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County Parks & Recreation



# Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation

Workshop Summary and Case Study Resource



# Health Equity Workshop Summary

In January of 2022, NRPA hosted its first-ever Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation Workshop. Through an equity-driven application process, six agencies were selected to participate in the workshop. Each agency had a project team of three to six individuals that included a mix of park and recreation professionals, cross-departmental colleagues, community partners and community members. The workshop was facilitated by Think Equity (previously Epic Health Solutions) and supported by NRPA staff in three comprehensive virtual sessions from January 11 to 13.

In alignment with NRPA's *Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* resource, the virtual workshop sessions covered topics — such as fostering anti-racist culture, evaluating programs and policies, meaningful community engagement, root causes of inequity, historical context and implications of systemic racism, health and racial equity concepts and terms, and applying a racial equity and health equity lens. The workshop objectives were as follows:

- 1) Define terms and concepts associated with health and racial equity.
- 2) Apply a benefit vs. burden analysis to programs, policies and practices to create equitable outcomes.
- 3) Describe how implicit bias, privilege and power affect how people interact with the world and their work.
- 4) Examine the role of self, structure and systems in impeding or facilitating health through a racial equity lens.
- 5) Describe the components of racial equity that guide organizations toward institutional equity and an anti-racist culture.

Following the workshop, all six agencies participated in the following technical assistance (TA) sessions:

- One-on-one sessions with Epic Health Solutions and NRPA in March 2022
- Two small group sessions with Epic Health Solutions and NRPA in April 2022
- Large group session with Epic Health Solutions and NRPA in May 2022

# Health Equity Workshop Findings

The workshop and TA sessions were evaluated through a participant survey at the close of each session. Most respondents said the workshop met the stated objectives with the top three takeaways being: challenging personal biases, understanding historical context of systemic and historical challenges and feeling empowered to move forward.

***“...being challenged to walk toward... discomfort to challenge conscious and unconscious biases, [and that it] resonated and felt like a call to action.”***

The feedback that was provided after each workshop/TA session helped inform the subsequent training and TA provided to participants. The main request by participants was to learn and share best practices, lessons learned and case studies for examples of practicing centering equity in parks and recreation. Key topics for discussing best practices were identified during the one-on-one meetings in March and informed breakout room topics for all agencies to discuss with each other during the small group TA sessions in April.

The key themes and primary areas of interest that workshop attendees identified are below. NRPA also has outlined suggested starting points and additional resources that agencies can explore related to each theme:



## Shared Language/Framing Messages

How can park and recreation professionals frame health equity messaging in communities where the word “equity” may be a politically charged and divisive term?

- NRPA’s [Equity Language Guide](#) is a starting point for creating a shared language. NRPA recommends agencies invest in professional development for their staff to use a shared language that can inform a shared vision and shared messaging for each agency that is equitable and relevant to their community.
- NRPA’s [Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action](#) and [Equity in Parks and Recreation](#) story map provide a starting point for helping professionals understand the history of park and recreation inequities and making a personal and agency-wide commitment to advancing equity that can help strengthen the agency’s vision and supportive messaging.



## Workforce Development and Diversification

How can leadership teams help professionals in all roles understand their role in advancing equity? How can they cultivate a diverse workforce that is reflective of the community served?

- NRPA's [Equity in Practice](#) certificate program is a starting point to support all professionals with identifying their role in advancing equity within their communities.
- Section 3, Worksheet Part 2: Agency Assessment in [Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action](#) (pages 34 to 36) helps agencies assess current representation amongst their staff in different positions, as well as key indicators in hiring and retention practices, opportunities for career growth and staff skills/knowledge of core DEI competencies. Professionals have an opportunity to identify their current state, ideal state and actions to take to address the findings.
- Section 3, Worksheet Part 3: Health Equity Integration in [Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action](#) (pages 59 to 62) provide sample actions an agency can take related to representation amongst staff in leadership, hiring practices and policies, and staff training.



## Policy Development

How can park and recreation professionals develop new equity-centric policies and how can they center equity within existing policies?

