

ARTHRITIS INTERVENTIONS IN PARK & RECREATION AGENCIES: INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS



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PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES: PROVIDING ARTHRITIS INTERVENTIONS

Arthritis is one of the leading causes of disability in the United States affecting over 52.2 million Americans, young and old. One in five adults and 300,000 children suffer from arthritis. Arthritis conditions are often misunderstood. Despite significant evidence showing the benefits of exercise and weight management for arthritis, avoiding physical activity remains a major misperception of this condition. Given the high prevalence of arthritis, the availability of exercise programs for arthritis should be an important priority for all local communities.

Since park and recreation agencies are leaders in providing exercise and recreation programs to America's local communities, they are appropriately positioned to also offer affordable and accessible physical activities for health conditions such as arthritis. The National Recreation and Park Association partnered with the Arthritis Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to implement two evidence-based programs, the Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program (AFEP) and the Walk With Ease (WWE) program, in park and recreation agencies across the nation. These programs reached approximately 2400 participants.

ARTHRITIS FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program (AFEP)

The AFEP is designed and proven to reduce pain and decrease stiffness through incorporating routines that include gentle range-of-motion exercises for one hour, two to three times per week for eight weeks.

Walk With Ease (WWE)

WWE is an exercise program designed and proven to reduce pain and improve overall health. This program includes health education and warm up and cool down exercises in addition to walking. WWE classes are one-hour long and offered three times per week for six weeks.

The following 28 parks and recreation agency grantees implemented either the AFEP and/or the WWE program:

- South Suburban Parks and Recreation, CO
- City of Colorado Springs Parks & Recreation, CO
- Hyland Hills Park & Recreation District, CO
- Norwich Recreation Department, CT
- Orange County Park and Recreation, FL
- City of St. Petersburg, Office on Aging, Health and Elder Resource, FL
- DeKalb County Parks & Recreation, GA
- City of Davenport Parks & Recreation, IA
- Frankfort Park District, IL
- New Lenox Community Park District, IL
- Munster Parks & Recreation, IN
- New Bedford Parks Recreation & Beaches, MA
- Inver Grove Heights Parks & Recreation, MN
- Three Rivers Park District, MN
- City of Burlington Parks & Recreation, NC
- Durham Parks and Recreation, NC
- Lincoln Parks & Recreation, NE
- Neptune Parks & Recreation, NJ
- Las Vegas Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services, NV
- Westerville Parks & Recreation Department, OH
- Worthington Parks & Recreation, OH
- City of Memphis Parks & Recreation, TN
- McAllen Parks & Recreation, TX
- Fairfax County Department of Neighborhood and Community Services, VA
- Seattle Parks & Recreation, WA
- Baraboo Parks and Recreation Department, WI
- Madison School & Community Recreation, WI
- Greater Huntington Park & Recreation District, WV

Since the AFEP and WWE outcome measures are established evidence based, the objective of this case study is to provide guidance to those park and recreation agencies planning similar programs by highlighting the process-oriented successes, challenges and strategies used by the grantee agencies to make the program successful. The data used in this case study was collected using the following multi-level instruments:

Grantee Questionnaire

All grantees were required to complete a process evaluation questionnaire to better understand how well the components of their program are functioning. The questionnaire was used to assess the performance and completion of steps taken to achieve desired program outcomes.

Grantee Interviews

After the questionnaire responses were analyzed, five grantee agencies were selected to participate in individual interviews. Through structured, qualitative interviews, the grantees were asked open-ended questions to obtain a solid understanding of impressions of the program implementation process. The grantees that were selected and completed the interviews were:

- City of Colorado Springs, CO
- Las Vegas Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services, NV
- City of Memphis Parks & Recreation, TN
- McAllen Parks & Recreation, TX
- Seattle Parks & Recreation, WA

The interviews and questionnaire responses were categorized into general themes as reported in the next section.





“We have a large Hispanic population who lives in area and our bilingual instructor helps us to accommodate everyone’s needs if necessary.”

– Las Vegas Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services, NV

ATTRACTING AUDIENCES

The Power of Word of Mouth

There was a general consensus among the grantees that word of mouth was one of the most effective methods of marketing the program. Participants that attended initial sessions were more likely to relay information about the program to their peers. Some program instructors set aside a few minutes at the end of each class to allow participants to express their testimonials on the impact that the program had on their life. This was an important factor in encouraging continued participation and promoting the program through word of mouth. This method was particularly successful among seniors and was an effective strategy for two reasons:

- *Trust* – Word of mouth has greater credibility because it comes from trusted sources. Potential participants are more likely to trust their peer’s recommendation
- *Specific Targeting* – Word of mouth has a targeted focus since information about the program is more likely to be passed on to individuals who are suffering from arthritis

Understanding Your Local Population

Every community’s population is unique; therefore, scanning your local community is a key factor in determining target populations for the program. The most evident target for this program were seniors. A common strategy to market the program was having a park and recreation staff member visit retirement homes, senior centers, etc. to publicize the programs. While a majority of participants in this program were indeed seniors, this evaluation demonstrated that it is important to avoid dismissing other target populations that may exist in your local community. For example, Fort Carson army base is located in the City of Colorado Springs and has built a partnership with the local park and recreation agency for a separate physical training program. This specific population was

an excellent target for AFEP and WWE because of the large number of injured service members that could benefit from the program. Las Vegas Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services also employed a similar approach. Due to the presence of a significant Latino population in the surrounding area, this park and recreation agency recruited a Spanish-speaking instructor, which attracted many participants.

