



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

PARTNERSHIP BUILDING RESOURCES





Cover image:

A Harlem Wizards team member greets fans at the grand opening of newly renovated basketball courts at Summer Road Park in Whitehouse, New Jersey, during the 2019 Summer Spectacular event. *Photo courtesy of Dave Dabour.*



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TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTNERS

Pinecrest (Florida) Parks and Recreation staff show support for Breast Cancer Awareness Month at the Pinecrest Community Center Playground.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHELLE HAMMONTREE

Partnerships between park and recreation agencies and other organizations in your community can help you ramp up programming and services in exponential ways. Partnerships can help you implement, expand and/or sustain your programming. They can help you work toward ensuring everyone in your community has equitable access to quality parks and recreation. Partnerships can help your agency achieve specific programmatic and service goals through leveraging expertise, skills and resources.

Often, partnerships to support park and recreation agencies involve collaboration among multiple organizations and “aim not only to improve parks and sustain them over time, but also to create durable collaborations between public and private parties — that is, to build a support system for parks,” according to the Urban Institute’s *Partnerships for Parks* report. Organizing multiple partners around shared goals may take time, but the rewards are great. Consider the possibilities of support from these types of partners:

- Schools are great partners, especially for collaboration on after-school programming, afterschool and summer meal provision, and marketing your programs.
- Local business partners can help your agency put on special events by assisting with funding, venues, outreach, marketing and other important activities.

Partnerships can help ensure “the just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks, green spaces and recreation facilities, as well as programming that is safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone.”

— NRPA’s definition of “park access”

- Special interest group partners can help you with specific missions of your agency, like connecting green spaces to make urban greenways in your city and/or expanding park accessibility.
- Local nonprofits (such as Partners for Parks in Mecklenburg, North Carolina — partnersforparks.org) and foundations (such as CityParks Foundation in New York City — cityparksfoundation.org/about-us) dedicated to increasing park and recreation access can bring many skills and resources to your agency. For additional information about the benefits of a park foundation partnership, check out “Making the Most of Your Partnerships” at nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2020/november/making-the-most-of-your-partnerships.
- Cultural/ethnic organizations can be great partners to connect you with children and adults in underserved neighborhoods, ensure you address cultural norms and customs, and/or provide translators for events if your agency does not have multilingual team members.
- Local departments of health are great partners for health promotion programming and medical services (vaccines, blood pressure screenings, etc.).
- Partnering with AmeriCorps can help you staff summer and year-round programming, especially when budgets are tight (americorps.gov/partner).
- Partnerships with public and private transportation organizations can help expand access to your park and recreation programming to groups traditionally left out due to transportation barriers.
- Local gardening coalitions and/or Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners can provide gardening expertise, which can help you install edible gardens at your site or help families learn how to grow their own food at home.

“Forming partnerships means you can potentially merge budgets, supplies, equipment, facility space, staff, volunteers, programming ideas, participant databases, marketing and promotions, as well as liability and risk management.”

— NRPA's *Parks & Recreation* magazine article, “How to Form Successful Program Partnerships.” (nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2013/november/how-to-form-successful-program-partnerships)

PARTNERS IDENTIFIED BY PARKS AS COMMUNITY NUTRITION HUB GRANTEES (2020):

- Schools
- Local government agencies
- Nonprofit organizations
- State government agencies
- Local neighborhood groups/associations
- Universities or other academic institutions
- For-profit organizations
- Healthcare providers
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/ Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) enrollment providers
- Health Equity Advocacy Teams

ADDITIONAL PARTNERS IDENTIFIED BY THE NORC WALSH CENTER FOR RURAL HEALTH ANALYSIS (FEB. 14, 2019):

- Libraries
- Senior centers
- Housing authorities
- Farmers markets
- Habitat for Humanity
- Master Gardeners
- YMCA
- Boys & Girls Clubs
- Faith-based organizations
- Public health departments

People take part in the DeKalb County Senior Olympics track and field event in Decatur, Illinois.

PARTNERSHIP BUILDING STRATEGIES:

How Agencies Can Approach Local Organizations to Form Partnerships

Your park and recreation agency may be considering creating a partnership with others in your community for many reasons — to bring about more effective and efficient delivery of programs, to pool resources, to connect community members with needed medical and/or social services, to provide programming and services to underserved communities, to apply for a grant, to address food access issues, and overall, to ensure all people have fair and just access to quality parks and recreation. However, you also may be wondering, “How do I make this partnership happen? How do we start the process?” Following are some suggestions for making this happen:

- Create a list of goals for the partnership. Begin by organizing a brainstorming session with your team. Record all contributions and then organize them into categories that align with your park and recreation agency’s mission (services, programs, health equity, park access, enrollment support, referral support, food access, etc.). Use this list of goals as the backbone of your partnership agenda.
- Based on your list of goals, conduct a community scan of existing partnerships and/or coalitions that may align with your needs. Perhaps a few members of your team can tackle this task, particularly if anyone on your team has connections to other organizations that may be members of partnerships that may be associated with the needs identified by your team.
- If existing partnerships/coalitions are available in your community, contact them to see how you may join to move forward with your plans.
- If your team determines that there is no existing partnership to join, then work with your team to create a list of

potential partners in your community whose mission and activities align with each goal identified by your team. Think broadly, think “outside the box,” and include a wide variety of potential partners, including organizations with high numbers of young people who may have more time for partnership activities.