- Epic Health Solutions shared several resources on policy development, including [sample city-wide policies](#), and NRPA has begun collecting existing policies as a reference for park and recreation professionals.



## Community Engagement

How can park and recreation agencies engage under-represented community members in agency services and programming?

- NRPA's [Community Engagement Resource Guide](#) is a starting point and NRPA recommends partnering with a facilitator or advocate reflective of the target community to discuss appropriate methods for engaging specific community populations.
- NRPA's [Health Impact Evaluation Framework](#) and [Community Wellness Hubs: A Toolkit for Advancing Community Health and Well-Being](#) provides guidance on key program design steps, including working with community members and key stakeholders,

conducting a community needs assessment, and establishing program objectives in collaboration with community members.



## Benchmarks and Performance Measures

How can park and recreation agencies measure success as they move forward in this work?

- The Health Equity Framework's Good, Better, Great Checklist (page 59) is a starting point to develop key benchmarks and indicators of success.
- NRPA's *Inclusive Healthy Places Companion Guide* to the *Inclusive Healthy Places Framework* provides suggested indicators, metrics and data resources related to implementing an inclusionary process and participation outcomes reflective of centering equity and inclusion.
- NRPA's *Health Impact Evaluation Framework* can help agencies create a mixed-methods evaluation plan that assesses both the process and outcome of their efforts to advance health equity.
- NRPA will continue to support agencies as they work to measure progress toward systems change. Evaluating systems-change approaches (practice/policy change, changing relationships/norms, addressing power structures, etc.) is new and complex. Because advancing systems-change approaches entails a long, ongoing and constantly evolving process, setting short- and intermediate-term goals and celebrating real-time progress is key. Explore [principles for evaluating systems change](#).

***“There is so much work to do. Our organization is not as far along as we might have hoped. But it feels empowering to have some concrete objectives and vision for what improvement in health equity might look like for our organization.”***

*– Health Equity Workshop participant*



# Agency Case Studies and Post-Workshop Health Equity Action

The technical assistance provided to each agency concluded on May 19, 2022, with an opportunity for agencies to celebrate and share their accomplishments, challenges and goals as they move their equity action plans forward. NRPA continued to monitor agency progress following the workshop, regularly monitoring commitments to health equity action and progress each agency was making.



## Sacramento County Department of Regional Parks, Sacramento, California

Sacramento County applied for this opportunity to ensure equity is centered in their park systems, which serve about 1.5 million community members in their area. Prior to the workshop, Sacramento County was hopeful to learn more about welcoming diverse populations into their regional facilities to guarantee that all people have access to healthy recreational opportunities. Sacramento staff was excited to learn ways in which their

Sacramento County's Department of Regional Parks currently maintains and operates more than 15,000 acres of parks and open spaces. The department works to enhance the health, enjoyment and quality of life in the region by protecting and managing park and open space lands, educating the public, providing a range of recreation activities for diverse populations, and providing stewardship through its partnership and community involvement. Sacramento County's four participants in NRPA's Health Equity Workshop included the director, senior planner, and two recreation and park commissioners.

organization can better understand the perspective of others to incorporate and promote actions that provide equity and justice for all. Going into the workshop, Sacramento County's top priorities included learning how to evaluate programs and policies, establish meaningful community engagement, and apply a health equity lens to their work.

During the workshop, Sacramento County appreciated the open dialogue and peer-sharing aspects that occurred between agencies. The attendees learned the importance of communication — especially with their community members — to ensure all voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

Following the workshop, all members of Sacramento’s Equity Committee completed the self-assessment and agency assessment portions of the *Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* (Framework). Since then, Sacramento staff has begun coordinating with the county’s overall DEI consultant to assist with the health equity integration phase. Sacramento has disclosed that identifying community outreach partners has been a challenge due to the agency’s fear of unintentionally leaving essential people out of the conversation, which is why Sacramento County has elected to work closely with its consultant, rather than managing this project completely in-house. In the next few months, Sacramento staff plans to brainstorm ways to expand the agency’s reach to organizations that it is not currently engaged with. Sacramento views success in the future as partnering with local groups or coalitions — such as the Boys and Girls Club, Office of Education, local media and Museums of Science and Curiosity — to advance their work in the equity space.

