them to be pragmatic and skeptical of institutions.
- Millennials were born in the age of digital media and technology. Millennials are often associated with an understanding of global issues and social engagement, while they value diversity and change. At the same time, they remember Columbine, 9/11 and natural disasters, and they were directly impacted by the economic recession as they entered the workforce. These experiences shape the fact that Millennials are money conscious and want to spend their time and money on meaningful experiences that add value to their life.¹¹
- Today’s generation is an entirely new phenomenon. Generation Z is the center of the social revolution — they’ve grown up entirely in a digital world and have never known a time without smartphones and an instant access to information. They’ve grown up with the first black president and in a socially progressive era with same-sex marriage, battles over universal healthcare, and the fight for equal pay for equal work. At the same time, Gen Z witnesses the daily news coverage of terror attacks, war and a divided political landscape. These events shape Gen Z’s values of diversity, embracement of multiculturalism and prosocial attitudes; yet, they also contribute to a generation that is more guarded than ever before.¹²

Benefits for Youth

Volunteering and getting involved in local community activities contributes many benefits for youth, including:

- Providing an opportunity to gain work experience and develop organizational and leadership skills
- Connecting kids to positive role models and social experiences
- Lowering the likelihood of participating in negative risks, such as alcohol and drug use, unsafe driving, unprotected sex, violence and depression¹⁵
- Lowering the risk of participating in illegal behaviors

According to a recent study published in *Injury Epidemiology* with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, researchers found that teens who took part in volunteer activities of their own volition had 11 percent fewer illegal behaviors between the ages of 18–28 than teens who did not volunteer. Teens who volunteered also had 31 percent fewer arrests and 39 percent fewer convictions.¹⁶ In addition, civic engagement is observed to improve academic achievement and future academic/occupational goals, including reducing the likelihood of dropping out of school, in at-risk, underrepresented youth.¹⁷

Youth as Health and Wellness Leaders

Older youth suffer from many of the same health issues that affect younger children. Rising levels of physical inactivity, poor nutrient intake, high consumption of sugary beverages, excessive screen-time use and low exposure to the outdoors are all areas of concerns that affect both school-aged children and older youth. Programs focused on activating youth as health and wellness leaders and advocates can have positive effects on the personal health of all program participants. Being physically active, eating healthier and spending time outdoors can reduce body weight and body fat, enhance emotional health and self-esteem, reduce chronic disease risk and decrease stress. In addition, serving as positive health and wellness role models for younger children in OST programs can impact their future decisions and behaviors to eat healthy and move more.

A recent survey conducted by Share our Strength and Sodexo provides insights into youth volunteerism:

- Youth ages 14–18 reported volunteering in marginal amounts, but they reported being extremely involved in social issues.
- Youth are more interested in being involved in volunteer events and want to participate in group activities.
- Rural, urban and suburban youth identify a desire to feel more connected to the local community.
- Youth are more likely to volunteer in activities that are conducted by a trusted institution (e.g., school, park and recreation department, etc.).
- Urban and suburban youth are more interested in issues like equality, hunger, health and wellness and the environment than rural youth.

Source: Sodexo Stop Hunger Foundation & No Kid Hungry Share our Strength https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5731da49746fb995e18dde67/t/574f5943f8baf35e5da19388/1464817988196/YouthEngagementToolkit_LR.pdf

Personal Stories of Weight Loss and Self-Confidence

In Houston, Texas, several teens reported physical and mental health changes attributed to the Commit to Health: Youth Ambassadors initiative. Almost 100 percent of the youth ambassadors reported stories of significant weight loss, changes in dietary habits, and increases in self-esteem and self-confidence during a focus group conducted with the ambassadors.

“Growing up, we never ate healthy at all, and to this day, my family still doesn’t. I was diagnosed with hypertension a year ago, and I realized I needed to start being healthier. When I joined Zumba® (a Youth Ambassadors initiative), little by little, I found a passion, which led to talking about eating healthier, and I found it so interesting. I would go to the doctor and nutritionist all the time, and they tell you to eat better, but they never told you how or what to eat. This program has changed that for me and inspired me to pursue a career as a nutritionist.”

— Houston Teen, 17

“The first time I did it (taught Zumba®) I was really nervous. But I got used to it, and I gained the skill of leadership and teaching. I learned how to work with kids — you need to communicate differently with them, be energized, use cues and have fun. And I got more confident every time that I taught. Now, I want to get my certification and teach others in the community.”

