



# How Parks Create Healthier Communities

An Overview of NRPA's Miami Innovation Lab



National Recreation  
and Park Association



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## Healthy Innovations Make the Case for Parks and Recreation

When modern ideas about leisure and recreation were first being explored in depth in the early 1900s, most influential thinkers made the connection that exercise and access to nature resulted in a healthier society. This was considered true regarding both physical and mental health. Whole theories of recreation and physical education revolved around the idea that in order to raise a healthy, well-adjusted society, children needed to be fit and connected to the world outdoors.

Somehow in the ensuing 100 years or so we got away from those ideas. As NRPA Director of Health Initiatives Zarnaaz Bashir recently pointed out to a group of almost 30 NRPA Innovation Lab attendees, “We’ve engineered physical activity out of our environment.” One purpose of NRPA’s first Innovation Lab was to get a closer look at an agency with a mission to achieve precisely the opposite.

### INNOVATING FOR HEALTH

NRPA’s Miami Innovation Lab was held March 12-13, 2015 at the Mayfair Hotel in historic Coconut Grove ([www.nrpa.org/Innovation-Labs](http://www.nrpa.org/Innovation-Labs)). Miami-Dade County is home to one of the most forward-thinking agencies when it comes to health and how parks, recreation, doctors and families can work together to reverse negative health trends. Jack Kardys, director of Miami-Dade County’s Department of Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS), and Maria

Nardi, chief of planning at PROS, pulled together their brightest partners for two days of sharing, brainstorming and informative site visits designed to illustrate why today’s park and recreation professional should add “healthcare provider” to their title as well.

Miami-Dade County is all about placemaking with four areas of focus in mind: policy, fitness programs, the built environment and media communications. It achieves this through innovative thinking and strategic partnerships that leverage particular areas of expertise including healthcare, socioeconomics, land use and safety. Basically, county leaders are looking out their windows and reimagining the landscape as one that should contribute to everyone’s overall health and well-being, regardless of race, class or geography.

“Parks, recreation and open spaces are natural antidotes to fight chronic health problems.”

- Kanat Tibet, Director,  
California Center for Public Health Advocacy

As park and recreation professionals, we know the wide-reaching effect we have on the health of the communities we serve, but leveraging that knowledge to capture the attention of policy makers and those holding the purse strings is a tricky matter. PROS is a model of how to get it done.

In league with the University of Miami School of Architecture, the Florida Department of Health and Miami's Miller School of Medicine, Kardys and Nardi endeavored to craft a 50-year master plan focused on engineering for equitable health outcomes. "The open space master plan...shapes how we approach things as a culture," Kardys said. "Miami-Dade County, as a result of that plan, adopted the idea that parks are not just a destination — they're a metaphor for a healthy environment, with the public realm, natural spaces, cultural spaces, greenways and blueways tying it all together."

Now, almost eight years into the 50-year master plan, PROS is building its case with hard numbers and reliable data that will illustrate to politicians and financiers the value of a holistic parks system. "No department in local government touches more people than we do," Kardys said, adding, "yet no department has been cut as much as we have. I wonder, in larger systems that have had similar cuts, if people take us for granted because we're not messaging that."

"Where we live, work, learn and play makes a difference. People live shorter lives when they live in environments that are not conducive to healthy living."

- Dr. Lillian Rivera, RN, MSN, Ph.D.,  
Administrator, Florida Department of  
Health — Miami-Dade County



### SHOWING, TELLING AND IMAGINING

The Innovation Lab featured a day of presentations from some of Kardys' strategic Miami-based partners, as well as health leaders from across the country. Attendees were invited to consider how they might make the case to their own elected bodies and patrons that, although municipal budgets are tight, priority should be put on the parks departments and professionals who arguably have greater influence over the well-being of their patrons than any single healthcare provider.