Sacramento is proud to have started this conversation within its organization and is committed to making this work a priority. Soon, the Equity Committee will host scheduled meetings to discuss committing to the call and next action steps for programs and policies. Workshop participants from Sacramento County recognize that not everyone in their organization is at the same learning stage, so they are eager to apply their learnings from the workshop to find the appropriate ways to communicate with colleagues and members. Sacramento staff plans to create and strengthen partnerships, participate in listening sessions with target populations, and develop a full vision as an agency for programs and policies moving forward. Sacramento is prepared to re-envision the ways in which people have traditionally used park spaces to ensure the county’s spaces are welcoming and safe for all.



### **Five Rivers MetroParks, Dayton, Ohio**

Five Rivers MetroParks applied for this workshop to discover ways for its members to increase awareness in their agency, establish trust with their community, and improve inclusion efforts through public engagement and facility development. MetroParks staff was eager to participate in this workshop to learn, grow and adapt in ways that allow all community members to feel more comfortable taking advantage of the benefits of parks and recreation. Through this workshop, MetroParks staff hoped to work toward practices that allow members to better understand the perspective of others, which will result in more equitable services being delivered in their community. Going into the workshop, Five Rivers MetroParks’ top priorities included learning how to apply a health equity lens to its work, evaluate programs and policies, establish

meaningful community engagement, and move upstream to address root causes of inequity in its community.

During the workshop, Five Rivers MetroParks participants appreciated the nature of the *Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* (Framework), as well as the resources and teachings provided. Most significantly, they enjoyed hearing from other agencies regarding past successes and failures and plan to use these findings to inform their equity work in the future.

Five Rivers MetroParks participants completed both the self-assessment and agency assessment portions of the framework and have initiated conversations internally to encourage other staff members to complete the assessment as well. Following the workshop, MetroParks participants engaged in conversations with their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee and have drafted an outline for a presentation for the Board of Park Commissioners that is to be scheduled soon. Five Rivers MetroParks staff recognizes that although the task is challenging, it is necessary to ensure the importance of the framework is understood on an agency-wide level. To accomplish this, staff has participated in internal equity conversations to build enthusiasm for the framework and their equity work. The agency shifted internal conversations to prioritize equity and focus on how their agency can contribute to this work. MetroParks staff believes this is an important initiative for any public agency and would recommend that interested agencies create a team across their agency to participate in this work, instead of limiting this journey to a single department. By doing so, agencies have the potential to expand this work over the entire organization, which can lead to quicker change and positive outcomes.

Five Rivers MetroParks takes pride in protecting open spaces and natural areas, as well as providing outdoor experiences that facilitate personal connections with nature. Five Rivers MetroParks currently protects nearly 16,000 acres of land and supports 25 facilities, as well as 11 conservation areas. Annually, more than 3.6 million individuals visit Five Rivers MetroParks to explore its trails, educational and natural features, and outdoor recreation experiences. Five Rivers Metroparks' four participants in the workshop included the director of outdoor connections, cultural resources manager, and two program managers — all representing parks and recreation.

In the coming years, MetroParks plans to collaborate with the county and regional partners to collect and analyze data that will assist them in their work to advance equity. The agency plans to focus on Black, Indigenous, people of color, people who are economically challenged, people who are differently abled and LGBTQIA+ populations to create safe and welcoming parks, programs and facilities within their community. Since participating in the workshop, staff members at MetroParks have said they are inspired to discover new, meaningful ways to engage diverse communities in their programs and policies and plan to use lessons learned as a guide. MetroParks plans to hire, train and promote a diverse workforce in addition to advancing equity



through resource retention. Five Rivers MetroParks' mission related to diversity, equity and inclusion is **to invest in the underserved — both in the community and within the agency — to create a culture where everyone feels welcome to connect with nature.**

