



**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*



# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

**IN PARKS AND  
RECREATION**



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF PASADENA HUMAN SERVICES AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

People play wheelchair rugby at the Adaptive Sports Festival in Pasadena, California.

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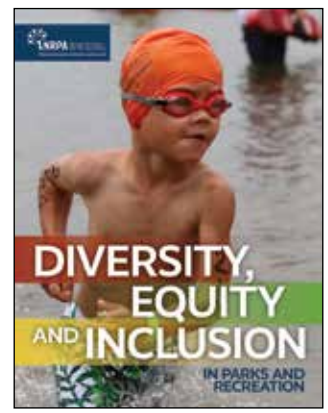
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A youth participates in the Johnson County (Kansas) Park and Recreation District's Kids Triathlon. Photo courtesy of Johnson County Park and Recreation District.



# Introduction

Park and recreation professionals are essential, serving on the front lines of many of today's most pressing challenges. Through their park and recreation agencies, they advance community health, resiliency and overall well-being. Given their mission to make communities better places to live, learn, work and play, park and recreation agencies are in a unique position to champion efforts that advance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Across the profession, however, gaps remain in understanding how systemic racism, unfair power structures, and a lack of cultural competency and humility affect DEI and access to quality park and recreation spaces and programs.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) supports park and recreation professionals as they work to meet the challenges facing our society. Utilizing the full potential of parks and recreation builds strong, healthy and resilient communities. NRPA's 2021–2023 Strategic Plan details this vision through its Three Pillars of Health and Wellness, Equity, and Conservation.

Centering equity in all that NRPA does lays the foundation for confronting injustices and ensures that parks and recreation remains accessible, inclusive, engaging and culturally relevant. By assuring representation of diverse life experiences and voices, park and recreation professionals will better reflect the communities their agencies serve. Inequity *is* the ultimate challenge facing our nation, and parks and recreation can make a profound difference.

In February 2021, the NRPA Research team surveyed park and recreation leaders to gain a better understanding of their agencies' efforts surrounding DEI practices. The 14-question survey took inventory of the DEI activities, if any, agencies have established, the professional development opportunities provided to staff and the challenges organizations face in their efforts to promote DEI practices. The survey's 283 responses from park and recreation leaders across the United States are the basis of this report.

A participant of the Homewood-Flossmoor (Illinois) Park District's 2019 Park Pride Day shows off plants before placing them into a flower bed.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT BIRGEL

## Centering equity means that:

We lead with race, because racial inequities persist in every system across the country — in health, education, employment, etc. Baked into the founding of our institutions, the vestiges of racial inequity will remain present — unless intentionally countered. Therefore, it is imperative that we acknowledge racism's influence from the beginning, examine with intention the ways to dismantle these systems, and rebuild — possibly reinvent — the policies and practices that shape essential places and spaces and our profession.

We uplift our core value of continuous learning and embrace a growth mindset — as individuals and as an organization — and support this shift in our members. Organizations that embody a growth mindset encourage appropriate risk-taking, knowing that some risks will not work out. They commit to progress, not perfection.

We, as an organization, examine how we embody inequitable systems and perpetuate exclusionary practices. As a membership organization, we lead by example and bring our members and affiliates along with us on this journey. Equity-centered approaches are intentional decisions and actions anchored in fairness of results and outcomes.

# Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Parks and Recreation: Key Findings

One-third of park and recreation agencies have formal diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) activities

1/3



Hiring practices and policies

Most common DEI activities at park and recreation agencies are:



Outlining an expressed commitment to DEI in foundational documents



Providing staff education and skill development

Most DEI activities are led by agency staff, including the agency director



# Key Findings

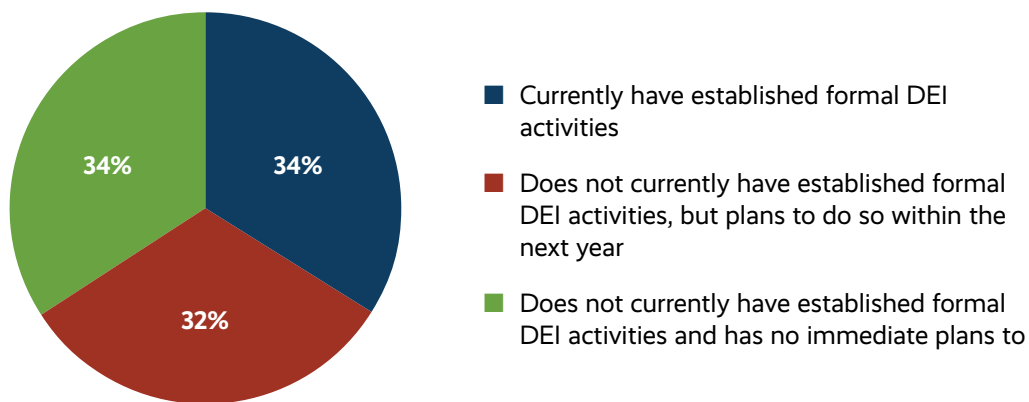
One-third of park and recreation agencies currently have formal DEI programs. Another 32 percent of park and recreation leaders anticipate their agencies will establish formal DEI activities within the next year. The remaining 34 percent of survey respondents indicate that their agencies do not have plans to launch formal DEI initiatives in the immediate future.