To illustrate the natural connectedness of parks, health providers, land use and social equity, Joanna Lombard, professor at the University of Miami School of Architecture, and Dr. Lillian Rivera of the Florida Department of Health, took the group on a field trip to Liberty City, traditionally one of the most underserved communities in Miami-Dade County. Recently it was the recipient of the new Frederica Wilson/Juanita Mann Health Center, located just adjacent to Gwen Cherry Park, an almost 40-acre recreation area with various amenities. Gwen Cherry is the subject of a study by Lombard's students who are considering how to connect patrons of the



health center to the park, as the two are currently separated by an active railroad track, industrial areas and brownfields that are unfriendly or impassible to pedestrians. Lombard, Kardys and their colleagues want to see the area revitalized to track with the master plan, so that residents can see and enjoy the benefits of accessible healthcare connected to a place to get fit, stay healthy and enjoy nature.

Back at the Mayfair, attendees split into four groups, assimilated the information gathered during the site visit and workshopped their own solutions to connect and revitalize this area of Liberty City. For purposes of the exercise, they were given an unlimited budget and encouraged to forget the typical restraints of feasibility and instead focus on creating an ideal landscape that would promote walking, safety and deeper social connections among residents. It took a few minutes for the concept of “unlimited budget/unlimited possibilities” to sink in for a group so accustomed to being told “no,” but soon all were deeply involved in realizing their visions. They imagined elevated walkways to cross over the railway line, partnerships with the Miami-Dade County Extension Office to create community gardens, cultural arts plazas to encourage connections, fitness areas, teen centers and still

more. What mere hours ago seemed a pie-in-the-sky concept of cross-department cooperation now seemed both obvious and imperative to achieve.

It may take a while for such concepts to take root, but you can spot the trend growing. Five hundred park sites across the country will implement Commit to Health standards, which support healthy eating and physical activity ([www.nrpa.org/CommitToHealth](http://www.nrpa.org/CommitToHealth)). Dozens of agencies, including PROS, are exploring the possibilities of Park Prescriptions, a concept that links the healthcare system and public lands, including parks, to combat disease ([www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Park-Prescriptions](http://www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Park-Prescriptions)). Park and recreation professionals are learning how to become Park Champions, shouldering the task of communicating with their local leaders the value of their park systems ([www.nrpa.org/Park-Champions](http://www.nrpa.org/Park-Champions)).

As the American demographic landscape continues to evolve, we must ask ourselves: How can we ensure that park and recreation professionals become solution providers for myriad public health concerns, and what are the specific policies, programs and partnerships that can be leveraged to create a greater culture of health?



## Resources for Taking the Next Step:

While your agency might lack such a comprehensive agenda, there are immediate steps that can be taken to help align park and recreation programs and initiatives with health and wellness objectives, as well as make the case for funding opportunities and robust data collection. NRPA, PROS, and several of the attendees of the Miami Innovation Lab shared several resources to achieve those goals, which are categorized and outlined below.

### TRANSPORTATION AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Emphasizing walking and biking as a means of transportation can have a lasting effect on the health of a community, both in terms of the physical body and the surrounding environment. Use the following resources to start a conversation about how you can increase awareness of alternative modes of transportation in your community, as well as make the case to government leaders for adequate funding of such initiatives.



#### **NRPA Resources**

- Active Transportation and Parks and Recreation: [www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications\\_and\\_Research/Research/ActiveTransportation\\_Final.HIGH.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/ActiveTransportation_Final.HIGH.pdf)
- Safe Routes to Parks: [www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications\\_and\\_Research/Research/Papers/Park-Access-Report.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/Park-Access-Report.pdf)

#### ***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2014 Bicycling and Walking in the U.S. Benchmarking Report***

The report, a collaboration between CDC and the Alliance for Biking and Walking, includes new data on bicycling and walking in all 50 states, the 52 largest U.S. cities and a select number of mid-sized cities. It combines original research with more than 20 government data sources to compile data on bicycling and walking levels and demographics, safety, funding, policies, infrastructure, education, public health indicators, and economic impacts: [www.bikewalkalliance.org/resources/benchmarking](http://www.bikewalkalliance.org/resources/benchmarking)

#### ***A Resident's Guide for Creating Safer Communities for Walking and Biking, January 2015***

This guide, sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration Office of Safety, is intended to assist residents, parents, community association members and others in making communities safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. The guide includes facts, ideas and resources to help residents learn about traffic problems that affect pedestrians and bicyclists and to find ways to help address these problems and promote safety among all road users.