— Houston Teen, 17

Youth Advisory Panels

Another opportunity to engage youth in both policy and practice is through youth-led advisory panels. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Youth Engagement Guide](#) includes information and examples about how to engage young people in the health and wellness efforts of their schools and communities, particularly related to creating environments where physical activity and healthy eating are not only accessible, but also encouraged.

The guide is organized into three distinct, yet related, sections:

- **Health-Focused Youth Programming**
Ideas and inspiration for health-focused programs, divided into three categories: peer education, service learning and activism and civic engagement
- **Youth Participation on Adult-Led Wellness Councils**
Practical steps for meaningfully including young people in the formation and sustainability of wellness councils, such as those found in many schools.
- **Youth-Led Health Advisory Groups**
Step-by-step advice for creating a youth-lead health advisory group for organizations, schools or communities.

The underlying tenets of the **socio-ecological (or social determinants of health) model** and **positive youth development** support all three paths. Therefore, included in the guide is background information about these two models, as well as where to turn for additional information.

A commitment to these principles and practices can ensure long-term effectiveness of youth engagement and, ultimately, healthier communities.

Meet the Commit to Health Youth Ambassadors

**Luis Cruz, Youth Ambassador,
Houston Parks and Recreation Department**

Why did you decide to become a Youth Ambassador?

I was born and raised in the east end of Houston, Texas. Many of us knew someone who struggled with diabetes or weight issues and many knew very little about nutrition. In high school, my friends and I created an initiative to promote health and wellness through Zumba® fitness, along with a creative way to promote environmental literacy. We portray the character of the U.S. Forest Service's Woodsy Owl, and promote Woodsy's conservation messages, including his four Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle and rot. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service uses bumble bee Frankie Bee to promote pollinator conservation. There are also U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service characters promoting refuge system efforts and messages, like Puddles, the blue goose, and Arnie, the Attwater Prairie Chicken. Through this unique programming, memorable interactions of integrated messages of conservation work through fitness, theater and dance, connect people with people and people with nature through physical engagement and interpretation.

Why do you believe health and wellness is something we need to educate our communities about?

It is important to educate our communities on health and wellness, but it's most important to engage people with actual solutions. For example, by incorporating Zumba® fitness, we have been able to provide a positive, safe environment in which diverse sets of people can take part. Through our journey, we have seen the positive energy of engaging in recreation and fitness throughout the city of Houston. We have also been showcased on national platforms in Colorado and Washington, D.C.

What do you want to do when you grow up?

I am currently attending Houston Community College, taking my basic courses, and will transfer to the University of Houston to study graphic design and environmental studies. I graduated from Furr High School and serve as a community partner, empowering high school students to tackle our community's health through engagement programming such as Zumba® fitness. Our goal is to expand our mission throughout the entire city of Houston, spreading messages of health and wellness, and bringing people together to celebrate each other and the outdoors.

BEST PRACTICES TO ENGAGE YOUTH

Engaging youth in volunteerism can be challenging, but there are a variety of best practices that can be used to successfully start a program. A first step in developing a sustainable and successful youth engagement program is to create a solid foundation for volunteer recruitment. Using a variety of recruitment methods, including meeting kids where they are (schools, youth sports programs, afterschool programs, etc.), communicating with them through preferred communication channels (text, social media, email, etc.) and working with influencers to engage their friends and peers are all successful tactics to recruitment. It's also important to start educating kids in your community about the issues and concerns from a younger age so they are informed and aware of community-wide issues and ways to get involved as they become more independent.

- **Meeting Kids Where They Are:** Looking toward organizations and activities that already engage older youth is a great tactic for recruitment. Schools, afterschool clubs, sports leagues and religious institutions are all areas where teens spend a majority of their time and feel comfortable. Form positive and mutually beneficial relationships with these potential partners so youth and administrators see the park and recreation department in a similar light, and encourage participation in your programs. Do students at the local high school need to be involved in a social-action project, or are they looking for additional learning opportunities? Align your program with areas that teens are already engaged in to make recruitment easier, or consider partnering with student groups to engage them in specific tasks that can benefit your agency.

In Houston and Mesa, park and recreation staff created partnerships within existing programs to successfully recruit their ambassadors. Houston partnered with the school district and an existing Green Ambassador initiative that focused on conservation and the benefits of community gardens. By adding a health and wellness component to this initiative and focusing on a group that was already engaged in the community, they quickly experienced success. Mesa utilized youth who were already involved in their youth sports leagues through the Positive Play Project. They identified older youth who were passionate about sports, were leaders on their teams and were looking for additional leadership roles.



- Preferred Communication Channels:** With changes in technology and social media, Gen Z communicates in a very different way than previous generations and wants information quickly and directly. While direct personal contact is still a productive and effective way to engage youth, new communication channels, such as text messaging, and utilizing social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, are often more effective and appealing than traditional methods. Using social media can feel overwhelming, but keeping it simple, polished, graphically appealing and consistent can ensure successful use.
 - Keep It Brief.** Try to keep content short. Remember, you can always link out to resources for more information. Think about how long the posts are that you normally stop to read — it's likely you'll only skim posts that are too long!
 - Polish Your Language.** Even if you normally pay little attention to spelling and grammar, make an effort to use good punctuation and spelling so that your messages will be easily understood. When posting on Twitter with character limits, try to rephrase your post, versus just shortening and abbreviating words.
 - Use Photos and Video to Make It Interesting.** Photos and videos catch people's attention, but make sure you mix it up and post different types of photos, people, activities and events to keep your followers' interest. Free Web and mobile apps like Canva (www.canva.com) can help you create stylized photos that you can use.
 - Be Consistent and Direct.** Decide how often you plan to post and try to be consistent. Maybe you plan to post one Instagram post a day and three Facebook posts a week. You can increase your postings over time, just try to avoid posting 20 times in one day and then going ghost for two weeks. Know what you want your audience to get out of your posts and shape your message around that. Remember — this generation wants information quickly and directly, so don't beat around the bush!
- Prioritize the Most Directly Impacted Kids:** A great strategy for engaging youth is to work with existing youth leaders. Chances are, these kids are pretty easy to identify: they are outgoing and vocal, have a following (whether in person or on social media) and are natural leaders. Be careful not to focus only on the typical kids who are engaged. Peers are often influenced by what their friends are doing and want to be a part of the action, so using influencers to engage their peers and create positive impacts can be a successful method to growing your audience. Create a network of influencers in your community and educate them on the issues to put their abilities to good use.
- Raising Awareness Early On:** Educating the community and younger children involved in your programs is an important part of engagement. Youth won't feel passionate about creating change unless they are aware of the issues that need to be addressed. Provide facts, resources and up-to-date information on the issues you want to address by using social media, marketing campaigns and signage at your facilities, and by engaging local partners and affiliates. It's important for the entire community to understand the issues and what can be done to address them.

Chicago experiences its share of challenges when it comes to providing safe places for teens and youth to spend time out of school. Many low-income, underserved neighborhoods struggle with violence, a high prevalence of drugs and gang activity. The Chicago Park District worked with teens from these communities to provide them with opportunities to gain work experience and leadership roles within the park system. In addition, they worked alongside the ambassadors to help them advocate for policy changes so that teens can use the fitness facilities after school (previously not allowed). A change in policy would result in more teens having a safe and accessible place to engage in positive health and wellness activities during out-of-school times.

SUSTAINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Once recruitment tactics are in place, it's equally as important to create strategies that will ensure the sustainability of your program and consistent involvement from youth. Some successful strategies include developing positive relationships with other organizations and individuals who serve youth, offering incentives and potential employment opportunities, engaging youth in policy development, and being inclusive of all cultures and abilities when it comes to volunteers.

- **Relationship Building:** Relationships with other organizations and individuals who serve and recognize youth as important members of the community are essential to the sustainability of a program. Having positive role models and leadership in the community engaged as an active part of your youth program ensures that there are multiple stakeholders involved and invested in community-wide success.
- **Offering Incentives:** Volunteers, especially in low-income communities, may be motivated by the prospect of receiving incentives or having their volunteer work pay off with a steady job in the future. Work to develop relationships with local businesses and offer an incentive program to help recruit and retain volunteers. Incentives can help to keep volunteers engaged and attendance consistent. Work with a local grocery store to provide gift cards for participation; reward volunteers with fun experiences like field trips, cooking classes or free fitness class passes; or incentivize them by providing a letter of recommendation for college applications or future employment opportunities.
- **Engaging Youth in Policy Development:** Policy is the best way to ensure program sustainability. Passing a citywide, site-wide or program-wide policy can help initiatives maintain their impact and growth when issues arise that might threaten progress, such as staff turnover and funding shortfalls. Engage your youth leaders with local policymakers as advocates for your program and the issues that it addresses. Encourage the leaders to participate in town hall meetings and have their voices heard. Local elected officials should be willing to engage in conversations with youth as they are their constituents, not to mention potential future votes.
- **Being Inclusive:** Being inclusive of all cultures, backgrounds, abilities, genders and ages is an important step in creating a sustainable and truly representative program, but it's also important to include youth leadership in organization-wide decisions. It's not enough to have a youth engagement program — it's imperative that the youth have a seat at the table when it comes to larger community issues and developments. New facilities, new programs and new initiatives impact all members of the community, and give teens an avenue to express their opinions, concerns and feelings, contributes to the overall health of the organization and community.

Resources to Foster Inclusion

The [National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability](http://www.nchpad.org/) (NCHPAD) is a public health practice and resource center on health promotion for people with disability. NCHPAD seeks to help people with disability and other chronic health conditions achieve health benefits through increased participation in all types of physical and social activities, including fitness and aquatic activities, recreational and sports programs, adaptive equipment usage and more. Browse the organization's resources at <http://www.nchpad.org/>.



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

While many successes can be attributed to the Youth Ambassadors pilot programs, there are always challenges associated with implementing a new initiative. The pilot programs shared several challenges that impacted them:

Challenge	Solution
Some youth may not understand policies or practices, so adults must be willing to bring them up to speed.	Spending time educating youth about the difference between best practices and creating policies is important. While a practice is great in theory, a policy ensures sustainability and life after staff turnover and departmental changes. Policies help to ensure that the progress made will continue in the future. A great resource for educating youth on policies is the <i>Healthy Out-of-School Time Wellness Policy Implementation Guide for Parks and Recreation Agencies</i> .
Starting with a younger audience can be challenging. “Since our Youth Ambassadors are in fifth and sixth grade, we must be sensitive to their young age and find a balance so as not to overwhelm them. We want them to be active in the program on a regular basis, but it has proven to be tricky for them and their parents at times.” — Mesa, Arizona	Bringing the activities to younger youth can be a great solution to working around scheduling and transportation issues. In Mesa, the park and recreation department used the Youth Ambassadors at events they were already attending (sporting events and large community celebrations). Youth were also offered incentives to take part in the program.
Adults may not understand the value of youth engagement or, ideally, youth-adult partnerships. They may see it as “more trouble than its worth.” This will take leadership buy in and ensuring the right staff people are in place to serve as mentors and leaders. — Chicago, Illinois	Park and recreation staff needs to be invested in youth leadership and recognize it as a priority and an important part of engaging an underrepresented voice in the community. Creating staff buy in can be challenging, especially with capacity already stretched and limited across the field. Make sure to educate staff on the multiple benefits that youth volunteers provide, as well as to offer resources and assistance on how best to communicate and work with teens to keep them involved.
Many adults are not civically engaged, therefore it may make them uncomfortable if they’re asked to encourage youth to speak at town halls, meet with elected leaders, etc.	Exploring local resources around civic engagement and participation can be helpful in opening the conversation at home. Look into the League of Women Voters or other nonpartisan groups that can provide more information.

FUTURE YOUTH-LED HEALTH AND WELLNESS INITIATIVES IN PARKS AND RECREATION

As evidenced in Houston, Chicago and Mesa, youth volunteers have the ability to create change and make large impacts in their communities. Youth engagement provides a multitude of benefits for both park and recreation agencies that need to increase capacity, reach underserved communities, and establish health and wellness as a priority. Youth also benefit as they prepare for future workforce opportunities, increase social connections and become more engaged within their communities. As health and wellness continues to be a priority for park and recreation agencies and for the nation, future initiatives that address childhood obesity, health disparities and chronic disease prevention should look to engage youth as leaders of these programs to maximize community benefit.

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National Recreation and Park Association

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading non-profit dedicated to improving the health and sustainability of communities for all people through parks, recreation and conservation. NRPA represents a vast membership network of 12,000 agencies, 105,000 parks and touches the lives of more than 200 million people in virtually every community. As the trusted leader for parks and recreation, NRPA is at the forefront of the movement to educate and

empower professionals across the country to improve their community's access to healthy activities, food and education.



The Alliance for a Healthier Generation

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation is a catalyst for children's health. We work with schools, companies, community organizations, healthcare professionals and families to transform the conditions and systems that lead to healthier kids. Our goal is to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity and to empower kids to develop lifelong, healthy habits. Founded by the American Heart Association and Clinton Foundation, we are collaborative change-makers working to create a nation where children thrive.

ENDNOTES

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