Formal DEI programs are more common at park and recreation agencies serving larger populations. Sixty-two percent of respondents from agencies serving more than 100,000 residents report that their organizations have established formal DEI activities; another 29 percent of respondents indicate that they will be launching formal DEI activities within the next year. One-quarter of agencies serving smaller jurisdictions of 50,000 or fewer people currently have formal DEI programs, while another 41 percent expect to establish such activities in the immediate future.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF CHESAPEAKE PARKS, RECREATION AND TOURISM

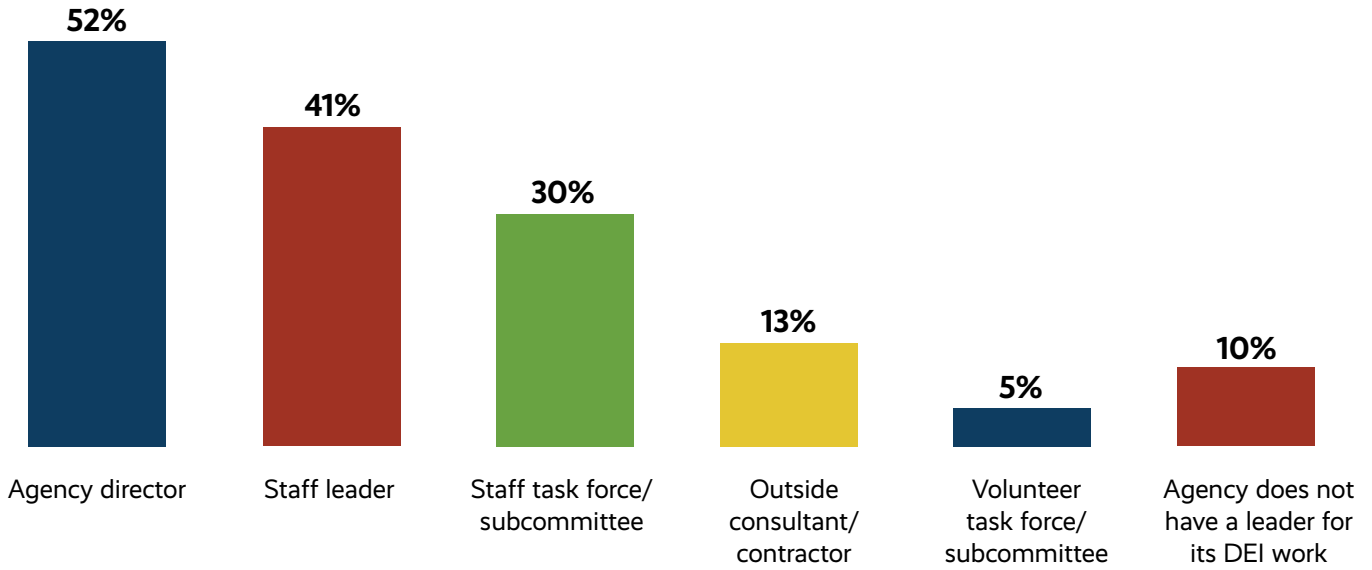
## One in Three Park and Recreation Agencies Have Established Formal DEI Activities (Percentage Distribution of Agencies)



Most park and recreation agencies rely on their staff — particularly those in key management positions — to lead their DEI activities. Agency directors oversee their current (or will oversee any future) formal DEI activities at slightly more than half of agencies. Similarly, 43 percent of agencies include other key members of their management teams, such as the assistant director or superintendent, to help steer their DEI efforts. Thirty percent of agencies have a staff task force and/or subcommittee playing an important role in their DEI activities; fewer agencies have their human resources or individuals in DEI-specific positions lead these activities.

Agencies are less likely to utilize non-staff resources to lead their DEI activities. For example, only 13 percent of agencies use an outside consultant or contractor to lead their DEI activities, while a mere five percent have a volunteer task force or subcommittee.

**More Than Half of Park and Recreation Agency Directors Lead or Will Lead Their Agency's DEI Activities**  
 (Percent of Agencies That Currently Have Established DEI Activities or Will Be Establishing DEI Activities Within a Year)



Whether or not they have a formal DEI program, most park and recreation agencies currently have established activities and policies that promote DEI practices. The most common DEI activity is the development of hiring practices and policies (reported by 66 percent of survey respondents). Half of park and recreation agencies include an expressed commitment to DEI in their foundational documents, including vision and mission statements and strategic plans.

Many park and recreation agencies also provide DEI-related education and professional development opportunities, including:

- Staff education/skill development (cited by 50 percent of respondents)
- Professional staff and volunteer education/skill development on DEI topics (46 percent)

Agencies also have established DEI practices that shape how they interact with their communities, including:

- Community engagement policies (cited by 45 percent of respondents)
- Recreation programming policies (38 percent)
- Volunteer recruitment practices and policies (25 percent)

Agencies located in jurisdictions with larger populations are more likely than those serving smaller populations to have policies and practices associated with:

- Hiring practices and policies (83 percent in larger populations compared to 66 percent in smaller populations)
- An expressed commitment to DEI in foundational documents (71 percent compared to 36 percent)
- Offering staff education/skill development (63 percent compared to 41 percent)

