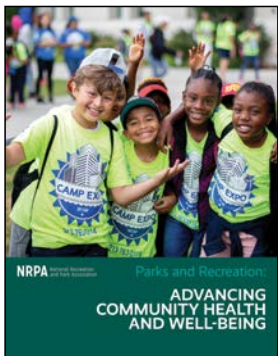




NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association

Parks and Recreation:

ADVANCING COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Cover image:
Summer camp at City of Los Angeles' EXPO Center includes sports, technology, activities and weekly field trips. *Photo courtesy of Gail Parker.*

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Introduction

Park and recreation professionals — and the programs and services they provide — are key to a fully integrated public health system. People know that parks and recreation traditionally has provided access to play spaces, sports, summer camps, physical activity and other leisure activities. But today's park and recreation professionals are on the frontlines of many of our most pressing public health challenges, including rising rates of hunger, chronic disease, mental health issues, substance use disorders and social isolation.

To meet the emerging health and wellness needs of the public, parks and recreation — in partnership with community members — is evolving into community wellness hubs. These hubs are trusted gathering places that allow every member of a community to connect with essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life.

By serving as community wellness hubs, parks and recreation can address systemic barriers to the social determinants of health and integrate more holistic health and wellness services into agency facilities and programming. At the core of a community wellness hub is health equity — ensuring that park and recreation operations, programs and services center equity so that all people in a community have fair and just opportunities to be as healthy as possible so they can thrive. This integrated approach has the potential to further advance physical, social and mental health outcomes and bring educational and economic opportunities to all residents of all communities.

To learn more about how park and recreation professionals are tackling the ever-expanding health and wellness needs of their communities — as well as what role the coronavirus (COVID-19) has played in their current approach and future plans — the Research team of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) conducted a survey in February 2021. The survey generated nearly 200 responses, the data from which form the basis of this report.

PARKS AND RECREATION

Advancing Community Health and Well-Being – Key Findings:



Parks and recreation is a leader in delivering vital services that advance physical and mental health for community members.



Many park and recreation innovations made to health and wellness programs in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) will continue post-pandemic.



Park and recreation agencies offer both in-person and virtual academic and enrichment programs for area youth.



Nine in 10 park and recreation agencies take specific actions to ensure their health and wellness programs and services promote health equity.

Key Findings

Programs and Services to Advance Community Health and Well-Being

Advancing Physical Health

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies are leaders in delivering vital services that advance the physical health of community members. These offerings not only promote an active lifestyle, but also provide access to healthy food and health services. Five in six park and recreation agencies (84 percent) offer in-person fitness and exercise programs, while nearly three in four agencies offer virtual fitness and exercise programs. Many park and recreation agencies plan to add such programs in the next two years; the percentage of agencies offering in-person and virtual fitness and exercise classes is expected to increase to 96 percent and 83 percent, respectively.

Parks and recreation is a leader in promoting access to healthy, affordable and locally sourced food. Nearly half (49 percent) of park and recreation agencies currently offer community gardening programs with another 26 percent of agencies indicating they intend to add community gardening programs to their list of offerings within the next two years. Also, 47 percent of agencies provide nutrition education opportunities to their communities. Further, many agencies deliver crucial meals to those in need through:

- ➔ Nutrition programs (such as providing meals) for youth (federal government reimbursable) (offered by 35 percent of agencies)
- ➔ Nutrition programs for older adults (federal government reimbursable) (28 percent)
- ➔ Non-federally funded nutrition programs (37 percent)

PHOTO COURTESY OF PIGEON FORGE (TENNESSEE) PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT



People participate in a guided hike hosted by City of Pigeon Forge (Tennessee) Parks and Recreation in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Park and recreation professionals are often on the frontline of their communities' response to natural disasters and other emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, 40 percent of all park and recreation agencies offer disaster and emergency relief in times of need.

Evidence-based chronic disease prevention and management programs are likely to experience the largest growth among all physical health programs. Currently, only one in five park and recreation agencies offer evidence-based chronic disease prevention and management programs, but another 29 percent of agencies anticipate that they will add such programs to their catalog of offerings within the next two years.

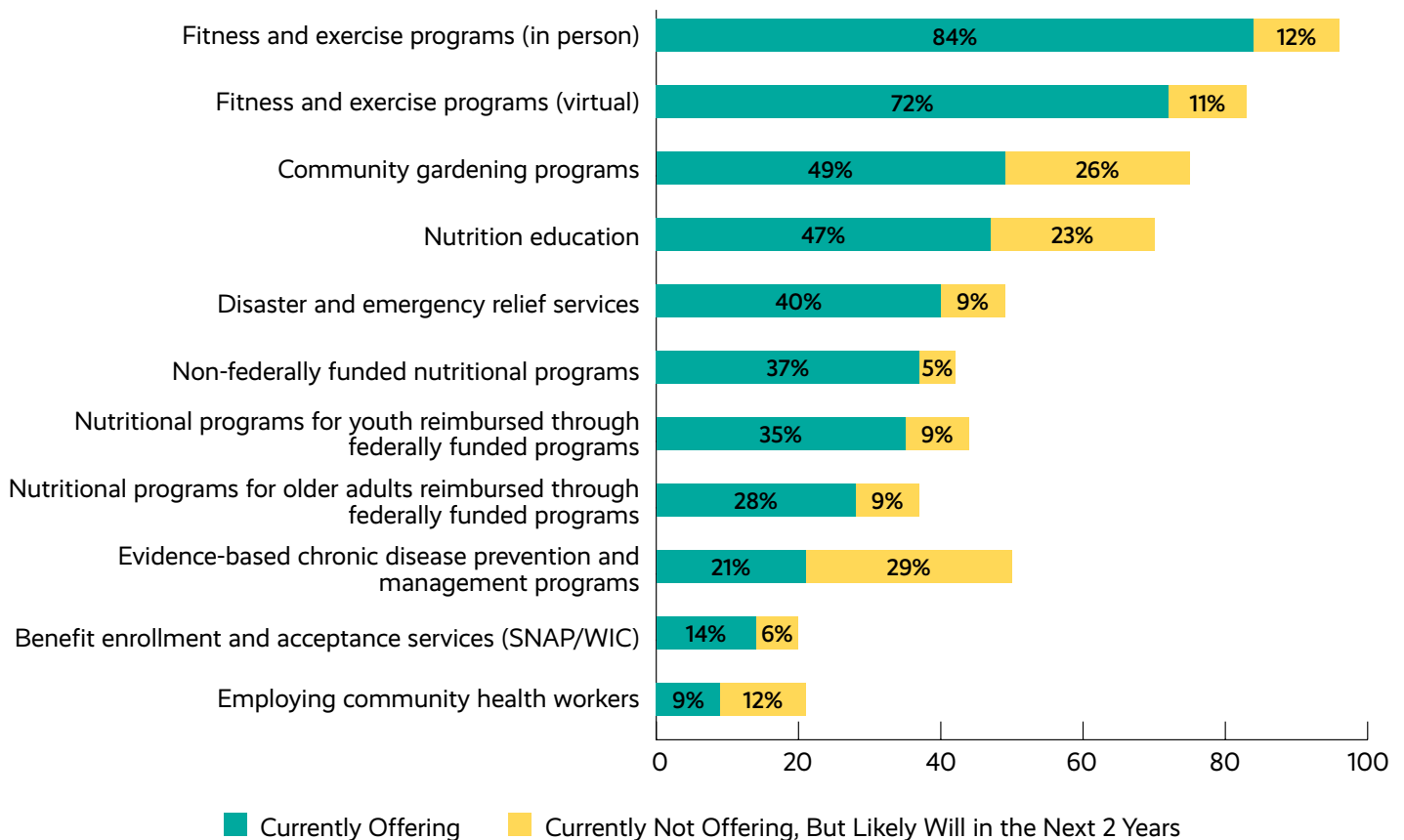
People participate in an outdoor patio yoga class at the Central Recreation Center in Aurora, Colorado.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF AURORA, COLORADO

PARKS AND RECREATION ADVANCES PHYSICAL HEALTH WITH FITNESS, NUTRITION AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE PROGRAMS

(Percent of Agencies Currently Offering or Planning to Offer a Program/Service Within the Next Two Years)



Advancing Social, Emotional and Mental Health

Overall well-being involves more than just physical fitness; it also requires a focus on the social, emotional and mental aspects of health. Given the rise in mental health disorders and concerns surrounding social isolation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a more intentional focus on supporting social, emotional and mental health is critical. Park and recreation professionals and their agencies create opportunities for people to gather and connect with others, learn social-emotional skills, and help reduce stress and anxiety.

Nine in 10 park and recreation agencies host community events where community members across generations, backgrounds and demographics can relax, have fun and simply connect with family and friends. Nearly as many agencies offer volunteer and community service opportunities. For many youths and young adults, volunteer and community service programs fulfill school requirements, build character and provide an opportunity for them to serve their communities. Volunteer programs provide older adults with opportunities to serve their communities, socialize with people of all ages, and remain busy and connected. These options for community connection and ways to build a sense of purpose are integral in supporting mental health, especially as we continue to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.

Stress can have a tremendously deleterious effect on one's overall health. More than four in five (82 percent) park and recreation agencies offer mindfulness programs that can help mitigate day-to-day stress and anxiety, as well as support coping and positive decision making. Programs such as meditation, yoga and nature walks offer residents opportunities to unwind and promote greater mental health.

Park and recreation agencies currently have a multitude of programs that provide social opportunities to families and residents throughout a community. Seventy-six percent of agencies offer cultural programs — including those in the arts, music and theater — while 68 percent offer family engagement programs. Other park and recreation programs advancing social and mental health include:

- ➔ Continued learning for older adults (offered by 54 percent of agencies)
- ➔ Intergenerational programs (52 percent)
- ➔ Social-emotional learning programs (39 percent)
- ➔ Wellness checks (37 percent)
- ➔ Community healing activities (19 percent)
- ➔ Substance use prevention programs (15 percent)



Volunteers put the finishing touches on the McLaren Park Community Garden in San Francisco as part of its opening celebration.

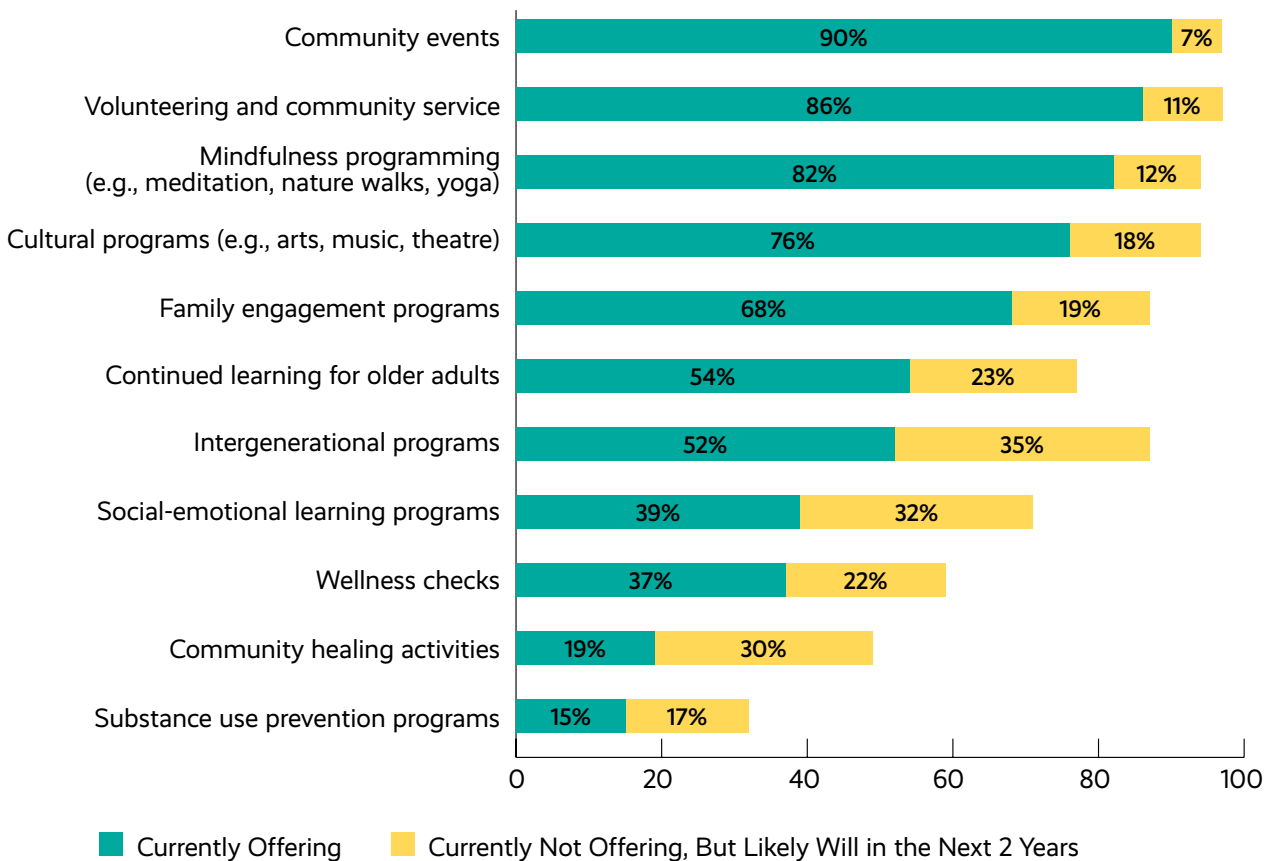
PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM WATKINS

Athletes compete in the Bluegrass 10,000 race on the Fourth of July, which has taken place for more than 30 years in downtown Lexington, Kentucky.



PARKS AND RECREATION ADVANCES MENTAL WELL-BEING THROUGH COMMUNITY EVENTS, VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES AND MINDFULNESS PROGRAMMING

(Percent of Agencies Currently Offering or Planning to Offer a Program/Service Within the Next Two Years)



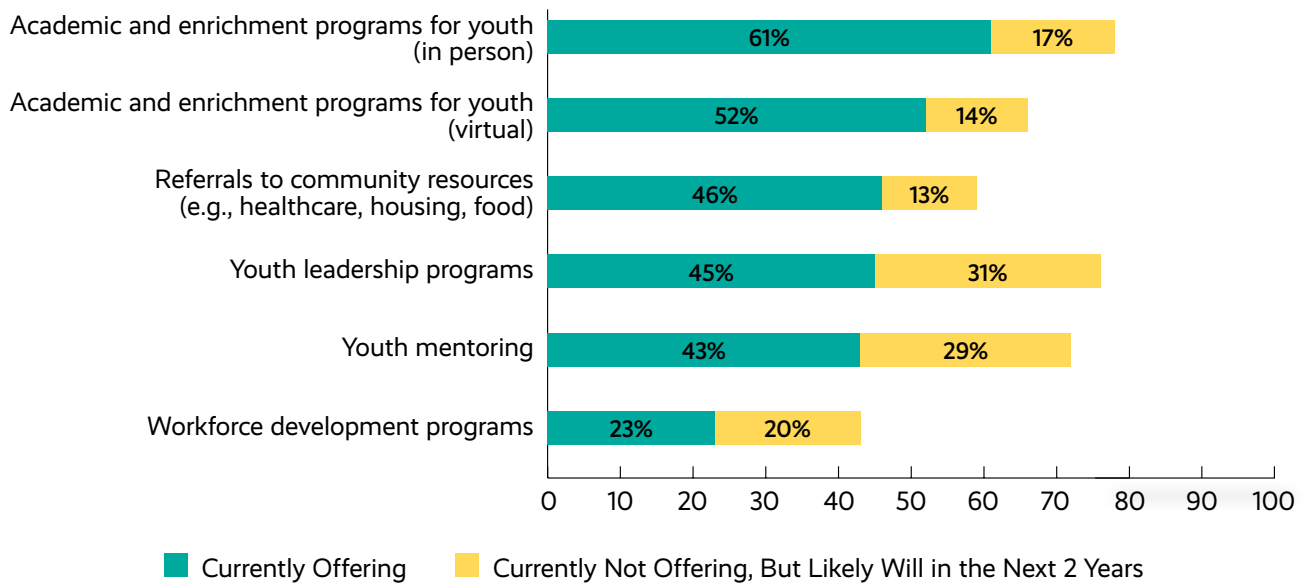
Education and Economic Opportunity

Park and recreation services are often extensions of educational and enrichment opportunities for many children and young adults. From providing tutoring and mentoring to being places of first employment, agencies shape the paths many young people will take. Sixty-one percent of park and recreation agencies offer in-person academic and enrichment programs for area youth, and 52 percent of agencies offer similar services virtually. In addition, many agencies provide leadership programs (45 percent) and mentoring opportunities (43 percent) for their communities' youth. Highlighting the tremendous impact such programs can have on youth and young adults — as well as considering the immense academic and social-emotional impact of COVID-19 on these groups — many additional agencies anticipate launching these services in the next two years.

Park and recreation professionals also serve as authorities in community resource matters. As frontline, on-the-ground community workers, they often connect residents to services and resources that go beyond traditional park and recreation services, including those that deal with healthcare, shelter, food, employment and other social resource needs. Forty-six percent of park and recreation agencies refer residents to community resources.

PARKS AND RECREATION ADVANCES EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR MANY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

(Percent of Agencies Currently Offering or Planning to Offer a Program/Service Within the Next Two Years)



The Legacy of COVID-19 Programs and Innovations

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. The pandemic — as it did in nearly every other facet of life — had a tremendous impact on parks and recreation. At first, agencies closed their recreation, community and senior centers and canceled many of their programs and events. At the same time, park and recreation professionals transitioned into new roles with creativity and innovation in response to the pandemic.

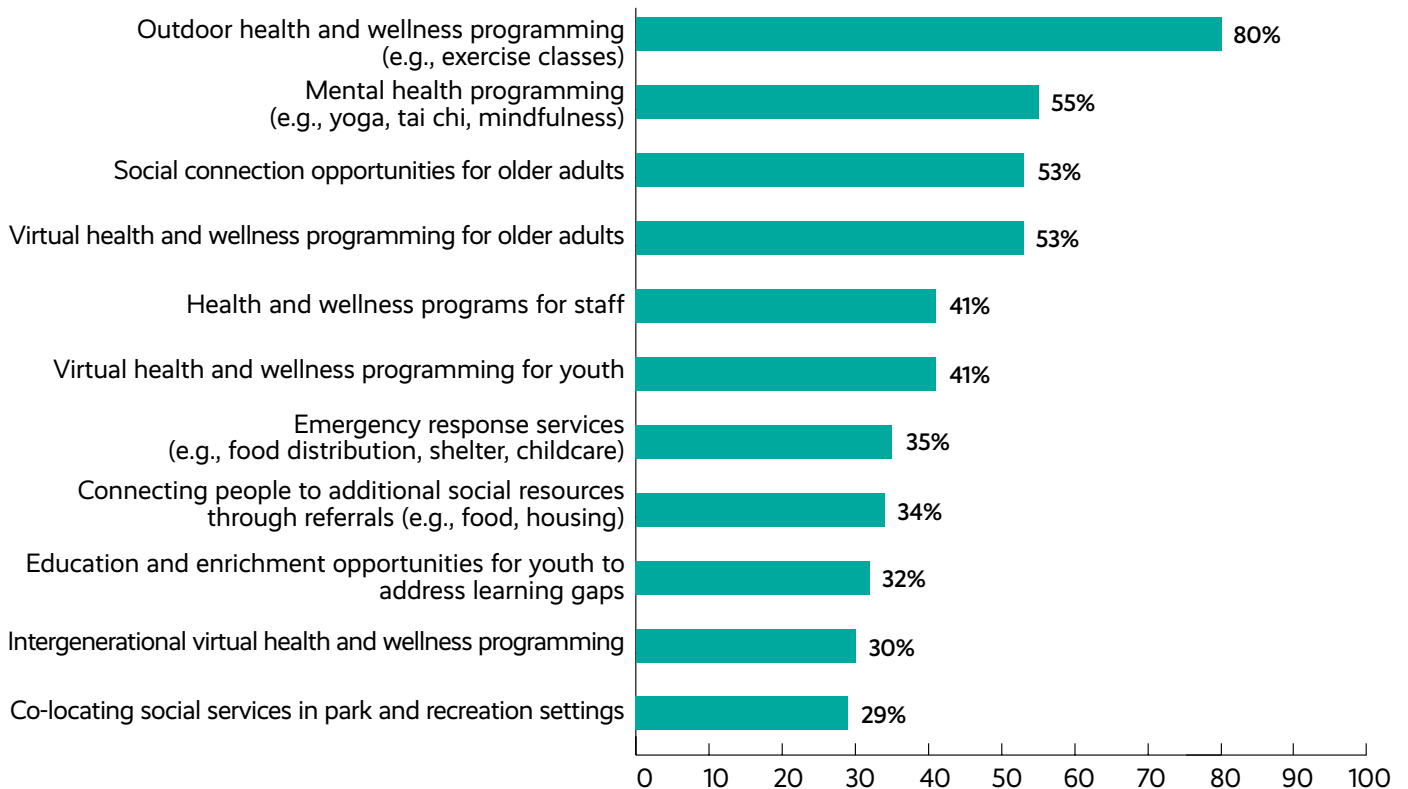
Throughout the public health emergency, park and recreation professionals met the challenge to ensure the members of their communities — especially the most vulnerable — were not forgotten and remained mentally and physically healthy and safe. This included launching new programs and reimagining preexisting offerings to meet their communities’ needs in safe, physically-distant environments.