[http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped\\_bike/ped\\_cmnlty/ped\\_walkguide/residents\\_guide2014\\_final.pdf](http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/ped_cmnlty/ped_walkguide/residents_guide2014_final.pdf)

#### ***Active Living Research Resources — Parks and Recreation***

Parks and recreation facilities provide opportunities for physical activity and can help people of all ages lead a more active lifestyle. People who live near parks are more likely to be active. However, some lower-income communities and communities of color tend to have less access to quality parks and recreation facilities. Active Living Research documents effective ways to improve the design, quality and availability of parks and recreation resources.

<http://activelivingresearch.org/taxonomy/parks-recreation>

### **American Planning Association (APA) Planning and Community Health Center**

How a community is designed has a direct effect on the health of its citizens. Land development patterns, zoning ordinances and land-use classifications impact walkability, access to services and transportation options. With an understanding of how the built environment affects public health, it is possible to create vibrant, active spaces and places.

[www.planning.org/NationalCenters/Health](http://www.planning.org/NationalCenters/Health)

### **NUTRITION, HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Lasting health and wellness begins with how we fuel and move our bodies. Today, we're seeing record levels of obesity and preventable disease like Type II Diabetes and hypertension in children, largely due to highly processed foods and increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Incorporating healthy eating habits and recommended levels of physical activity can help children and adults fight disease, lose weight and increase longevity.

#### **NRPA Resources**

- **Commit to Health**  
This campaign supports the implementation and evaluation of Healthy Eating, Physical Activity (HEPA) standards in park and recreation sites across the country.  
[www.nrpa.org/CommitToHealth](http://www.nrpa.org/CommitToHealth)
- **Park Prescriptions**  
This initiative links the healthcare system and public lands, including local parks, to encourage healthier habits. NRPA is collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Institute at the Golden Gate in California, to convene leaders from across the country to elevate the concept of park prescriptions to a best practice in preventive health. The goal of this effort is to create a national agenda for implementing park prescriptions more widely by further understanding and defining "park prescriptions," identifying successful models from across the country, and developing standardized measurement and data collection methods that define effectiveness of these programs.  
[www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Park-Prescriptions](http://www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Park-Prescriptions)

### **Voices for Healthy Kids**

The joint initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and American Heart Association (AHA) works to help all young people eat healthier foods and be more active. Almost one in three kids and teens is overweight or obese. By engaging, organizing and mobilizing people in communities across the United States, Voices for Healthy Kids will help make the healthy choice the easy choice in the places where children live, learn, and play.

- **Sugar Sweetened Beverages Toolkit**  
[www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/HealthyDrinks/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Sugar-Sweetened-Beverages-Toolkit\\_UCM\\_462748\\_Article.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/HealthyDrinks/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Sugar-Sweetened-Beverages-Toolkit_UCM_462748_Article.jsp)

### **SAFE SPACES AND EASE OF ACCESS**

A significant but often overlooked barrier to increased physical and mental health derived from parks and green spaces is ease of access. Children and teens especially need to feel they have safe, convenient places to gather, play, study and share a meal or a snack. The following organizations and initiatives strive to provide such spaces or encourage use of existing facilities to promote healthier outcomes.

### **Voices for Healthy Kids**

The joint initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and American Heart Association (AHA) works to help all young people eat healthier foods and be more active.