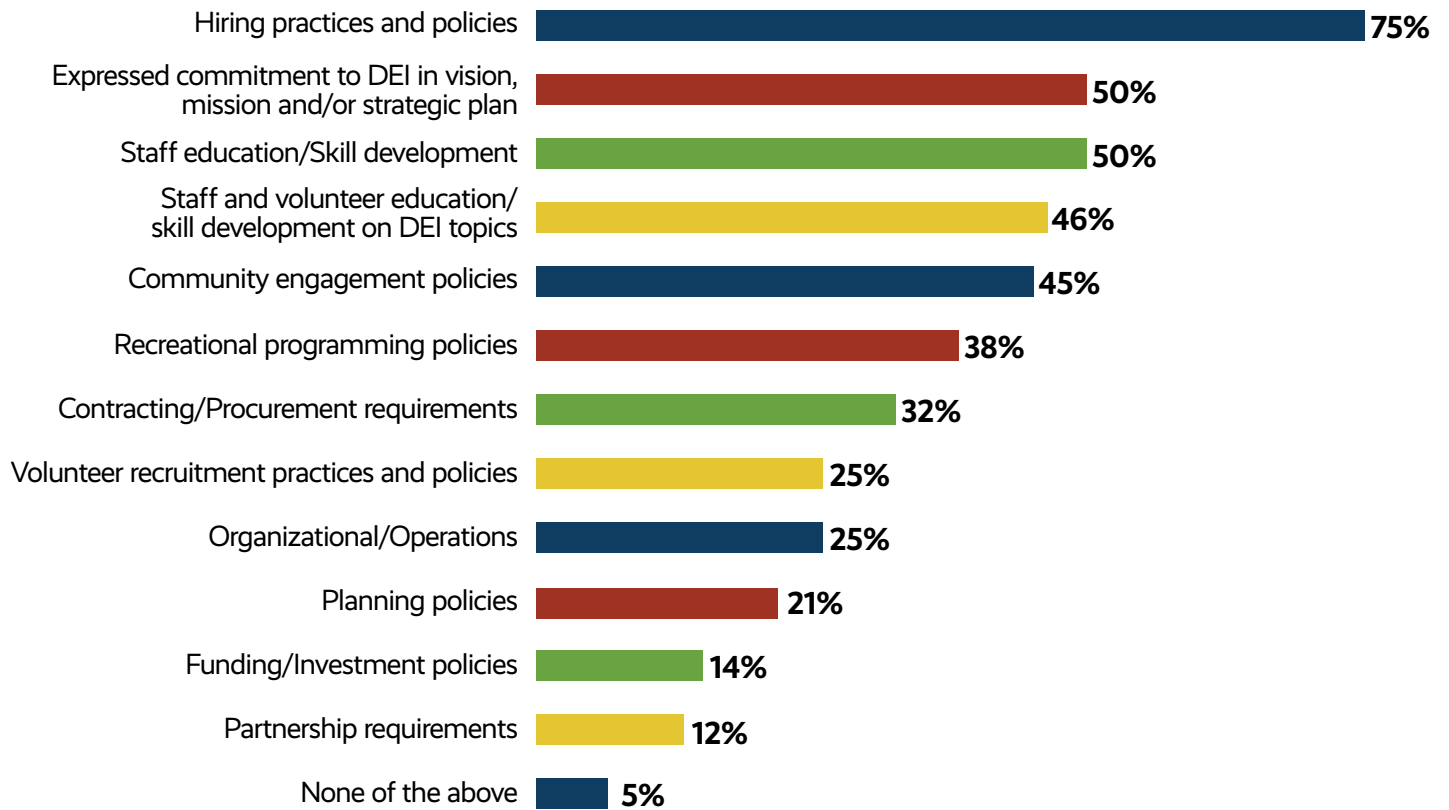
PHOTO COURTESY OF KELLEY GRIMMINS, PLANO PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT



Adults participate in an art class at the Sam Johnson Recreation Center in Plano, Texas.

- Providing professional staff and volunteer education/skill development on DEI topics (57 percent compared to 37 percent)
- Implementing community engagement policies (54 percent compared to 43 percent)
- Contracting/procurement requirements, such as minority or women business enterprise programs (49 percent compared to 26 percent)

## Virtually All Park and Recreation Agencies Practice Some DEI Activities and/or Policies (Percent of Agencies)



Park and recreation leaders face significant challenges in their efforts to promote diversity and establish inclusionary and equitable practices at their agencies. The most frequently cited challenge — for nearly three in five park and recreation leaders — is difficulty developing staff capacity and competency around DEI. One-third of park and recreation leaders are unsure how to establish or implement DEI-focused policies; a similar share is uncertain about where to start with DEI activities or how best to support staff.

Building community support for the agency and its activities can be a daunting task for many park and recreation leaders. Forty-two percent of survey respondents indicate that they are seeking ways to build trust with the communities they serve. Further, two in five park and recreation leaders believe their agencies face challenges in ensuring all members of their communities have access to and enjoy their parks, facilities and programming.