## Salt Lake City Corporation, Salt Lake City, Utah

Because the team at Salt Lake City recognizes that simply building facilities does not create equal opportunities for all to benefit from them, the agency applied for this unique opportunity to ensure all community members not only have access to multiple facets of health, but they also have the knowledge, skills and confidence to utilize these aspects. Prior to the workshop, Salt Lake City was eager to learn how to recognize the systems that need adjustments in terms of equity, become an active voice and a source of trusted knowledge for the community and discover ways to empower and authentically engage community members with different lived experiences. Salt Lake City was excited to assess equity and inclusion in its current programs and policies and pursue initiatives that shape policies to promote health equity, with a focus on access to nature and recreation. Going into the workshop, Salt Lake City's top priorities included learning how to apply a racial equity lens to the agency's work, evaluate programs and policies, and establish meaningful community engagement.

Salt Lake City's Department of Public Lands values the preservation, development and maintenance of parks throughout the city. The Parks Division in Salt Lake City currently manages 735 acres of parklands intended for the use and enjoyment of the community and visitors to the area. Salt Lake City's six participants in NRPA's Health Equity Workshop included the department director, deputy director, director of planning and ecological services, and program manager from Salt Lake City's Department of Public Lands. This team also was joined by the chief operating officer at NeighborWorks Salt Lake and a representative from the Salt Lake City Parks, Natural Lands, Urban Forestry and Trails Advisory Board.

During the workshop, Salt Lake City appreciated the open sharing of resources, templates and equity plans. Staff has found these resources to be especially beneficial in initiating equity conversations within the agency.

Following the workshop, Salt Lake City staff completed both the self-assessment and agency assessment portions of the *Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* (Framework). Since completing the Health Equity Workshop, Salt Lake City has made major strides toward integrating health equity and committing to the call within its community. In addition to initiating internal conversations related to DEI within its agency, Salt Lake City has initiated a five-part training for all staff that occurs weekly through its Human Resources department. These trainings will be used to establish foundational DEI concepts for staff members

and will encourage further DEI conversations throughout the agency. Salt Lake City Public Lands also appointed two representatives on the Government Alliance on Race and Equity Advisory Board and is in the process of drafting a DEI plan with its chief equity officer, which will include a newly developed equity statement. Since the workshop, Salt Lake City staff hired an intern to help collect and manage data on operational equity and spending, and the agency plans to hire a DEI liaison to assist with increasing advisory board diversity, recruitment retention and community outreach support. In terms of the Framework, Salt Lake City admits the agency assessment portion was challenging, but it inspired the agency to plan for a larger equity analysis of their organization. For this reason, Salt Lake City also is looking to hire an external consultant to complete an agency assessment with a focus on hiring practices, inclusivity and language barriers. Additional ways that Salt Lake City has focused on health equity since the workshop include reviewing job descriptions to improve inclusivity and accessibility, completing a language access plan and updating bilingual signage standards within its community. These aspects are part of its public lands' master plan, which identifies equity as a primary guiding lens. In five to 10 years, Salt Lake City hopes to begin adopting this master plan within its agency.

### **West Allis – West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department, West Allis – West Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

Because the team at West Allis-West Milwaukee (WAWM) serves a diverse population, the agency applied for this unique opportunity to learn more about the impacts of institutional and systemic racism, as well as ways in which it can combat inequities in its community. The WAWM core team was eager to learn how to use their professional platforms to provide equitable services, support change and become champions of health equity in their community. Going into the workshop, WAWM's top priorities included learning how to foster an anti-racist culture, evaluate programs and policies and establish meaningful community engagement.

The West Allis – West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department takes pride in providing recreational experiences and learning opportunities that serve its community. In partnership with the school district and community, the Recreation and Community Services Department supports programming that encourages personal excellence and life-long learning for all. West Allis – West Milwaukee's (WAWM) five participants in NRPA's Health Equity Workshop included the director and two program managers from the Recreation and Community Services Department, as well as two representatives from the City of West Allis Health Department.

During the workshop, WAWM appreciated the collaboration between NRPA and Epic Health Solutions. They agency valued the encouraging and engaging nature of the sessions and greatly

valued the *Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* (Framework), which WAWM plans to reference frequently moving forward.