- After creating the list of potential community partners, divvy up responsibility among your team to research each of the identified potential partners. Consider creating a template to be filled out by each team member to ensure the same data points are collected, focusing efforts on identifying:
 - o The current activities of the potential partner that align with your partnership goals;
 - o The resources they may be able to contribute to help you achieve the goals;
 - o What your agency has to offer to the potential partner (remember, a partnership is a two-way street, so articulate what your park and recreation agency can bring to the table);
 - o Whether the potential partner already is engaged in a large number of community partnerships, and therefore, may not have a lot of time to dedicate to another partner/partnership (“partnership fatigue” has been mentioned as a challenge by NRPA’s Parks as Community Nutrition Hub grantees); and
 - o Anything else your team believes should be learned about each potential partner.
- Regroup to share what each team member has learned about potential partners, select the key partners to approach (save the other research for a future partnership process), and then create a timeline and action plan for contacting the potential partner(s):
 - o Create a summary document outlining the goals of the partnership, as well as the talking points to use as part of your outreach strategy to potential partners;
 - o Select a date for a potential meeting (virtual or in person) that can be shared with potential partners during outreach, so they see that you are serious about moving forward (and to ensure you stay on track as you work on creating the partnership); and
 - o Identify who on your team will approach each potential partner, when, and how, including a specific timeline for contact, re-contact if needed, and report back

KEY PARTNERSHIP CONSIDERATIONS:

- What needs does your agency have that can be filled by a community partner?
- What aspects of your programming and services can be strengthened through collaboration with a partner?
- What can your agency offer a potential partner?

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN PARTNERSHIPS:

- Consider creating a mentoring program as part of your partnership goals;
- Consider engaging young AmeriCorps volunteers as key organizers of your partnership — they may even be able to take on this role as their core assignment (americorps.gov/partner);
- Consider giving time-off credit to your younger park and recreation team members who participate in a partnership; and
- Consider creating an internship program with a local college or graduate school whereby a student would manage the partnership development and/or maintenance processes.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEKALB COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION, PARKS AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS.

Community members make s'mores at a back-to-school campfire at Mason Mill Park in Tucker, Georgia.

to the team. Take into consideration existing relationships your team members may have with others in the community when assigning roles for outreach — gatekeepers into communities are very powerful in helping you connect to potential partners, especially in urban centers where organizations tend to be large, and thus, may be hard to get into.

- As partners begin to come on board, create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that outlines the goals of the partnership, roles and responsibilities (services) of the partners, timeline for the MOU, financial commitments/in-kind services, communications (type, frequency of meetings, etc.), record keeping, type of assessments/evaluation of partnership activities, identification of key contacts, etc. All partners should commit by signing the MOU, which may seem a bit formal, but many find that partnerships without a formal agreement tend to be less effective.
- Finally, in collaboration with your partners, confirm the goals of the partnership, and create a governance plan, procedures, ground rules, decision-making structures, timelines for action, and an evaluation plan for achieving results as you jointly move toward achieving the goals of the partnership.

“I actually have an aunt who works at the Department of Human Resources. She connected me with the right person and, from there, I have had no troubles with making a connection.”

— City of Ozark, Alabama –
Ozark Leisure Services, email
communication, June 3, 2021



PARTNERSHIP RECRUITING MODEL: SEATTLE PARKS AND RECREATION

As your park and recreation agency becomes more comfortable with establishing partnerships, you may want to consider creating a process whereby outside organizations that have ideas for partnering can reach out to you in a formalized manner. Seattle Parks and Recreation has created such a system. On its webpage, potential partners can review key documents, including the agency's Partnership Policy, Partnership Principles and an Expression of Interest form. Also on its webpage is a list of some of the agency's partners, including descriptions of their work together. As you consider creating or ramping up your park partnership work, take a look at this webpage for some ideas — no need to reinvent the wheel.

www.seattle.gov/parks/about-us/do-business-with-us/partner-with-us

In Berea, Kentucky, meals prepared by Berea College and Berea Community School food service kitchens are distributed to children in need using a school bus.