Nearly all (97 percent) park and recreation professionals responding to the survey note that many of the innovations their agencies made to health and wellness programs in response to COVID-19 will continue post-pandemic. Among the most widely cited long-lasting legacies of the field’s response to the pandemic are:

- ➔ Outdoor health and wellness programming (e.g., exercise classes) (offered by 80 percent of agencies)
- ➔ Mental health programming (e.g., yoga, tai chi, mindfulness) (55 percent)
- ➔ Providing social connection opportunities for older adults (53 percent)
- ➔ Virtual health and wellness programming for older adults (53 percent)
- ➔ Offering health and wellness programs to agency staff (41 percent)
- ➔ Virtual health and wellness programming for youth (41 percent)
- ➔ Providing emergency response services (e.g., food distribution, shelter, childcare) (35 percent)
- ➔ Connecting people to social resources through referrals (e.g., food, housing) (34 percent)

PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES WILL CONTINUE MANY OF THE HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS DEVELOPED IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

(Percent of Agencies)



Partners in Health and Wellness

Promoting the health and wellness of an entire community is not a one-person, one-organization or one-department job. Rather, fostering partnerships to best leverage resources and assets and to work toward shared goals with other government departments, local nonprofits and community-based organizations is a critical piece of the puzzle. Serving the health and wellness needs of a diverse community requires a holistic, multi-pronged approach. Park and recreation agencies rely on partners from both within and outside their local communities to ensure the highest quality support for their health and wellness programs and services. Ninety-six percent of park and recreation agencies collaborate with partners to assist them in advancing the health and wellness needs of residents in their communities.

More than three in four agencies (76 percent) partner with community-based organizations and 72 percent partner with local school districts to support their health and wellness programs and services. In addition, more than half of agencies team up with:

- ➔ Libraries (cited by 58 percent of respondents)
- ➔ Community organizers (55 percent)
- ➔ Local public health departments (53 percent)
- ➔ Healthcare providers (51 percent)

In addition, 47 percent of park and recreation agencies connect with area agencies on aging to bring services to older adults. Forty-five percent of agencies collaborate with cultural, arts and humanities organizations, while 42 percent work closely with private-sector business partners to support park and recreation health and wellness programs and services. A third of agencies or fewer partner with:

- ➔ Social services/social workers (cited by 34 percent of respondents)
- ➔ Faith-based groups (33 percent)
- ➔ Universities (28 percent)
- ➔ State health departments (21 percent)
- ➔ Transportation agencies (20 percent)
- ➔ Housing authorities (16 percent)
- ➔ Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC)-centered organizations (15 percent)



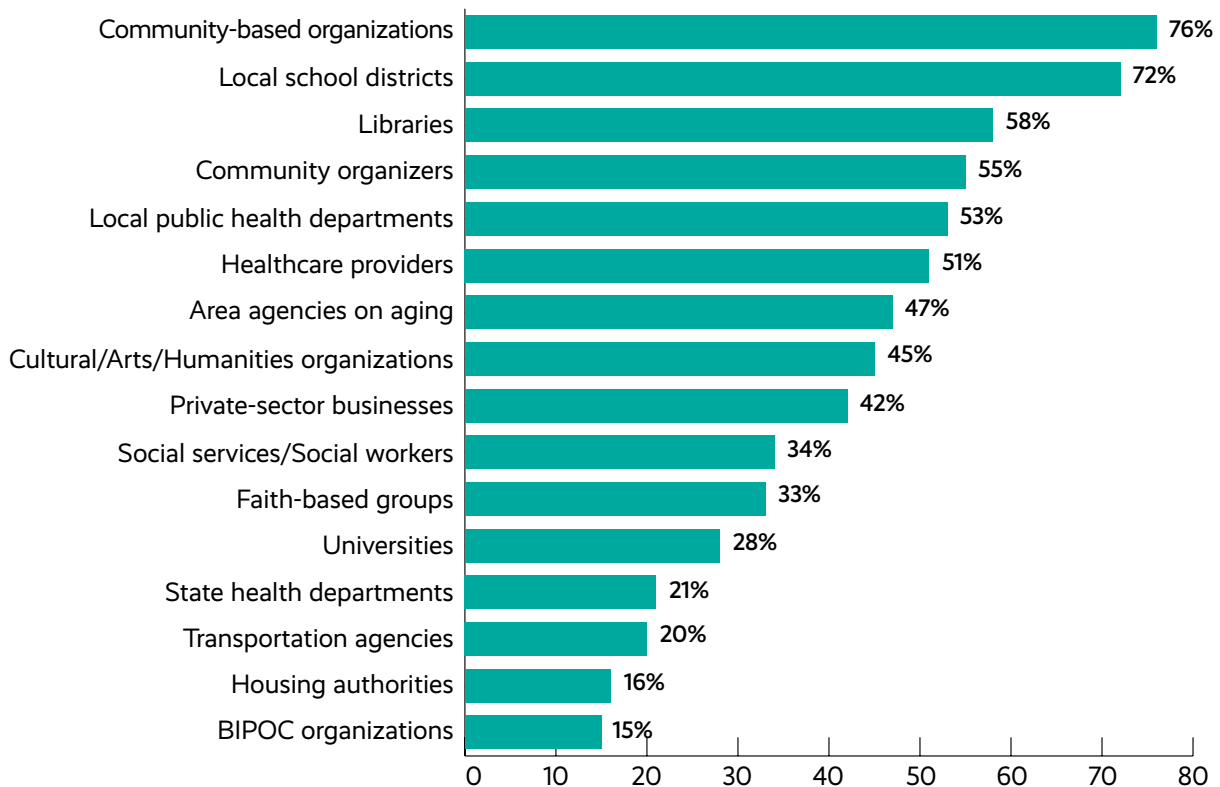
A youth soccer player goes for the goal at All American Park in Las Vegas.



DeKalb County (Georgia) students from Sheltering Arms Pre-K explore the Mason Mill wetlands and search for signs of barred owls with a park ranger.

VIRTUALLY ALL PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES COLLABORATE WITH PARTNERS TO SUPPORT THEIR HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

(Percent of Agencies)



Addressing Emerging Public Health Threats



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUSTIN MILLER

A farm camper and counselor remove weeds from a community garden at Historic Wagner Farm in Glenview, Illinois.

Park and recreation professionals work every day to address and mitigate emerging public health threats impacting their cities, towns and counties. From the visible threats of climate change to the unseen threats of mental health disorders and social isolation, parks and recreation plays a critical role in supporting public health in communities.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies are at the forefront of meeting these public health challenges. This includes the more than three in four (76 percent) park and recreation agencies that currently work to reverse physical inactivity — a key contributor to chronic disease and diminished mental health — in their communities. Similarly, 41 percent of agencies are addressing chronic disease (e.g., obesity, cardiovascular disease, arthritis).

With [one in five U.S. adults and one in six U.S. youth ages 6 to 17 suffering from some form of mental illness each year](#), mental health is a particular area of focus for many park and recreation agencies. Thirty-eight percent of agencies offer programming and services that address social isolation and loneliness, while 37 percent deliver services that support the social-emotional health and development of youth. In addition, 20 percent of agencies dedicate resources that attend to mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other conditions. Thirteen percent offer help to address trauma.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, park and recreation professionals and their agencies support their communities in navigating a number of emerging public health threats, including:

- ➔ Food access (cited by 38 percent of respondents)
- ➔ Environmental resiliency/climate change (24 percent)
- ➔ Unequal access to education/learning resources (22 percent)
- ➔ Substance use disorders (e.g., prevention, response) (17 percent)
- ➔ Disparate access to economic opportunities (e.g., jobs, workforce development) (19 percent)
- ➔ Homelessness (17 percent)
- ➔ Trauma (13 percent)
- ➔ Uneven access to healthcare (six percent)

Looking toward the future, park and recreation leaders anticipate their agencies will be tackling additional public health challenges, including:

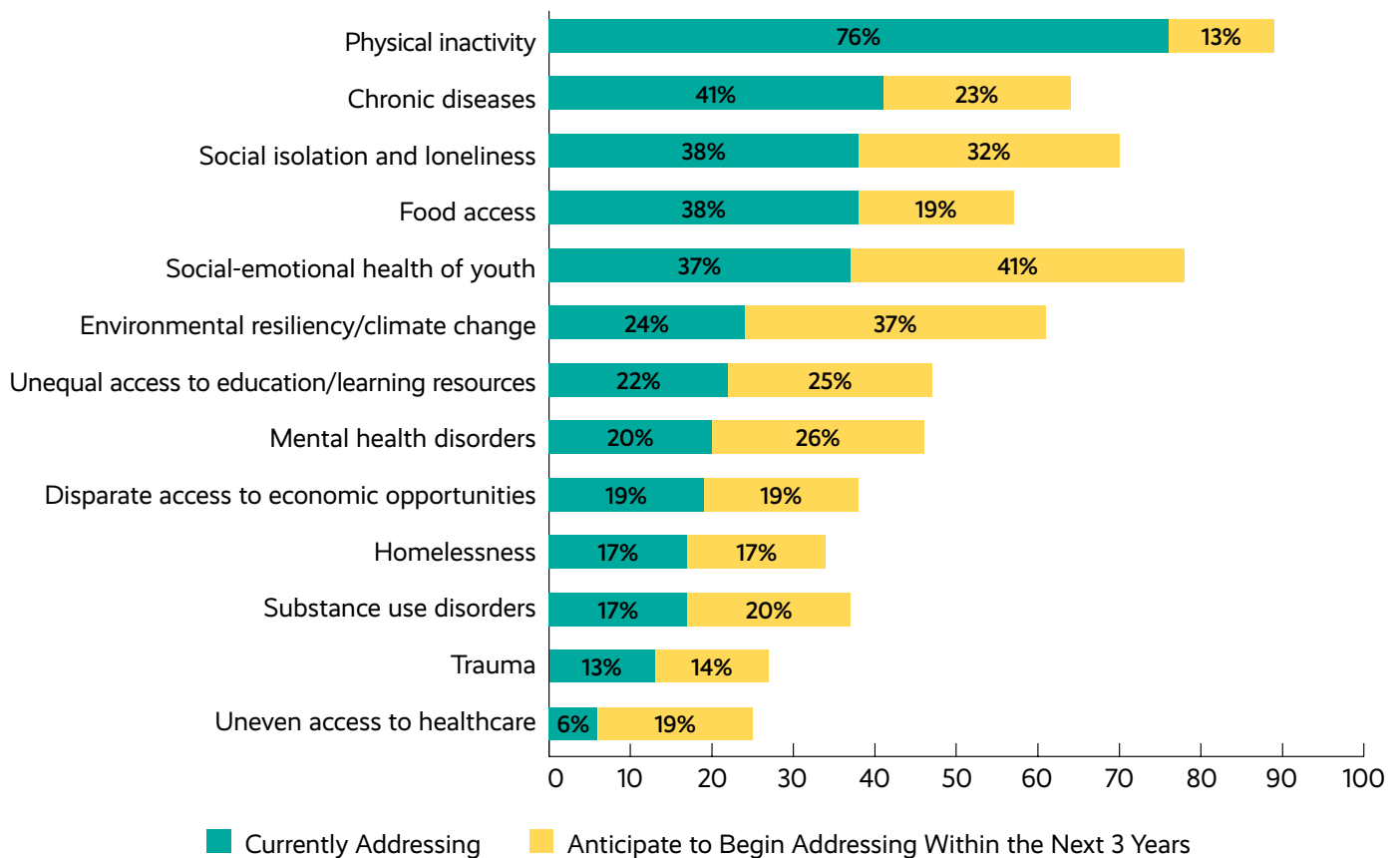
- ➔ Social-emotional health of youth (cited by 41 percent of respondents)
- ➔ Environmental resiliency and climate change (37 percent)
- ➔ Social isolation and loneliness (32 percent)
- ➔ Mental health disorders (26 percent)
- ➔ Unequal access to education and learning resources (25 percent)



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHERINE MCLAUGHLIN

PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES ADDRESS MANY PUBLIC HEALTH THREATS AFFECTING THEIR COMMUNITIES

(Percent of Agencies Currently Addressing or Anticipate Addressing Within the Next Three Years)



The Role of Parks and Recreation in Advancing Health and Well-Being

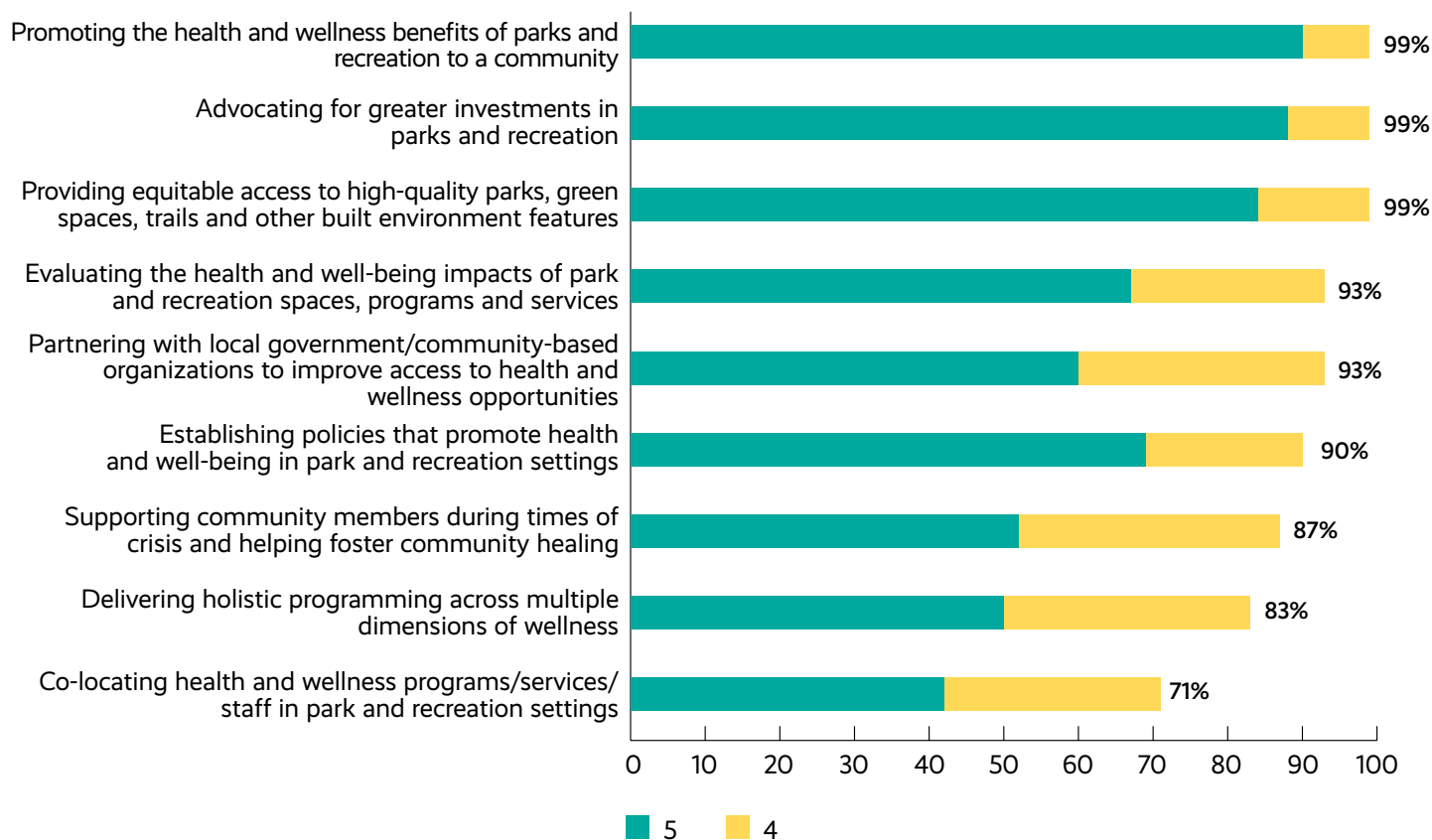
Park and recreation professionals view themselves and their peers as leaders in advancing health and well-being in their communities. Nearly all survey respondents indicate their most important roles in advancing health and well-being in their communities include:

- ➔ Promoting the health and wellness benefits of parks and recreation to the community (99 percent of respondents rating the level of importance as either a four or five on a five-point scale)
- ➔ Advocating for greater investments in parks and recreation (99 percent)
- ➔ Providing equitable access to high-quality parks, green spaces, trails and other built environment features (99 percent)

Ninety-three percent of park and recreation professionals recognize that evaluating the health and wellness of park and recreation spaces, programs, and services in their communities is among their most important functions in advancing health and well-being in their communities. A similar share of respondents hold the same view regarding partnering with local government/community-based organizations to improve access to health and wellness opportunities.

PROMOTING THE BENEFITS OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS, ADVOCATING FOR GREATER PARK AND RECREATION INVESTMENTS AND PROVIDING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY PARKS RANK MOST IMPORTANT TO PARK AND RECREATION PROFESSIONALS

(Percent of Respondents Rating These Benefits a “4” or “5” on a Five-Point Scale)





Bikers participate in the Bike Centerville community bike ride at Iron Horse Park in Centerville, Ohio.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CENTERVILLE-WASHINGTON PARK DISTRICT, OHIO

Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation

Our nation's history of systemic racism and unfair practices, policies and power structures impact the conditions in which people live, learn, work and play. Those impacts can lead to health and socioeconomic disparities that disproportionately impact Black, Latino, Native American, people of color, low-income and rural communities. By elevating and centering health equity within operations, programs and services, parks and recreation has the potential to ensure everyone has fair and just opportunities to be as healthy as possible.

Nine in 10 park and recreation agencies are taking specific actions to ensure that their health and wellness programs and services promote health equity. Seventy-two percent of park and recreation professionals indicate that their agencies are transparent and accountable to key stakeholders, staff and the public; 70 percent report that their agencies make training staff on diversity, equity and inclusion a priority.

Being invested and present in a community requires trust. It is imperative that every park and recreation agency's staff members build trust with community residents to ensure they have their residents' best interests in mind and those professionals are listening to and understanding community members' needs. More than half (52 percent) of all park and recreation agencies have specific initiatives in place to support community engagement to build trust and ensure equitable representation. Other actions that agencies are taking to ensure their health and wellness programs and services promote health equity in their communities include:

- ➔ Convening cross-sector partners to create solutions to health inequities and disparities (25 percent of agencies)
- ➔ Prioritizing investment and resources in historically disinvested communities (22 percent)
- ➔ Defining equity goals and evaluating progress (21 percent)
- ➔ Partnering with community-led and BIPOC-led organizations (21 percent)
- ➔ Conducting needs assessments to identify practices/policies that narrow health inequities (20 percent)
- ➔ Establishing new policies to ensure the community has power and authority (16 percent)

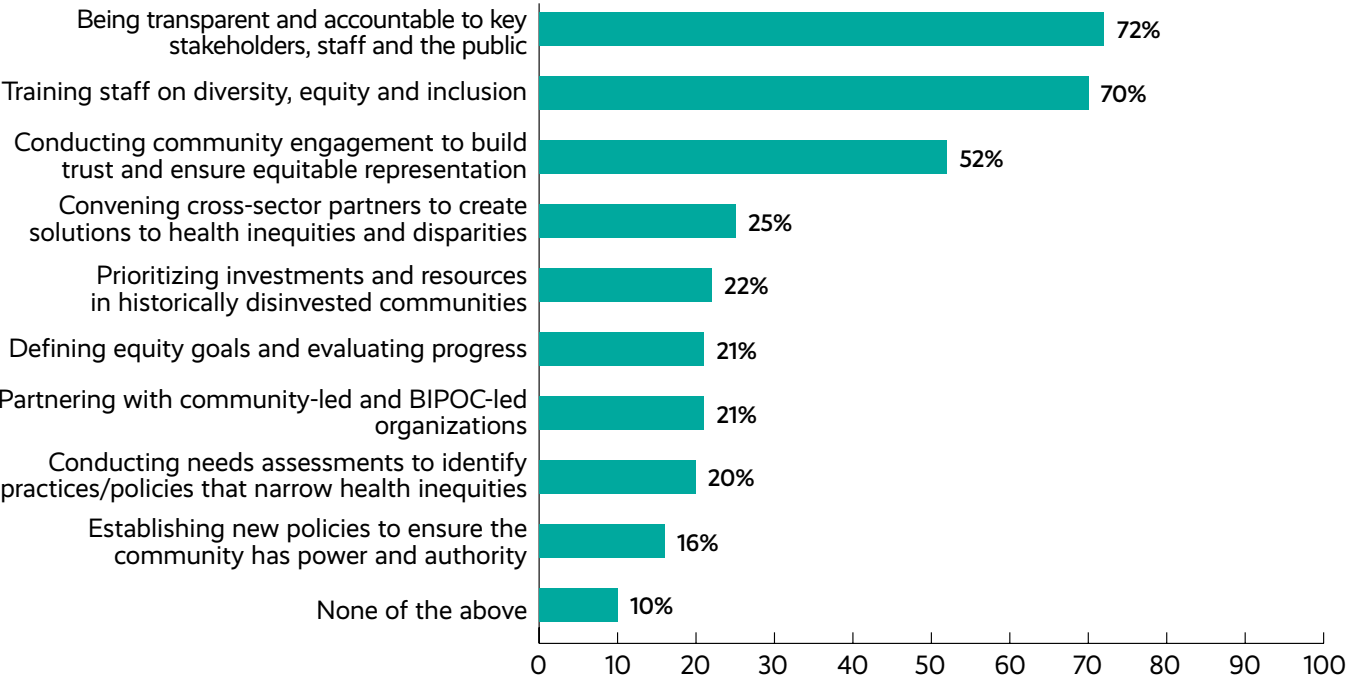


A person participates in a Special Games event in Temecula, California.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF TEMECULA, CALIFORNIA

MOST AGENCIES TAKE INTENTIONAL ACTIONS TO ENSURE THAT THEIR HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES PROMOTE HEALTH EQUITY

(Percent of Agencies)



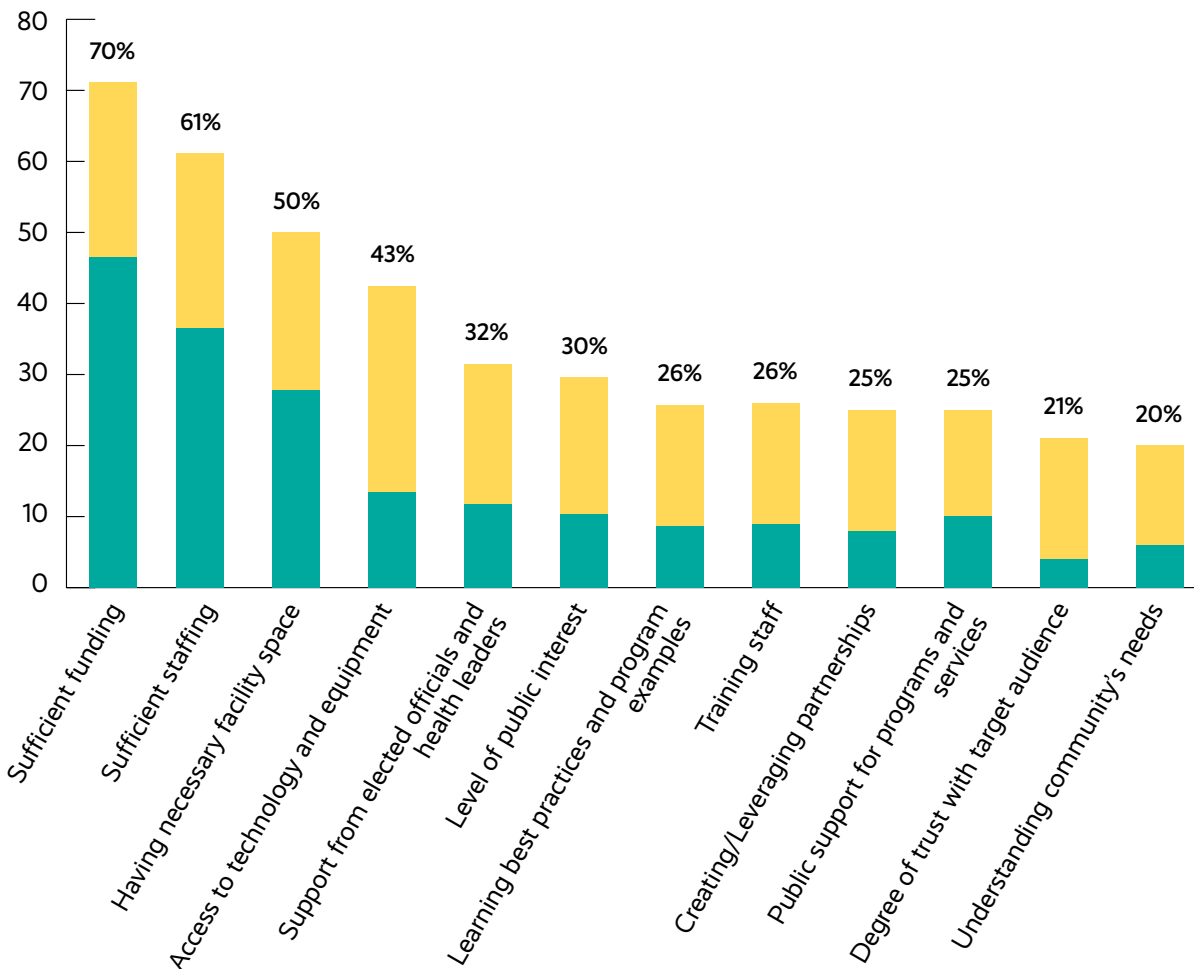
Barriers to Expanding Health and Wellness Programs and Services

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies strive to provide the best programs and services for the residents of their communities, but they often encounter barriers that slow or halt progress altogether. Seventy percent of agencies indicate funding is the biggest barrier when it comes to being able to expand health and wellness programs and services. Nearly half (47 percent) of agencies rate funding as a very substantial barrier. In addition, 61 percent of agencies indicate level of staffing as a barrier, while half of all agencies note a lack of necessary facility space in which to conduct such programs and services. Slightly more than two in five park and recreation professionals report that their agencies have difficulty gaining access to needed technology and equipment.