After the Health Equity Workshop, the core team at WAWM completed the self-assessment and agency assessment portions of the framework. The core team also created a plan to move the agency into the Health Equity Integration phase in conjunction with the development of WAWM's Community Wellness Hub. Through this workshop, the WAWM team recognized that inequities do exist within their community and believe their biggest accomplishment thus far is acknowledging, as an organization, that change needs to occur for this reason. This step has motivated the team at WAWM to assess their current practices, as well as plan for next steps to address these inequities within their community.

Moving forward as an organization, the team's goal is to center equity in all programs, policies and procedures to allow for systems change within their community. The WAWM team is eager to expand this conversation to the full administrative team to implement positive changes on an agency-wide level. To lead this work, WAWM has hired a consultant that will conduct six learning sessions with the core team, complete



an agency audit and assist in creating an action plan for next steps. WAWM recognizes that integration is a challenging step in this work, but with support from its consultant, the agency is confident in its abilities to act and implement a new equity action plan. The team at WAWM recognizes this work is sensitive and emotion-evoking due to the history and pain that are unraveled with it, which means this process can take time. Moving forward, WAWM plans to continue referencing the Framework and use its learnings to inform future professional development and policy improvement opportunities for all staff.



## Chicago Park District, Chicago, Illinois

Because the team at Chicago Park District strongly believes in access, equity and justice for all communities, the agency applied for this opportunity to learn how to incorporate an equity lens into its programming and staffing practices. Chicago leadership was eager to discover ways to partner and work with valuable organizations that can bring resources into the 77 neighborhoods Chicago Park District currently serves.

The Park District is the largest park system in the Midwest and the third largest in the country; each unique community calls for varying health equity approaches. For example, the Park District is converting a contaminated industrial area into a 17-acre park with a natural area, nature play space and fieldhouse. It also is establishing its headquarters in a community that needs green space. The Chicago Park District plans to revitalize nature-focused programs, community gardens, healthy food options, nature play areas and continue to grow its 250,000 tree canopies by at least 3,000 trees yearly.

Additionally, Chicago Park District was excited to engage in this workshop to learn how to educate its staff and community members about equity and to learn how parks can be used to develop, improve and expand access to social services. Going into the workshop, Chicago Park District's top priorities included learning how to apply a health equity lens, evaluate programs and policies, and establish meaningful community engagement.

During the workshop, Chicago Park District resonated with participating agencies that shared their struggles in addressing and implementing equitable policies and programs. The agency appreciated the resources provided and was excited to share learnings with the rest of its organization.

Since participating in the workshop, Park District leadership has announced a deeper focus and dedicated commitment to expand health, wellness and sustainability efforts in neighborhoods. The agency will expand its focus on health, wellness and sustainability to improve Chicagoans' quality of life equitably and work to improve health disparities in priority communities.

Chicago Park District staff also completed the self-assessment portion of the *Elevating Health Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* (Framework) and has started to initiate conversations around strategic planning and health equity internally within the agency. Chicago Park District also formed connections with its local hospitals to collaborate on addressing social disparities and implementing policies to improve equitable practices in the community. Chicago staff — representing various departments including Health and Wellness, Special Recreation, Outdoor and

Chicago Park District owns more than 8,800 acres of green space and offers thousands of physical, cultural, and environmental programs through its more than 600 parks. As the largest municipal park manager in the nation, Chicago Park District strives to enhance the quality of life in Chicago by prioritizing the needs of community members and ensuring all have access to safe, inviting and beautifully maintained parks and facilities. Chicago Park District's seven participants in NRPA's Health Equity Workshop included the assistant manager of special recreation, region director, program and event coordinator, center director, deputy chief of workforce development, and two wellness managers — all representing parks and recreation.

Environmental Education and Community Recreation — learned from each other the amount of health equity work the agency does that can be better documented and shared and that the Chicago Park District would benefit from an integrated plan of action.