HOW PARTNERSHIPS CAN SUPPORT FOOD ACCESS/HEALTH EQUITY

PHOTO COURTESY OF BEREA COLLEGE


Partnerships to address food access and healthy equity have been central to the efforts of park and recreation professionals. Some have created partnerships to further their goals with respect to part of their overall mission, some agencies were approached by an outside organization that wanted to partner on a specific task that led to the creation of a new partnership, while others sought out and joined existing partnerships or coalitions that aligned with their program and/or service goals. Regardless of how these partnerships came to be, they have been powerful in supporting food access and health equity in communities.

“The USDA authorizes the use of SNAP and WIC benefits at mobile markets, which can help increase the accessibility of these foods to low-income citizens.”

— “Mobile Markets” section of the Rural Health Information Hub’s Rural Food Access Toolkit. (bit.ly/3AfITQs)

Food access

How do partnerships between park and recreation agencies and other organizations in your community support food access? Some suggest using a “community food system” approach to addressing food access, which takes into consideration the large and complex food system in the United States, and how it can be leveraged in unique ways at the community level. Such an approach addresses food access in a holistic manner — targeting components of the community food system. Looking at such a model may help you identify partners in your community to help you address food access in a targeted manner.



Sacramento, California's Youth Action Corps (YAC) engages youth in keeping their parks clean and beautiful while connecting them to future job and internship opportunities

PHOTO COURTESY ANDRE FAVILA

For example, if your park and recreation agency decides to focus on the distribution component, you may seek out partners who can bring farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and mobile farmers markets to your park and recreation site. This will help bring local foods to families you serve. Or, you may decide to partner with organizations to offer food pantries (faith-based organizations, etc.), backpack programs (food banks, faith-based organizations, schools, etc.), summer meals (food service sponsors), and/or afterschool snacks.

When considering the types of foods to be offered, it may be appropriate to include the healthcare and/or nutrition sectors, as well as ethnic/cultural organizations, as partners. Healthcare/nutrition specialists would be able to help you identify medically appropriate foods for older adults with diabetes and/or high blood pressure, if they are your target group. Ethnic/cultural partners would be able to help you choose foods and recipes that are unique to the palates of the people your distribution efforts serve.

FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

A food policy council is a multi-sector group of community leaders and stakeholders that evaluates and addresses food system problems/issues. There are many food policy councils around the United States — consider joining one to move your food access agenda forward. To see if a food policy council exists in your area, go to: foodpolicynetworks.org/councils/directory/online/index.html

If your park and recreation agency chooses to focus on the production component, you may consider asking farmers to bring produce directly to your site to educate families about where their food comes from, and offer them the opportunity to sell produce as well. Another way to promote food access related to the production component may be to partner with Extension Master Gardeners who volunteer their time to educate communities about edible gardening (mastergardener.extension.org/contact-us/find-a-program). Such a partnership may encourage families to plant their own edible gardens in community gardens or home gardens, and thus, provide families increased access to fresh food.

Lastly, if you decide to focus partnering efforts on the consumption component, consider partnering with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and/or food banks/pantries to help families in your community obtain resources for food. In addition to the nutrition literacy program offered by your park and recreation agency, SNAP/WIC partners also can assist with providing nutrition education to your families, so they know which foods to consume for optimal health.

Health equity

The aim of health equity partnerships is to improve the underlying community conditions that make healthy living easier, particularly for underserved communities. Multi-sector partnerships — including park and recreation agencies, community organizations, ethnic/cultural groups, as well as representatives from education, housing, media, planning and economic development, transportation, healthcare, business, among others — have the power to create opportunities to help everyone achieve optimal health and well-being regardless of identity, neighborhood, ability or socioeconomic status.

Partnerships help promote health across communities in many ways. According to the Tasmanian Government’s Working in Health Promoting Ways resource (dhhs.tas.gov.au/wihpw/principles/partnerships), such partnerships include:

- Help to reduce service gaps
- Make systems easier for our community to understand and access
- Share resources, workloads, ideas, information, skills and knowledge
- Increase the number of people we can reach
- Increase what we can do



FOOD ACCESS PARTNERSHIP MODEL: WEST ALLIS-WEST MILWAUKEE RECREATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services in Wisconsin, shared how it became a partner with the Hunger Task Force in Milwaukee:

“They sought us out as a local summer meals provider for children. We were invited to attend a meeting of a consortium of agencies that provide summer meals for children, and it has taken off from there. ... It is primarily a partnership focused on feeding children in the summer or afterschool, but it has been expanding. ... They have helped pay for staffing to keep our summer meal site programs open longer in the summer; they have purchased picnic tables for us; they have provided books and snacks to summer meal program sites; they [have] provided volunteers to post signage promoting our summer meal site programs; they have provided funding to offset the cost of hot meals/suppers. They have been an amazing partner and have helped our staff to do their jobs better. ... I just found out that they have around 12 staff members [who] speak many languages [to] assist with SNAP applications, questions, etc. We plan to work with them to promote and support SNAP within our community.”
(Email communication, June 1, 2021)



PHOTO COURTESY OF CYNTHIA PAYNE

Sharon Hunter-Payne cooks for the Columbus (Georgia) Parks and Recreation Spirit Counsel Thanksgiving luncheon.