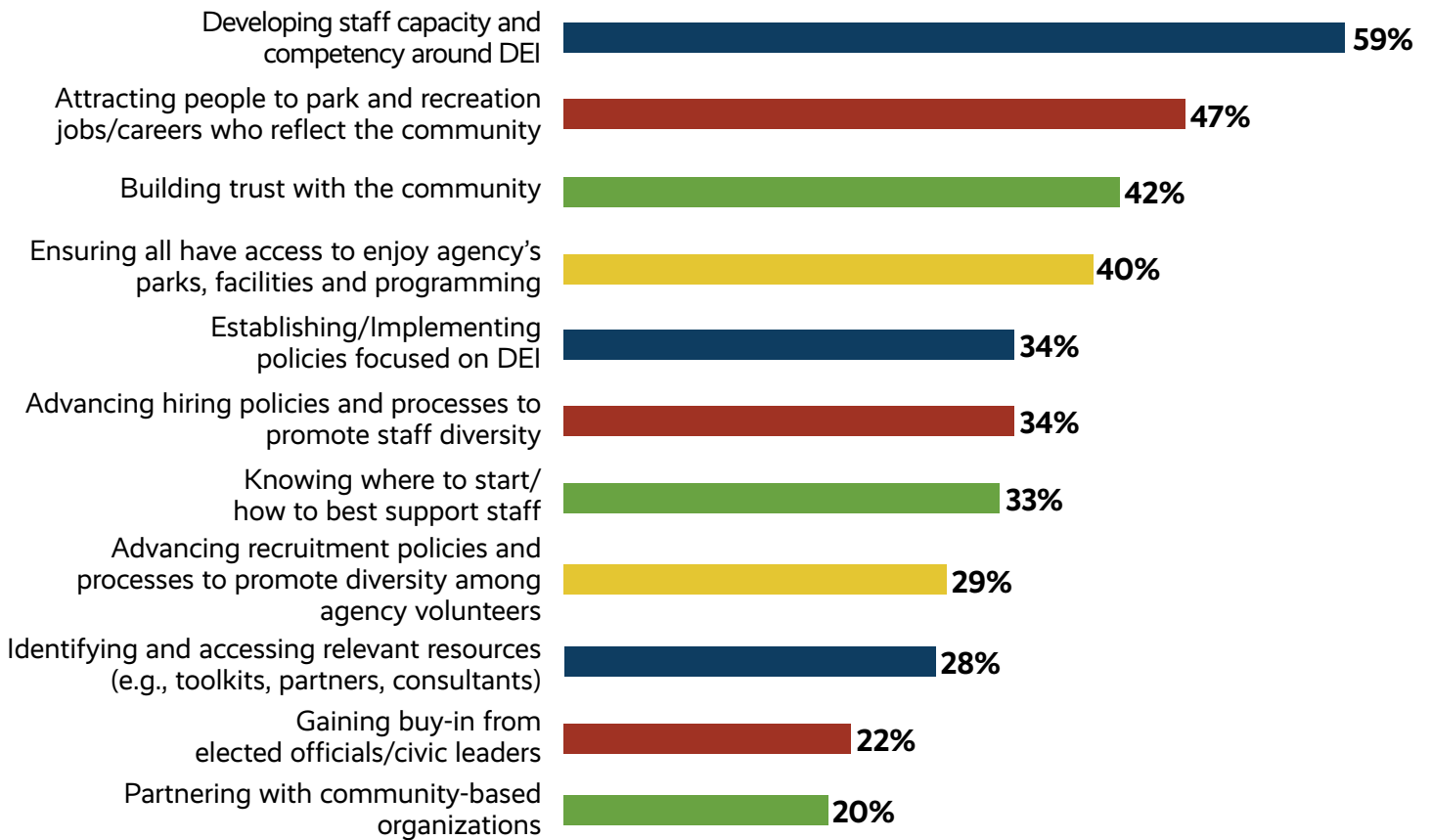
Making sure that agency staffing reflects the community that the agency serves is another obstacle. Forty-seven percent of agency leaders report difficulty in recruiting people for park and recreation jobs who reflect the communities they serve. In addition, a third of respondents report struggling to advance hiring policies and processes that promote diversity in agency staffing.



Park and recreation professionals take part in a 2019 community engagement workshop hosted by NRPA.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

**Park and Recreation Leaders Face Many Challenges in Their Efforts to Promote DEI Practices**  
 (Percent of Agencies That Currently Have DEI Activities or Will Be Establishing DEI Activities Within a Year)



Few park and recreation agencies have gone through a formal equity assessment. Only 12 percent of park and recreation leaders indicate that their agencies have conducted a formal equity assessment within the past five years and another 12 percent report that their organizations currently are conducting such an assessment. In addition, 16 percent of agencies have undertaken some form of an informal DEI assessment within the past five years. Looking to the future, 37 percent of park and recreation leaders anticipate conducting an equity assessment within the next two years. Just a quarter of agencies have neither conducted, nor anticipate conducting, a DEI assessment in the immediate future.

Agencies located in more populous locales are more likely to have conducted some sort of DEI assessment. Seventeen percent of agencies that serve more than 100,000 people have conducted a formal DEI assessment within the past five years, while another 26 percent have conducted an informal DEI assessment. In addition, 17 percent of larger agencies have a DEI assessment currently in progress. In comparison, only six percent of agencies serving areas with fewer than 50,000 people have conducted a formal DEI assessment, a similar six percent have done an informal assessment and eight percent have an assessment currently in progress.