To begin this work, Chicago staff acknowledges the need for a team-based approach, which requires a commitment from all those involved to successfully assess their agency and provide a path for change in the future. Since the healthy equity trainings, Chicago staff has engaged the new leadership in sustainable equity conversations. The agency shifted its DEI committee's work to develop a shared language and understanding of equity, adding additional senior staff to the committee, expanding it to more than 50 participants and receiving direction from the general superintendent and CEO. Chicago staff has spent time digesting the resources and lessons received during the Health Equity Workshop and is prepared to present these collective learnings, as well as a new proposal, to the City of Chicago's Office of Equity and Racial Justice and to the city's new superintendent. Moving forward, Chicago Park District plans to use NRPA's Health Equity resources to inform future pilots, internal trainings and the implementation of a language accessibility guide. Additionally, Chicago staff recognizes the importance of the community and plan to review the process of community participation in decision-making conversations to ensure community members have a voice in changing policies, programs and strategies. In the coming years, Chicago Park District hopes to create a new health equity-focused strategy and policy to align with the City of Chicago and guide future decisions.



## San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department, San Antonio, Texas

San Antonio Parks and Recreation applied for this opportunity to create a space for learning, reflecting and planning for action in its organization. Staff members were eager to learn how to use their positions and power to influence policy and practice changes that can improve health outcomes for institutionally marginalized communities. San Antonio was looking forward to discovering ways to educate others about topics related to equity and engage more individuals in its equity efforts. The core team at San Antonio Parks and Recreation recognizes this work requires commitment from an entire community to move forward. Going into the workshop, San Antonio's top priorities included learning how to evaluate programs and policies, establish meaningful community engagement, apply a racial equity lens and challenge implicit biases.

The San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department's mission is to provide exceptional parks, facilities, programs and services to advance the quality of life for all. Currently, San Antonio Parks and Recreation maintains more than 250 city-owned parks and is responsible for more than 16,000 acres of green space. San Antonio's vision includes equitable access for all by 2050. This emphasizes a commitment to a system that drives excellence, equity, empowerment, and engagement in all operations and policies. San Antonio Parks and Recreation's five participants included the executive assistant, parks and recreation board chair and administrator from the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department. This team also was joined by a health equity manager from the City of San Antonio Office of Equity, as well as a representative from San Antonio Metropolitan Health.

During the workshop, San Antonio valued the resources that were provided and was eager to share them with the entire agency. The team appreciated the opportunity to learn and understand from other agencies, as well share successes and challenges in their equity work.

After participating in the workshop, San Antonio staff completed the self-assessment portion of the Framework and has shared this tool internally within the agency. While participants have completed parts of the agency assessment, they recognize this portion requires honesty and commitment from all staff members, which has prolonged the process. San Antonio Parks and Recreation used this framework to develop an action plan for implementation in its agency and has since created a designated equity staff team to lead this work over the next two years. The creation of this action plan has allowed staff to take a deeper dive into the organization's make-up and evaluate existing programs and policies. San Antonio recognizes equity work is challenging and has been patiently getting the entire agency on the same page in terms of messaging and time commitment but believes the Framework provides a good road map to guide this process and its work.

In the coming years, San Antonio plans to grow its Racial Equity, Accessibility, Diversity and Inclusion (READI) team to implement the agency's equity action plan effectively within its organization. Through this team, San Antonio hopes to expand equity training for staff, continue sharing resources and knowledge with internal and external partners and increase engagement opportunities with the public. After the completion of this workshop, San Antonio Parks and Recreation also updated its agency statement to center equity. According to San Antonio, equity is achieved when one's identity does not determine the experience the person has with parks and recreation.



# Resources

*[Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action](#)*

*[Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Historical Perspective](#)*

*[Creating an Equitable System-Wide Master Plan](#)*

*[Community Engagement Resource Guide: Creating Equitable Access to High-Performing Parks](#)*

*[NRPA's Equity in Practice Resource Library](#)*

*[Community Wellness Hubs: A Toolkit for Advancing Community Health and Well-Being](#)*

*[Advancing Community Health and Well-Being Report](#)*

*[Engagement With Parks Report](#)*

*[Annual Performance Report](#)*

*[Health Impact Evaluation Framework](#)*

*[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Parks and Recreation Report](#)*

*[NRPA's DEI Action Plan](#)*

*[NRPA's Equity Language Guide](#)*