



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

Building the Pipeline of Coaches in Philadelphia, PA

Case Study





Trainers are introducing an activity to the participants. Photo courtesy of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation.

Agency Information

Philadelphia Parks & Recreation manages a recreation, environmental, and cultural center network covering more than 11% of the city's land area. The system serves 1.6 million residents across Philadelphia's diverse neighborhoods through 150 recreation centers, providing spaces for community engagement, outdoor activities, youth sports, and enrichment programs.

Increasing Access to Youth Sports

One of Philadelphia Parks & Recreation's ongoing challenges is meeting the increasing demand for high-quality youth programming while providing a skilled workforce to support it. This gap is particularly present in youth sports, where the need for trained and dedicated coaches remains high. To address this, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation has aligned its efforts with the National Recreation and Park Association's Youth Sports Framework, focusing on the **Recruiting and Training Coaches** pathway. Their goal is to expand opportunities for young athletes by ensuring they have access to well-prepared mentors and leaders in sports.

Philadelphia Parks & Recreation and the Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative, has been partnering with the City of Philadelphia's Career Connected Learning PHL Program (C2L-PHL) since 2022. This program engages youth ages 12-24 by providing paid work experiences to foster skill development and career readiness. Through the program, participants gain valuable hands-on learning opportunities that prepare them for future professional success. As part of this initiative, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation employs over 1,200 youth and young adults as junior counselors at summer camps, where they play a vital role in supporting and mentoring thousands of younger participants.

In 2024, the training program for counselors was significantly expanded by Philadelphia Parks & Recreation with funding from NRPA and the Million Coaches Challenge to include comprehensive instruction in sports-based youth development and playful learning methodologies. While some training had been conducted years previously, this program provided counselors with knowledge and strategies to engage youth through sports activities and interactive learning experiences.

Why It Matters

Engaging youth workers in summer programming is highly effective because they can easily connect with and relate to younger participants. Equipped with these new skills, the counselors applied their training by leading dynamic sports sessions and facilitating playful learning activities designed to foster personal growth, teamwork, and social-emotional development among participants.

However, many of these workers perceive these roles as temporary "summer job" opportunities rather than as a potential pathway to long-term careers. This program encouraged a shift in this perspective, moving from the temporary job mentality to highlighting the valuable skills and experience gained in these positions and demonstrating how these experiences can be a foundation for future professional growth. Throughout this program, 82% reported gaining career knowledge and skills, and 70% said the program helped them envision a successful career in the future.

Moving the Needle

The City of Philadelphia has demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting its youth by leveraging sports as a strategic tool for community well-being and workforce development. Philadelphia Parks & Recreation fosters a sense of ownership and pride in public spaces by empowering young people to lead and connect with their communities. This creates a ripple effect as participants return year after year, embedding a culture of mentorship and continuity within the program.

The program's impact extends to violence prevention. While 2024 saw a reduction in gun violence, there is a growing concern around the impact of community violence on young people. Through its initiatives, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation is making an immediate impact on youth, keeping them engaged in healthy activities that reduce the risk of engaging in harmful behaviors, and creating long-term opportunities. These programs not only engage participants in positive, structured activities but also provide a clear pathway for youth to transition from program participants to recreation leaders with the potential to pursue full-time careers within the agency.

Impact of Youth Sports Initiatives

- 1,200 Youth Counselors completed sports-based youth development and education training, using their new skills to support over 4,000 participants in sports-based community programming.
- 82% of Youth Counselors graduated with valuable career skills from the program, enhancing their professional prospects; 76% of participants reported a positive and rewarding experience in the program; and, 70% gained a clearer understanding of what a successful career path looks like.
- Philadelphia Parks & Recreation and the Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative strengthened their partnerships, enhancing program effectiveness and reach.
- Significant progress was made in decreasing gun violence in 2024, highlighting the positive impact of community-based programs.



Youth Counselors participate in training. Photo courtesy of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation.