

DISABILITY INCLUSION IN PARKS AND RECREATION

NRPA defines inclusion as removing barriers, both physical and theoretical, so that all people, including those with physical and cognitive disabilities, have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of parks and recreation. While the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life and sets standards for accessible features, there is still room to inspire change and create greater impacts. Park and recreation agencies are leading these efforts by providing quality programming and prioritizing innovative inclusive opportunities for community members of all abilities.

WHY PARKS NEED TO PRIORITIZE DISABILITY INCLUSION

Park and recreation agencies already have the processes in place to create a welcoming and inclusive space. Support is especially crucial, as individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities have significantly higher prevalence rates for most chronic diseases than people without disabilities. These diseases include increased rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, as well as had a higher association with stroke and arthritis¹. People with disabilities consistently report higher rates of obesity and smoking, lack of physical activity and lack of engagement with the outdoors. Agencies support equity for those with disabilities by ensuring accessibility to parks, recreation centers, swimming pools, nature trails and other facilities; by offering resources and support not typically available to those with cognitive disabilities; and by designing inclusive programming for those with physical and cognitive disabilities.

Examples of programming for individuals with a physical or cognitive disability include:

- Physical activity programs, exercise classes, and/or fitness training (e.g., walking programs, yoga classes, personal training, sports leagues)
- Volunteer or employment activities (opportunities to volunteer or work in parks and recreation centers)
- Health and wellness programs (e.g., chronic disease prevention and treatment programs, cooking/nutrition classes)
- Social activities that support social-emotional learning opportunities (e.g., social clubs, arts and crafts, music, dancing, cultural classes)

¹ *Examining Health Disparities among Adults with Disabilities and What It Means for Public Health, 2011.* <https://www.nchpad.org/964/5155/Examining-Health-Disparities-among-Adults-with-Disabilities-and-What-it-Means-for-Public-Health>





ADDITIONAL WAYS TO PROMOTE DISABILITY INCLUSION IN PARKS AND RECREATION

Creating a welcoming and accessible environment for those with physical and cognitive disabilities is a great first step to promoting inclusion. Parks and recreation can promote disability inclusion through:

- **Community Representation:** Ensuring that all community members voices are represented when it comes to decision-making about programmatic offerings or facility improvements/expansion.
- **Prioritizing Accessibility:** Park and recreation agencies need to consider all populations when planning events, installing park improvement projects or creating new programs. Ensuring that all park and recreation offerings

are accessible and inclusive should be a top priority to positively influence health outcomes of those with disabilities.

- **Messaging:** It's important to recognize that although spaces and programs may be open to all, those with physical or cognitive disabilities or their caregivers may feel more comfortable when that message is explicitly stated and supported. Consider adding messaging to promotional materials or on display in facilities that assures all community members that they are welcome. Aim to use people first language; for example, "a person with a disability" versus "a disabled person."

Inclusive Efforts in Parks and Recreation:

In the fall of 2017, NRPA—with support from the Lakeshore Foundation—hosted an innovative inclusion microgrant challenge. Four local park and recreation agencies each received \$1,000 awards to implement innovative programs and enhancements so individuals with a physical or cognitive disability could participate in healthy living opportunities.

- "Learn to Ride Adaptive" bike program in Austin, Texas, provides community members with an adaptive bike to participate in cycling programs alongside their peers.
- "Prichard Pride: Growing a Garden Together" in Prichard, Alabama, added ramps and signage to an intergenerational garden, allowing all to garden together.
- "Grow Up Green Club" in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, enables children on the autism spectrum and typically developing children to explore sun, water, wind, dirt and backyard nature.
- "Sense Tents" in Minneapolis, Minnesota, brings mobile tent units to events to provide the appropriate to tools for people with disabilities to regulate their senses and calm their minds and bodies.

TAKE ACTION NOW

- [Pledge your commitment](#) through Commit to Inclusion
- [Submit a success story](#) with your own Parks for Inclusion story to be featured on NRPA's Success Story database
- Share what your agency is working on through social media, using the hashtag **#ParksForInclusion**
- Check out more ways to get involved on the [Parks for Inclusion resource database](#)

LEARN MORE AT WWW.NRPA.ORG/PARKSFORINCLUSION