Traditional Marketing Methods

Although word of mouth and target marketing were the most successful strategies, almost all grantees stated using traditional methods of marketing that included:

- *Print* – grantees used advertisements, flyers, brochures and other materials for distribution at pharmacies, veteran centers, retirement homes, etc. Specifically mentioning the Arthritis Foundation on print materials was particularly valuable in attracting audiences because of established branding of the organization
- *Broadcast* – some grantees used their local radio and television station to publicize the program
- *Incentives* – some grantees provided water bottles, healthy snacks, etc. to attract and retain participants
- *Social Media* – posting program information on Facebook, Twitters, etc.

PERFECTING THE PROGRAM IN PARKS

Accommodating Participant Needs and Abilities

During the initial sessions, program instructors began to notice that participants had a variety of physical and mental abilities. In order for the program to yield positive health outcomes, it was necessary for instructors to confront this challenge by modifying the exercises and instructions based on the participants abilities. For example, the City of Colorado Springs Parks

“For some groups, the classes had to be shortened due to attention spans, e.g. a group of seniors who had dementia. Staff was able to modify the program to meet a shortened time frame of 30-40 minutes versus the full hour.”

- City of Colorado Springs Parks & Recreation, CO

and Recreation’s program had many senior participants with dementia. For the program to have the maximum impact on these individuals, the instructor made the following modifications:

- Starting off slowly with a few minutes of continuous exercise to begin with
- Breaking down activities into simple, manageable steps
- Demonstrating the activity and asking the participants to follow the lead
- Communicating and repeating one instruction at a time
- Shortening the class time
- Adjusting the use of props

For the program to be successful, instructors must observe, monitor and plan to accommodate the needs of their participants in each class.

ENCOURAGING RETENTION BY PROMOTING PREVENTION

After the initial task of attracting participants, several grantees were confronted with the challenge of retaining participation. Since a large number of participants were not experiencing arthritis symptoms at the time,



they believed it was not necessary to continue with the program. McAllen Parks and Recreation approached this challenge by emphasizing and reiterating the importance of exercise to prevent arthritis. Some talking points used to highlight the importance of regular exercise for arthritis prevention included:

- Since your knees support your body weight, it is important to manage your weight through exercise. A sedentary lifestyle makes for weak muscles and increases the odds of developing arthritis and other health problems
- Not only does exercise take the weight off your joints, it also strengthens the muscles around the joints preventing them from wear and tear
- Avoid injury by learning the correct exercise techniques

Participant retention may not be as challenging for those that are already suffering from arthritis, however, for those that do not have arthritis, pitching for prevention can improve retention.

“The majority of folks really enjoyed the exercises and the opportunity to socialize with others who experience similar challenges.”

**- City of Colorado Springs
Parks & Recreation, CO**

“The classes have opened up discussion about arthritis and have given sufferers a voice as well as a supportive community.”

- McAllen Parks & Recreation, TX

Creating a Supportive Environment

Not only did the program yield positive health outcomes, it served as a support group for those with arthritis. Several grantees reported that participants used class time to share insights on coping with arthritis and managing daily activities. While arthritis can be overwhelming for many individuals, using the program to create a supportive environment can ease fears by better understanding arthritis. Several participants expressed improvements in their emotional health (relief from fear and hopelessness) because of the opportunity to dialogue with their peers experiencing similar issues.



Continuous Care Beyond Parks

As part of continuous care for arthritis, instructors reported that the ease and low impact of the exercises motivated participants to continue to replicate the exercises at home as well. Instructors encouraged the use of simple props available in the home such as chairs to assist with the exercises. Furthermore, instructors assisted participants in setting achievable goals for their exercise plans. Several participants indicated that daily exercise lessened joint pain and increased their energy levels.

PARTICIPANT PROGRESS

Physiological Improvements

Many participants expressed their satisfaction with the program and noted several physiological improvements as a result of the program. Key improvements included weight loss, controlled sugar levels and stable blood pressure. Participants experienced less joint pain and increased energy levels whereby they could play with their grandchildren. Many also expressed gratefulness for the exercise program because it helped to enhance their stamina by decreasing fatigue and improving sleep.

Psychological Improvements

Psychological improvements reported by participants were as compelling as physiological improvements. Participants experienced the following short and long-term benefits: decrease in anxiety, improvement in mood and increased ability to relax. Since depression and fear are concerns for individuals with arthritis, the program highlighted that physical activity is an important psychological adjunct to treatment as well.

“Participants reported that the class has helped them in their everyday lives such as walking up and down stairs without pain, drinking more water during the day and having more energy to perform other activities.”

- Las Vegas Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services, NV

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A significant number of Americans are affected by arthritis, however, many are not aware that something as simple as gentle exercise is enough to provide relief from the discomfort it causes. For many individuals with arthritis, starting an exercise program can be challenging. This program demonstrated that there is no better place to provide arthritis interventions than in park and recreation agencies. Since parks serve as trusted organizations and are located in nearly every community across the country, they are perfect partners to offer such programs by providing in-person support and guidance to arthritis patients. As this case study indicates, park and recreation agencies are well positioned with the appropriate resources to accommodate citizens with varied health conditions and physical abilities. By providing a venue for a community-based arthritis exercise program, parks continue to contribute to the physical and psychological health of our citizens.

“Participants that completed the program wanted to start walking groups so that they continued walking after the class ended.”

– Lincoln Parks and Recreation, NE





The National Recreation and Park Association thanks the Arthritis Foundation for recognizing and supporting the critical role of park and recreation agencies in providing programs which help prevent and manage arthritis for millions of Americans.



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