Fortunately, building support for parks and recreation’s role in promoting health and wellness programs is less of an issue. One-third of survey respondents indicate that support from elected officials and local health officials is a barrier to expanding these programs; 30 percent indicate an insufficient level of public interest.

GAINING SUFFICIENT FUNDING, STAFFING AND FACILITY SPACE ARE THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO EXPANDING HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

(Percent of Respondents Rating These Barriers a “4” or “5” on a Five-point Scale)



Preparing Park and Recreation Professionals

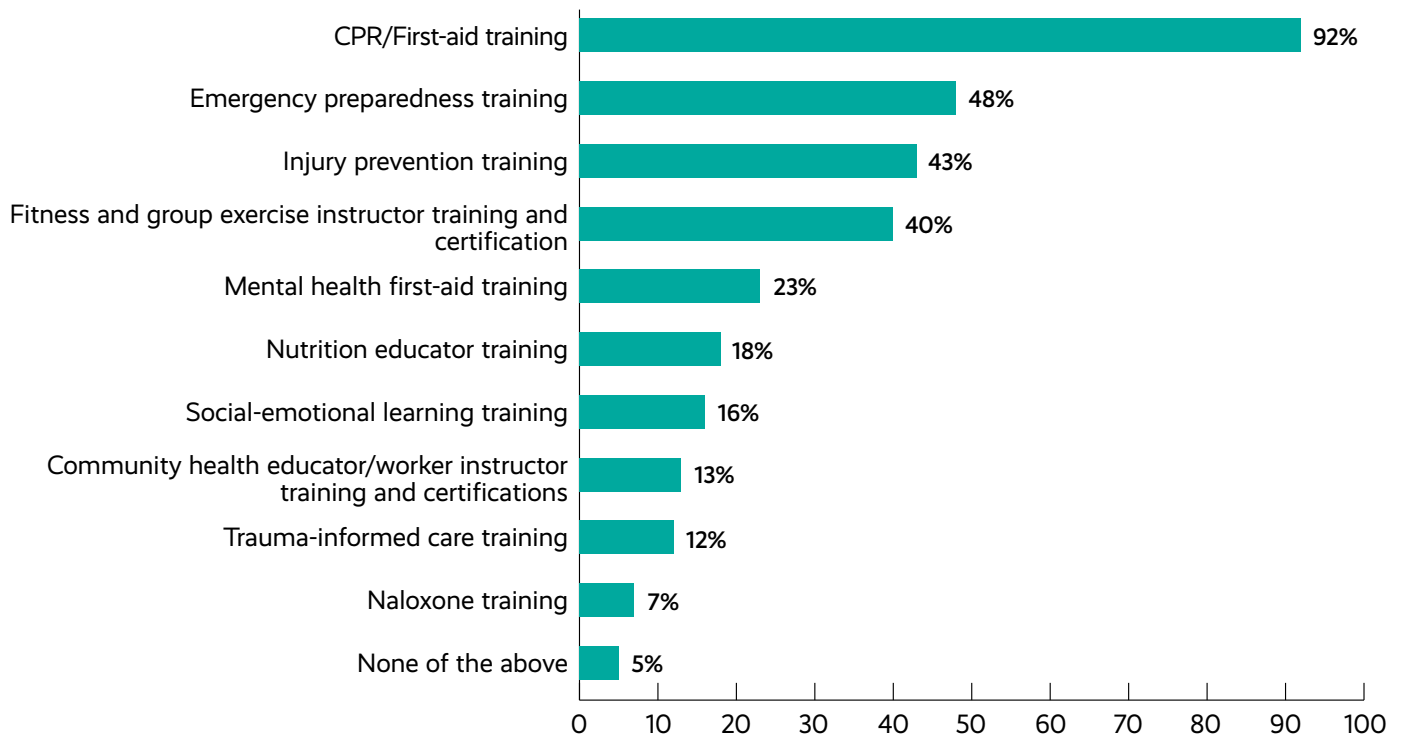
Training and professional development are critical tools that prepare park and recreation professionals for their role in supporting their communities' health and well-being. Training and professional development also keep agency staff engaged in this mission.

Ninety-five percent of park and recreation agencies provide health and well-being training and/or professional development opportunities to staff members. Most common is cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first-aid training, which are provided by 92 percent of agencies to their staff.

Since park and recreation professionals work in various environments and among diverse groups of residents, health and well-being training and professional development also vary. Nearly half (48 percent) of all staff members participate in emergency-preparedness training, while 43 percent are involved in injury-prevention training. Two in five park and recreation agencies provide the opportunity for (or require) training and certification to fitness and group exercise instructors.

PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES PROVIDE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO THEIR STAFF

(Percent of Agencies)



Conclusion

At their core, park and recreation professionals and their agencies protect the health of all people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play. Across the country, park and recreation professionals have transformed themselves into public health leaders — meeting community members where they are and connecting them to needed health opportunities. They have expanded programming and worked to fill gaps in access to physical activity, healthy food, chronic disease prevention and management, and social connections, as well as support academic and cultural enrichment opportunities.

While parks and recreation has become an integral part of the public health system, the survey results indicate that there is more work to do. Park and recreation professionals have a significant opportunity to address the social-emotional health of youth, social isolation and loneliness, climate change, mental health disorders and access to educational opportunities in the coming years. Further, park and recreation professionals are recognizing and taking steps to address the inequitable access to health and wellness opportunities within their communities. Nonetheless, there remains significant opportunity for those in the field to center health equity within their operations, programs and services to ensure that all people have a fair and just opportunity to thrive.

As we look toward the future, it is clear that parks and recreation is in a unique position to develop bigger, bolder and more equitable solutions that confront today's host of emerging public health challenges while, at the same time, building a culture that prioritizes wellness.

A hiker enjoys the trails and views at Dawson Butte Ranch Open Space in Castle Rock, Colorado.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLORADO

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the park and recreation professionals and their agencies that completed the survey, providing the data that served as the basis of this report. Thank you to Kevin Roth, Melissa May, Gina Mullins-Cohen, Lindsay Hogeboom, Vitisia Paynich, Jennifer Nguyen, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Thank you also to the many park and recreation professionals who contributed the images featured throughout this report.

About NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

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 immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject-matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at nrpa.org/Research.



A young girl dances to keep warm during the morning of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service at Brook Run Park in Dunwoody, Georgia.

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