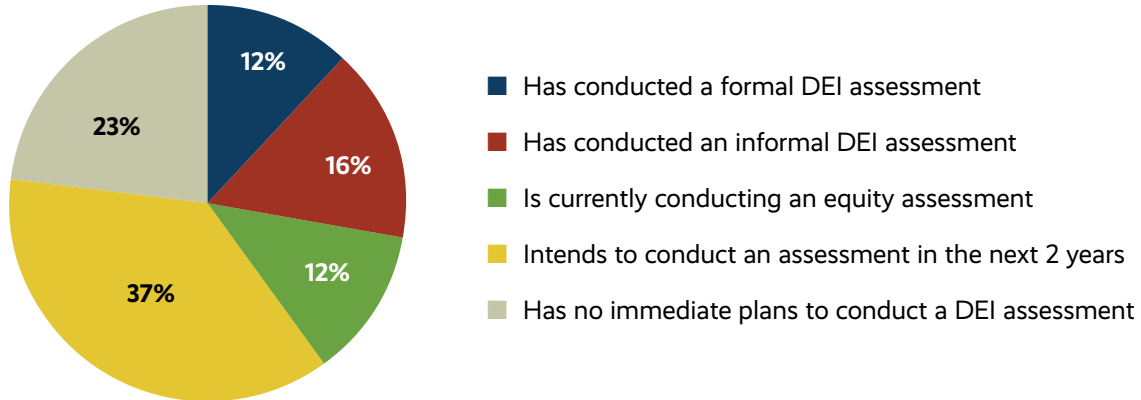
The gap between large and small agencies will likely shrink in the coming years. Fifty-two percent of agencies serving fewer than 50,000 people and 28 percent of agencies serving more than 100,000 residents expect to conduct DEI assessments within the next two years.

**Fifty-two percent of agencies serving fewer than 50,000 people and 28 percent of agencies serving more than 100,000 residents expect to conduct DEI assessments within the next two years.**



## Two in Five Park and Recreation Agencies Have Conducted an Equity Assessment Within the Past Five Years

(Percentage Distribution of Agencies That Currently Have DEI Activities or Will Be Establishing DEI Activities Within a Year)



Four in five park and recreation agencies offer their staff education (e.g., webinars, in-person trainings, conference sessions) and resources (e.g., toolkits) that promote DEI. The prevalence of staff education opportunities does not differ by size of agency.

The most common methods for staff DEI education are webinars and in-person trainings — being offered at 52 percent and 44 percent of agencies, respectively. Slightly more than a third of agencies provide staff with financial support (e.g., tuition, travel reimbursement) to participate in external professional development activities. Agencies located in higher populated locations are more likely than those serving smaller popula-

tions to make available to their staff:

- Webinars (60 percent compared to 48 percent)
- In-person training (50 percent compared to 35 percent)
- Financial support for external professional development opportunities (38 percent compared to 31 percent)

Topics covered in agencies' DEI education offerings include:

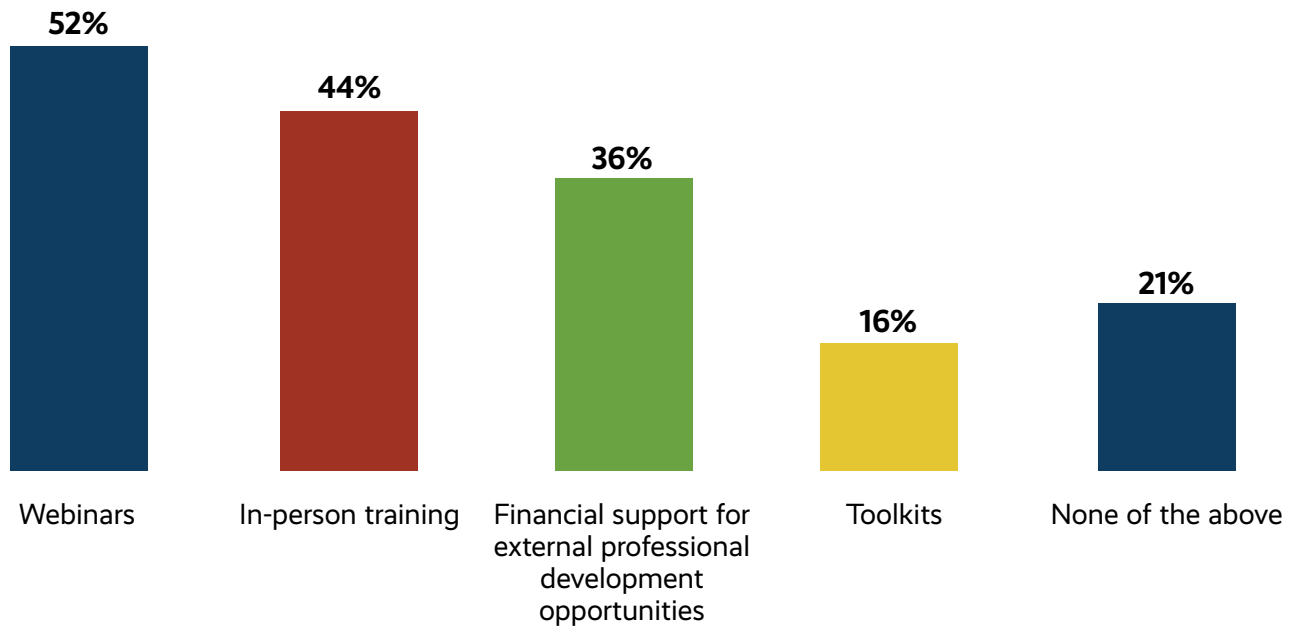
- Implicit bias
- Adaptive and inclusive programming
- Hiring practices
- Equity versus equality
- Systemic racism



Park and recreation professionals attend an education session at the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

**Four in Five Park and Recreation Agencies Offer DEI Education and Resources to Staff**  
 (Percent of Agencies That Currently Have DEI Activities or Will Be Establishing DEI Activities Within a Year)



A majority of park and recreation professionals indicate that both local and state political leaders place a high level of importance on DEI in parks and recreation. Sixty-four percent of survey respondents report that DEI in parks and recreation is important to their local jurisdictions' political leaders (e.g., mayors, city managers, county executives, council members), while only 15 percent indicate such efforts are unimportant to local leaders. Eighty percent of leaders from larger agencies report that their jurisdictions' leaders place a high level of importance on DEI in parks and recreation compared to 59 percent of respondents from smaller agencies.

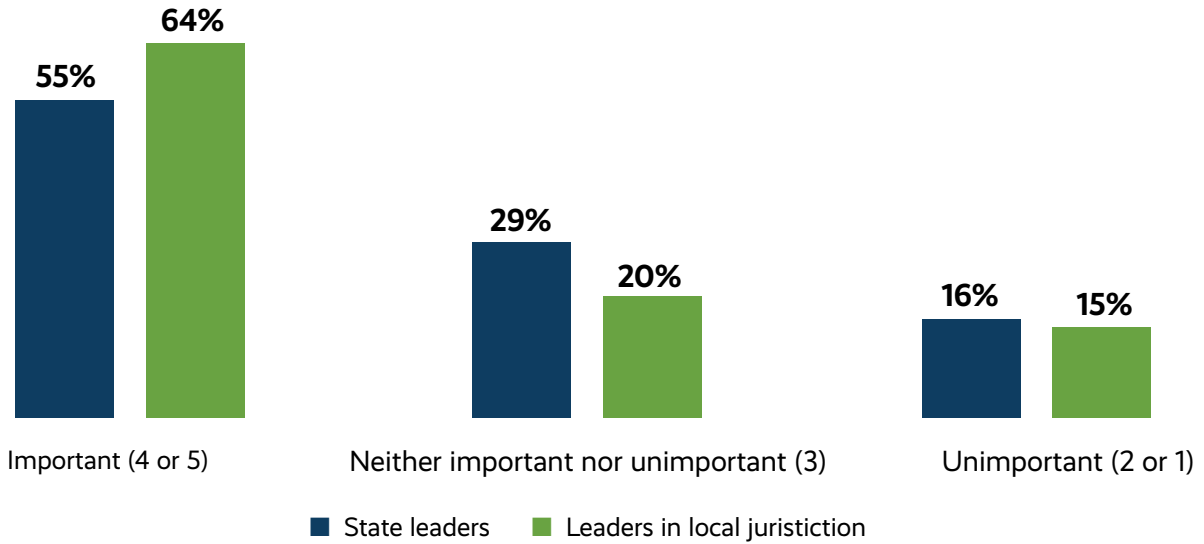
A smaller majority of agency leaders agrees that their state-level political leaders place a high degree of importance on DEI in parks and recreation compared to 16 percent who report the opposite. Sixty-two percent of leaders from smaller agencies indicate that their states' leaders place a high level of importance on DEI in parks and recreation compared to 52 percent of respondents from larger agencies.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

A park and recreation professional takes part in an activity during a 2019 community engagement workshop hosted by NRPA.

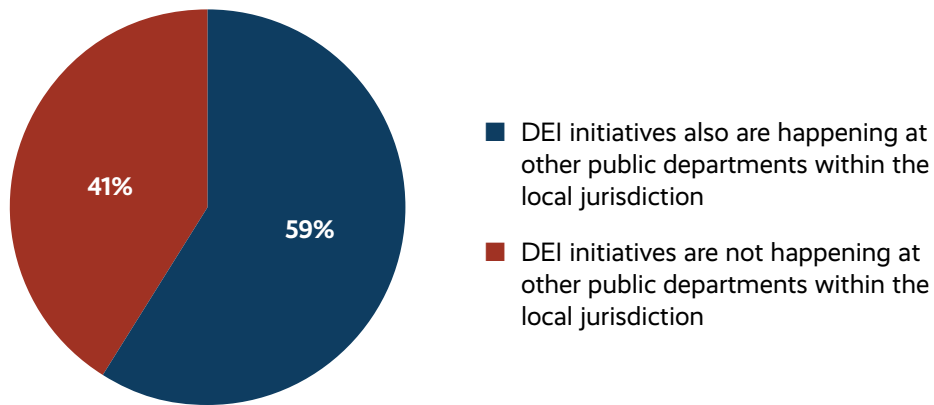
**Park and Recreation Leaders Believe DEI in Parks and Recreation Is Important to Political Leaders at the State and Local Levels**  
 (Percentage Distribution of Five-Point Scale Rating)



A majority of park and recreation leaders — 59 percent — note that DEI efforts are occurring not only at their agency, but also in other departments within the local government. Three-quarters of respondents from agencies serving populations greater than 100,000 indicate that other public departments

have established DEI activities compared to 47 percent of respondents from agencies serving jurisdictions with fewer than 50,000 people. In most of the cases, DEI efforts span across all jurisdiction agencies and departments with leadership coming from the mayor’s, county executive’s or city manager’s office.

**Most DEI Initiatives Span Across All City/Town/County Departments, Not Just at the Park and Recreation Agency**  
 (Percentage Distribution)



Park and recreation agencies take several actions to ensure accountability with their DEI initiatives, including measuring and tracking progress against goals. Approximately half of agencies take the following actions in regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability and income level:

- Assess communications and products for appropriate messaging (cited by 55 percent of respondents)
- Analyze key operational decisions to determine their impact (52 percent)
- Analyze key programmatic decisions to determine their impact (49 percent)

Many agencies place DEI accountability on their staff and key stakeholders, including:

- Incorporating DEI commitment into new staff and stakeholder orientation (cited by 49 percent of respondents)
- Collecting data on staff and other stakeholder (e.g., partners, vendors, community) diversity by race, ethnicity, gender, disability and income level (26 percent)
- Establishing mechanisms for staff accountability for DEI performance (20 percent)
- Establishing mechanisms for senior management accountability for DEI performance (17 percent)

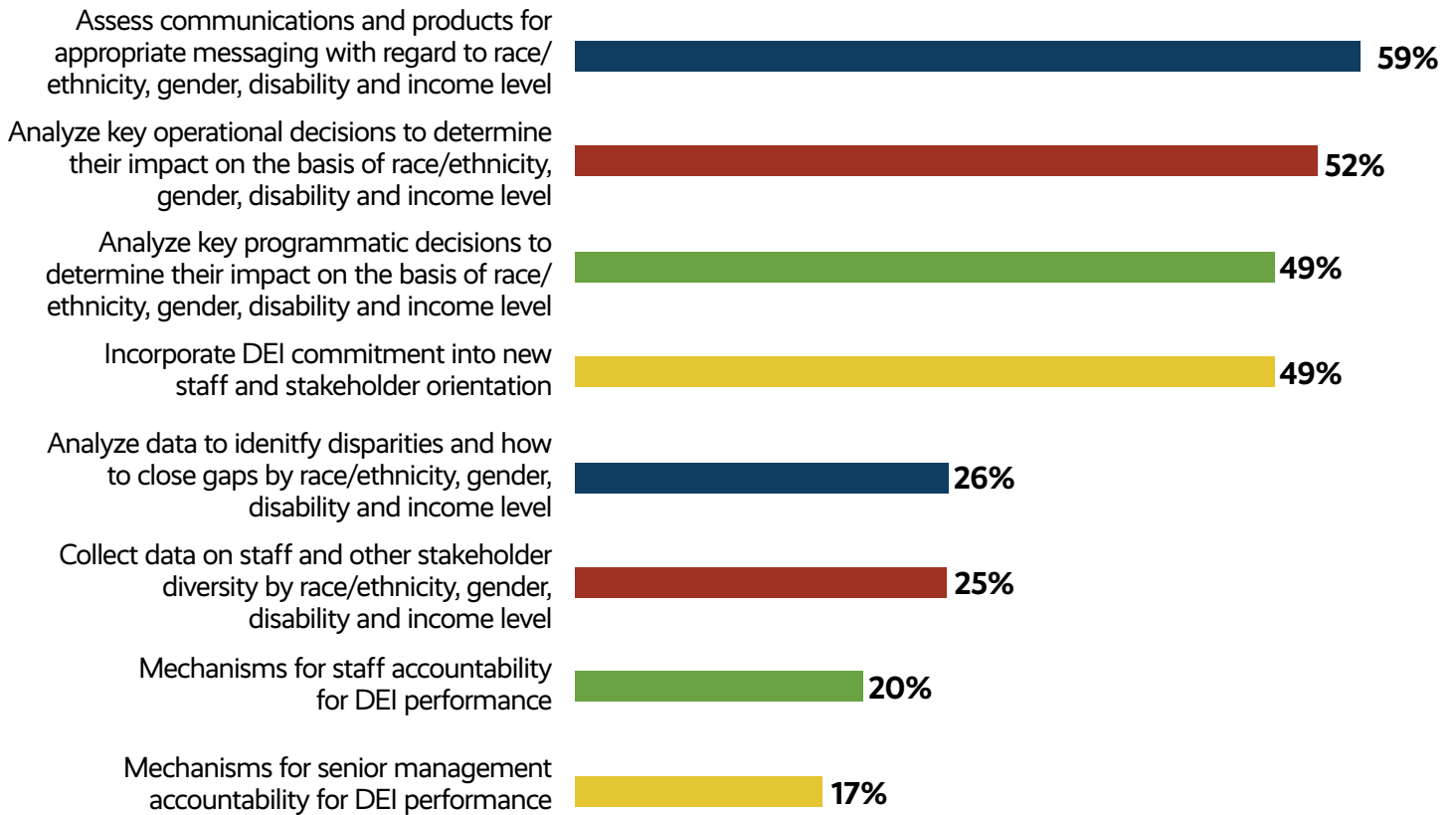
In addition, a quarter of agencies collect and analyze data to develop an understanding of disparities and identify how to close gaps in race, ethnicity, gender, disability and income level.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EL PASO PARKS AND RECREATION

Attendees of an El Paso (Texas) Parks and Recreation program participate in a two-hour hike before dusk.

### Park and Recreation Agencies Ensure Accountability, Measure Initiatives and Track Progress on DEI (Percent of Agencies With Established DEI Activities)



# Conclusions

A marching band performs at the grand opening of Catherine Street Park in Baltimore during the 2019 NRPA Parks Build Community event.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

“Preparing the profession for the future” is a key element of the 2021–2023 NRPA Strategic Plan. It reflects the need for park and recreation professionals to build continuously upon their professional skills. Through a wealth of education opportunities — including the NRPA Annual Conference, schools, certificates, certification and accreditation programs, and webinars — park and recreation professionals participate in tens of thousands of hours of professional development programs annually. NRPA is developing and implementing a research-informed professional development and membership engagement strategy. This will ensure that the more than 160,000 full-time park and recreation professionals, along with hundreds of thousands of part-time and seasonal workers, maintain relevant skills as well as easily adapt to the needs of and reflect the communities they serve.

The results from this survey (and from a similar survey of state park and recreation associations) will inform this strategy. Specifically, these results provide a clearer understanding of the current state of DEI work across the field that highlights opportunities for NRPA to assist its members. Among the results’ major themes are:

## **A need for targeted support for smaller agencies serving less than 50,000 residents**

Smaller agencies face tremendous challenges in initiating

and implementing DEI practices. While three in five agencies serving populations greater than 100,000 have established formal DEI activities, only a quarter of agencies serving less than 50,000 people have done the same. Similarly, only one in five smaller agencies has conducted (or currently is conducting) a DEI assessment. Directors from these agencies note a need for specific resources targeted to smaller departments, including earmarked grant funds or resources and web-based learning opportunities (e.g., webinars) to support staff training. As more than half of leaders from smaller agencies indicate they will be conducting assessments in the next two years, NRPA’s strategy will include the development of distinctive opportunities with small agency needs in mind.

## **Building Member Capacity and Competency in DEI**

Park and recreation leaders face significant challenges in their efforts to promote diversity and establish inclusionary and equitable practices. The most common DEI activities and/or policies center around hiring practices and policies and education/skill development for staff and volunteers. Yet, at the same time, leaders most frequently note a significant challenge in supporting staff capacity and competency around DEI. Agencies are searching for greater assistance —



Metroparks Toledo (Ohio) hosts an adaptive paddling program at Wiregrass Lake Metropark.

either because of a concern about the sustainability of these efforts or a desire to build knowledge and skills that are intentional and comprehensive (as opposed to inconsistent, one-off opportunities). As a result, NRPA will develop a wide range of professional development opportunities in DEI. These resources will build upon what exists in some agencies and provide to other agencies a starting place as they develop plans for taking action and securing resources.

### Equity in Practice (Best Practices) and Peer-to-Peer Learning Networks

Park and recreation leaders note a strong desire to share best practices in DEI as they establish or build upon existing efforts at their agencies. Specifically, survey respondents want:

- Conversations with their peers on “what’s being done across the nation” and on “the ins and outs of established practices”
- Exchanges of agency policies
- Recommendations on DEI speakers

NRPA, as the leading convener for the field, can advance equitable practices through the NRPA Annual Conference, in-person schools and workshops, and online webinars. This includes developing a suite of “Equity in Practice” learning opportunities that highlight leaders and best practices across all park and recreation functions (e.g., planning, maintenance, human resources/operations, programming). Professionals will gain access to examples of success, critical resources and learned lessons. NRPA also will facilitate peer-to-peer learning networks that will provide a space for those with shared experiences (e.g., DEI task forces, human resource managers, small agencies) to learn from each other.

### Development of Trusted Resources

While a majority of agencies have DEI programs and policies in place, many face challenges in making these initiatives sustainable and fully impactful. These include:

- Difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff who reflect the communities the agency serves
- Assistance identifying ways to build trust with communities
- Uncertainty where to start on DEI efforts at their agency
- Help on how to establish and implement DEI-focused policies

Park and recreation leaders indicate that they are seeking:

- A recommended set of metrics
- Tools and templates on various topics, such as hiring practices and assessments of programs/services for impact
- Communication/advocacy toolkits that highlight the importance of DEI
- Board activities
- Steps on how to get started
- Resources to support training and individual learning (e.g., articles, videos, consultants)

To answer these needs, NRPA will curate a host of resources to support individual learning and conversations as agencies begin and continue their journeys.

Parks and recreation will be a critical lever in addressing inequities in our communities. But to be successful, park and recreation professionals will require DEI training that applies cultural competency and humility in community engagement. Further, a lasting impact will only occur with the establishment of equity-centered practices in all functions in our field — from planning, programs and maintenance to practices, policies and decision making. Inequity is the ultimate challenge facing our nation. With this commitment, parks and recreation can make a profound difference.

# Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the park and recreation professionals and their agencies that completed the survey, the data from which served as the basis of this report. Thank you to Autumn Saxton-Ross, Kevin Roth, Gina Mullins-Cohen, Melissa May, Lindsay Hogeboom, Vitisia Paynich, Jennifer Nguyen, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Also, thank you to the agencies and individuals who provided the images used throughout the report.

Park and recreation professionals and advocates participate in an education session during the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA



# 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](https://nrpa.org/Research).



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**22377 Belmont Ridge Road  
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501**

**800.626.NRPA (6772) | [nrpa.org](http://nrpa.org)**