Park and recreation agencies are ideal partners for social and health services because: “We have access to families with children and often people feel comfortable talking with us as opposed to other offices they are not familiar with.”

— New London Recreation Department, Connecticut, email communication June 1, 2021

“They [park and recreation agencies] are accessible, hours of operation are more conducive to supporting families, trust within the community and among participants, hub of resources and service oriented, availability of resources, connection to overall health.”

— West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services, email communication June 1, 2021

- Can improve the quality of programs
- Involve people with different strengths and perspectives to improve planning, implementation and evaluation processes
- Empower communities to achieve their well-being goals
- Promote a shared approach to addressing areas that impact health
- Foster the sharing of resources, differing ideas, experiences and strengths
- Give our work a stronger voice
- Allow us to better understand our community’s needs and how we can better support them
- Help us be more creative and implement diverse strategies
- Produce outcomes that are often more sustainable and long lasting
- Are a proven way to work with hard-to-reach groups by working with agencies they already trust
- Help us work better with other services building understanding and trust
- Improve referral processes

While creating or joining community-based partnerships to address health equity may seem daunting, it gets your team together to see where you are now, who in your community is working on healthy equity already and brainstorm some ideas. You will discover that it is very manageable with some basic pre-planning and very much worth the effort. As a starting point, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outlines some considerations for developing partnerships to advance health equity (bit.ly/3rY5jCw). Consider engaging your team to discuss some of the following questions that have been adapted from the CDC guidance:

- Where is our park and recreation agency now on our path toward health equity?
- How does our team reflect the populations experiencing inequities in our community?
- What is our commitment to advancing health equity in what we do?
- How do our current partnerships/coalitions reflect the populations experiencing inequities in our community?
- Which of our partners/coalitions (potential partners/coalitions) have commitments to advancing health equity?
- How does this commitment translate into identifiable and measurable activities, particularly those that dovetail with what our park and recreation agency aims to do regarding health equity?
- What partners are we missing in our network/coalition that should be included? What partners do we need to engage, in order to address the major social determinants of health impacting our community ([cdc.gov/nchhstp/social-determinants/faq.html#what-are-social-determinants](https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/social-determinants/faq.html#what-are-social-determinants))?
- What are the commonalities in the priorities of potential partners that can serve as levers for collaboration?
- And finally, when partners agree to work together, what is each partner's role in addressing health equity?

“[M]ulti-sector partnerships can work to improve the underlying community conditions that make healthy living easier, particularly in underserved communities.”

— “Developing Partnerships and Coalitions to Advance Health Equity,” a section in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s report, *Practitioner’s Guide for Advancing Health Equity: Community Strategies for Preventing Chronic Disease.* (bit.ly/3rY5jCw)

This type of collaborative brainstorming will help you identify partners and/or existing health equity partnerships. As you work through this process, remember to think about partners that already serve various populations at risk (e.g., people of color, older adults, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals) to help make sure you have expertise in the partnership with regard to the norms, culture and needs of the populations to be served.

Also, as mentioned above, a multi-sector approach is very important when considering how to address health inequities. Thus, think about a broad array of groups that may make good partners: education, housing, media, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, funders, hospitals, universities, planning and economic development, transportation, government (public health, Medicaid, Cooperative Extension, etc.), and business.

In conclusion, park and recreation agencies are uniquely positioned to actively create and/or participate in partnerships, particularly those that address food access and health equity. Park and recreation agencies offer safe spaces for physical activity, dedicated programming for fitness, nutrition and well-being, and are community resource hubs — connecting families to services and programs that help individuals access nutritious foods and achieve optimal health.



Children bike on a trail at South Dakota State Parks' Chief White Crane Recreation Area.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH DAKOTA STATE PARKS



Preschool teacher Hannah leads children on a nature trail adventure at Bob Jones Nature Center and Preserve in Southlake, Texas.

PHOTO TAKEN BY DANA BLANKENSHIP, COURTESY OF CITY OF SOUTHLAKE, TEXAS

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- The West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services (Shelly Strasser)



PHOTO COURTESY OF PRAKASIT, DREAMSTIME

Partnerships can help parks and recreation implement, expand and/or sustain programming.



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