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NRPA Comments: White House Conference on Nutrition, Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on a smart and equitable path forward for hunger, nutrition and health policy. We look forward to engaging further with the White House on this important set of issues, including participating in the September 2022 conference.

At NRPA, our core organizational pillars include ensuring equity is at the center of all our work, advancing community health and well-being, and creating a nation of resilient and climate-ready communities through the power of parks and recreation. In line with these principles, we are focused on expanding access to the myriad benefits of parks and recreation to all people and communities across the U.S. We are especially interested in eliminating disparities and supporting the diverse range of individuals and communities that are impacted by hunger and diet-related diseases, including communities of color, rural communities, people with disabilities, older adults, LGBTQ+ people, military families and military veterans.

Parks as Community Wellness Hubs

The conditions where people live, learn, work and play – the social determinants of health – have the greatest influence on health and wellness outcomes, community resiliency, and overall quality of life. These social determinants of health—including access to high quality parks and recreation and the essential programs, services and spaces managed by professional—are vital to community resilience, economic opportunity and health and well-being.

Park and recreation professionals — and the programs, services and spaces they provide — play a vital role in ensuring that all people can thrive in the communities where they live, learn, work and play. To realize this vision, park and recreation agencies, in partnership with community members, are leveraging the full power of the industry to champion **Community Wellness Hubs** – trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life.

The benefits of parks, green space and recreational programming are immense with strong evidence that:

- People who live near parks are both physically and mentally healthier than those who do not and people with access to parks and green spaces live longer, healthier lives.
- Parks and recreation encourages physical activities by providing space for popular sports, hiking trails, swimming pools and many other activities designed to promote active lifestyles. Parks and recreation is a leading provider of youth sports.

- Access to parks and other public open space promotes greater mental well-being. Children who spend a significant amount of time in nature also experience better emotional stability and improved mental health.
- Parks and recreation is a leading provider of healthy meals, nutrition services and education.
- Local park and recreation agencies' expenditures support economic activity and job creation.
- Employers and employees are more likely to locate near high-quality park and recreation amenities.

The public believes in and benefits from the power of parks and recreation to improve the health, well-being, and resiliency of their communities:

- 260 million people in the United States visited a local park or recreation facility at least once during the past year
- More than seven in 10 U.S. residents have at least one local park, playground, open space or recreation center within walking distance of their homes
- Four in five U.S. adults seek high-quality parks and recreation when choosing a place to live
- 87 percent of people agree that parks and recreation is an important service provided by their local government
- Nearly nine in 10 people agree that it is important to fund local park and recreation agencies to ensure every member of the community has equitable access to amenities, infrastructure and programming

Despite the well-documented benefits of parks and recreation and their vital role as Community Wellness Hubs, 100 million people, including 28 million youth, still do not have access to these essential spaces, programs or services within a 10-minute walk of home, and the quality of spaces, programs and services differs drastically across the country.

At the core of NRPA's vision, we are committed to advancing equity and inclusion, recognizing that our nation's deep-rooted history of systemic racism resulted in unfair practices, policies and power structures that impact the conditions where people live, learn, work and play today and the opportunities they will have tomorrow. The inequities caused by systemic racism have benefited some and burdened others, leading to health, environmental and socio-economic disparities that disproportionately impact Black, Latino, Indigenous, people of color, low-income communities, rural communities and other historically disenfranchised populations. These inequities are unjust and confronting them is an imperative that cannot be ignored.

Overarching Policy Goals

NRPA believes the power of parks and recreation can and must be leveraged to improve health outcomes in our communities. Governments must invest in more parks, green spaces, and recreational programming with equity at the center, prioritizing communities currently lacking in these resources. Investment must also be prioritized for expanding programs and services in line with NRPA's Community Wellness Hub model to address hunger, nutrition, and physical activity challenges. Further, we must increase public awareness of the essential role of parks and recreation as an upstream solution to many of our public health and social challenges, one that provides numerous physical and mental health benefits, as well as social, economic and environmental benefits directly to individuals and communities.

Policy Goals in Line with the White House Conference's 5 Pillars

1. Improve food access and affordability: End hunger by making it easier for everyone – including urban, suburban, rural, and Tribal communities – to access and afford food. For example, expand eligibility for and increase participation in food assistance programs and improve transportation to places where food is available.

Investing more reliably in parks and recreation and community-based organizations will make it easier for everyone to access and afford healthy and local food. Local park and recreation agencies play a critical role in ensuring that people have access to healthy and local foods, nutrition education, food assistance programs, and safe and active transportation to support access to grocery stores, farmers markets and other distribution centers.

These agencies serve as one of the largest providers of summer meals to youth through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and support afterschool meal programs year-round for children, adults and families through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), HHS' congregate feeding program and other federally funded anti-hunger programs. Local park and recreation agencies also connect people to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) via outreach and enrollment services, and many agencies operate community gardens and farmers markets in parks and public spaces to ensure people have access to fruits and vegetables, thus benefiting from sustainable and local food systems.