- **Expanded Shared Use Incentives and Monitoring Toolkit:**  
[www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/ActivePlaces/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Expanded-Shared-Use-Incentives-and-Monitoring\\_UCM\\_472702\\_Article.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/ActivePlaces/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Expanded-Shared-Use-Incentives-and-Monitoring_UCM_472702_Article.jsp)
- **Shared Use Liability Toolkit:**  
[www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/ActivePlaces/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Shared-Use-Liability-Toolkit\\_UCM\\_464708\\_Article.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/ActivePlaces/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids-Shared-Use-Liability-Toolkit_UCM_464708_Article.jsp)



## DATA RESOURCES

Use the following sources for information about health and wellness status in communities across the country. Many also feature functionality that allows agencies and municipalities to compare their information with that of similar communities. Data can serve an important function for agencies requesting increased funding or fighting potential budget cuts, as hard numbers demonstrate clearly the benefit of parks, recreational programming and open spaces.

### ***NRPA Resources — PRORAGIS™***

The PRORAGIS™ database is NRPA's definitive source for critical data designed to assist park and recreation professionals in the effective management and planning of their resources and facilities.

[www.nrpa.org/PRORAGIS](http://www.nrpa.org/PRORAGIS)

### ***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Community Health Status Indicators (CHSI) 2015***

The interactive web application produces health profiles for all 3,143 counties in the United States. Each profile includes key indicators of health outcomes, such as the physical environment and the built environment.

[wwwn.cdc.gov/CommunityHealth](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/CommunityHealth)

### ***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity's Data, Trends, and Maps***

This online, interactive database provides nutrition, physical activity, obesity and breastfeeding data from a variety of sources.

[http://nccd.cdc.gov/NPAO\\_DTM](http://nccd.cdc.gov/NPAO_DTM)

## TRAINING AND CONTINUED EDUCATION

These sources provide training and education for park and recreation professionals, planners, healthcare workers and others to encourage cross-departmental collaboration to promote healthier outcomes for communities.

### ***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Working Together: A Training Framework for Public Health and Planning Professionals***

As public health professionals and urban planners begin to work more closely, they need the ability to speak each other's languages in order to work together effectively. Public health professionals and urban planners need a mutual and basic understanding of each other's concepts, data sources, etc. in order to forge effective partnerships. CDC's comprehensive toolkit will help both professions get basic training in concepts that will foster this collaboration.

[www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/training\\_framework.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/training_framework.htm)

### ***Public Health Institute (PHI) Health in All Policies Guide***

PHI's guide — compiled in partnership with the California Department of Public Health and the American Public Health Association — was produced in response to growing interest in using collaborative approaches to improve population health by embedding health considerations into decision-making processes across a broad array of sectors. The guide draws heavily on the experiences of the California Health in All Policies Task Force and incorporates information from the published and gray literature and interviews with people across the country.

[www.phi.org/uploads/files/Health\\_in\\_All\\_Policies-A\\_Guide\\_for\\_State\\_and\\_Local\\_Governments.pdf](http://www.phi.org/uploads/files/Health_in_All_Policies-A_Guide_for_State_and_Local_Governments.pdf)



# National Recreation and Park Association

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing park, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. Through its network of more than 48,000 recreation and park professionals and citizens, NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles, conservation initiatives and equitable access to parks and public space.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places great importance on research to understand and improve various aspects of the park and recreation field. Research is vital to ensure park and recreation professionals have the resources to make informed decisions. At NRPA, the development of current research via empirical studies and literature reviews for our members and the public is a key priority.

## The Value of Parks and Recreation

**Conservation**—Public parks are critical to preserving natural resources and wildlife habitats, which offer significant social and economic benefits. Local park and recreation agencies are leaders in protecting open space, connecting children to nature, and providing programs that engage communities in conservation.

**Health and Wellness**—Park and recreation departments lead the nation in improving the health and wellness of communities. From fitness programs, to well-maintained, accessible, walking paths and trails, to nutrition programs for underserved youth and adults, our work is at the forefront of providing solutions to these challenges.

**Social Equity**—We believe universal access to public parks and recreation is fundamental to all, not just a privilege for a few. Every day, our members work hard to ensure all people have access to quality parks and programs, and in turn, make our communities more livable and desirable.





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