Further, our members also partner with public health departments, community health workers and healthcare providers to expand produce prescription and double-up buck programs, conduct food insecurity screenings, provide direct SNAP and WIC enrollment assistance, and provide evidence-based nutrition education.

Specific policy opportunities in this space that warrant the White House's support include:

- Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) with an expansion of eligibility for meal programs, expanded waivers, and a seamless summer option.
- Expansion of SNAP/WIC eligibility and elimination of burdensome and unfair administrative requirements that prevent people from pursuing benefits.
- Expansion of funding for local food systems and agricultural initiatives including farmers markets, produce Rx programs, and double-up bucks programs.
- Expansion of culturally relevant and community-driven education (SNAP-ed) and out-of-school time (OST) education for youth and families.
- Expansion of funding for transportation initiatives to make public transportation free for youth and families during summer months. This solution helps close the physical gap between children and nutrition opportunities during the summer months when they are not receiving food services at school.

2. Integrate nutrition and health: Prioritize the role of nutrition and food security in overall health, including disease prevention and management, and ensure that our health care system addresses the nutrition needs of all people.

Local park and recreation agencies can serve as a strong asset and partner in the prioritization of nutrition and food security in overall health. To leverage the power of parks in this way, funding and resources must specifically be provided to community-based organizations, including park and recreation agencies, to expand evidence-based disease prevention and management programs and expand the number of evidence-based and/or promising programs with an emphasis on cultural relevance. Park and recreation agencies are one of the leading community-based providers of evidence-based chronic disease self-management programs for older adults, and they are a leading provider of healthy lifestyle education to youth, families and adults.

Further, investments must be made in expanding community health worker models, workforce development opportunities, and instructor/educator training models to build the professional network of evidence-based program providers. We must expand evidence-based programs offered by CBO's to ensure people have access to healthcare services and chronic disease prevention and management programs in accessible, trusted, culturally responsive locations. This includes building referral pathways between healthcare providers and CBO's providing evidence-based disease prevention and management programs and healthy lifestyle education.

3. Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices: Foster environments that enable all people to easily make informed healthy choices, increase access to healthy food, encourage healthy workplace and school policies, and invest in public messaging and education campaigns that are culturally appropriate and resonate with specific communities.

To empower consumers in communities across the U.S., funding must be expanded for nutrition education programs (including SNAP-ed and other evidence-based programs), farmers markets and community gardens, intergenerational nutrition programs in community-based settings and out-of-school time (OST) programs. In fact, according to an NRPA Park Pulse, eighty-seven percent of U.S. adults believe access to locally grown fresh produce—including farmers markets and fresh produce stands—is important. These programs must be brought forth in accessible, affordable and trusted gathering places. Innovative workforce development strategies and career pathways must also be crafted to build a network of community members leading culturally relevant nutrition education.

These strategies have been proven effective at changing environments and behaviors. A Community Wellness Hub pilot program that leveraged private funding and operated from 2020-2022 in fifteen communities resulted in significant improvements to nutrition and health behaviors among youth and adults. 48% percent of participants in nutrition education programs increased their fruit and vegetable consumption, 29 percent of people increased meal preparation at home, 37 percent of youth increased the frequency of healthy food choices, and adults ranked themselves higher in every single quality of life indicator including overall life satisfaction. Additionally, nearly 18 million meals were provided to youth and adults, 228 new food access points were established, and 327 community partnerships were strengthened.

4. Support physical activity for all: Make it easier for people to be more physically active (in part by ensuring that everyone has access to safe places to be active), increase awareness of the benefits of physical activity, and conduct research on and measure physical activity.

To increase physical activity for all, NRPA encourages the White House to support increased funding and support to various existing federal initiatives with an emphasis on health equity. This includes providing funding to **implement CDC's parks, trails and greenways recommendation** including community engagement, public awareness, programs and access enhancements so more people can benefit from parks. Further, the **HHS National Youth Sports Strategy** must receive support and expansion, with an emphasis on providing funding and additional resources focused on expanding community-based, recreational sports, and closing the equity gaps for youth of color, girls, and other disenfranchised populations. NRPA also supports expansion of the **HHS Move Your Way campaign** to encourage people to reimagine physical activity and get active locally.

5. Enhance nutrition and food security research: Improve nutrition metrics, data collection, and research to inform nutrition and food security policy, particularly on issues of equity, access, and disparities

To improve data collection and interpretation surrounding nutrition and food security research, NRPA encourages the White House to support increased funding, including for pilots and innovative models, with the goal of growing the evidence-base for a holistic approach to health and wellness. Taking a holistic approach to hunger, nutrition and health falls in line with NRPA's Community Wellness Hub models and policy proposals that consider the social determinants of health.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to help inform the national plan to address hunger, nutrition, and health policy. We look forward to partnering with the administration and continuing this conversation at the conference in September.

