
PARKS AS NUTRITION HUBS: VIRTUAL TRAINING SUMMARY

July 8, 2020

PREPARED FOR

National Recreation and Park Association

PREPARED BY

Commonality, Inc.



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PROJECT OVERVIEW

As trusted and accessible institutions, local park and recreation agencies play a critical role in increasing access to the programs and services that improve health outcomes for all community members. Of particular note is the vital role that agencies can play in supporting community food access; food access strategies must meet community members where they are, and thus parks — as trusted, familiar gathering places — are uniquely positioned to improve food security in rural, suburban and urban communities.

It is in recognition of this fact that the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), with the support of the Walmart Foundation, seeks to build upon the existing work of park and recreation professionals serving in public health roles and to transform the field into intentional “community nutrition hubs.” These community-based hubs will provide access to affordable healthy foods and essential nutrition support and services that reduce food insecurity, strengthen healthy decision making and improve health outcomes. Specific goals include:

1. **Increasing access to healthy foods in low income areas** through U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) child nutrition programs and older adult meal programs.
2. **Implementing diverse models as well as analyzing and sharing best practices**, such as food insecurity screenings, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) enrollment and retention assistance, referral systems, farmers markets that accept benefits intergenerational meals and health literacy programs.
3. **Providing evidence-based nutrition literacy resources** to reduce food insecurity and to create behavior changes such as increased consumption and preparation of fruits and vegetables and increased confidence in healthy decision making.

To demonstrate what is possible in the pursuit of this vision, NRPA has awarded re-grants to 15 park and recreation agencies representing rural, urban and suburban communities nationwide. Grantee agencies — each of which serve high percentages of people of color, areas with high rates of poverty and chronic disease, and communities with diminished food access and fresh food availability — will plan and implement their model community nutrition hubs during an 18-month project period which began in June 2020. This timeline allows for a dedicated planning period in advance of hub implementation that includes meaningful community and stakeholder engagement; community needs assessments with a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) lens; goal setting; implementation plan development and training. The first training session for grantees took place virtually (due to current COVID-19 constraints) on July 8, 2020. The following report serves to capture the proceedings, key takeaways and next steps featured during that day.

AGENDA SYNOPSIS

To welcome grantees to the Parks as Nutrition Hubs initiative, NRPA, in partnership with its facilitators from Commonality, Inc., designed a one-day, six-hour virtual training dedicated to equipping grantees with the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully move into and through the planning phase of the project. Featuring sessions led by both subject-matter experts as well as technical assistance consultants engaged to support grantees for the duration of the project, the training covered a wide range of topics, from evaluation and needs assessment development to coalition building, goal setting and implementation plan creation.



Figure 1: Kristine Stratton welcomes grantees

NRPA’s commitment to advancing health equity in parks and underscored how the vital work grantees do each day is supporting the advancement of community health nationwide — especially as our nation navigates COVID-19 and the trauma of institutional racism.

With the training’s context set, grantees spent the rest of the day participating in a series of sessions dedicated to advancing these themes and delivering tangible tools and resources to support each team’s work on the community nutrition hub project overall. These sessions varied in their structure and topic and included:

- **A keynote address** focused on equity — the most vital, core value that will be woven into every aspect of the cohort’s work as grantees.
- An invitation for grantees to recognize and take pride in their work as the **agents of public health** that they are.
- Teach-ins dedicated to ensuring grantees have the tools necessary to track, evaluate and **measure their success** during the grant.
- Four core sessions centered on effective community-oriented strategy development including:
 - **Understanding your community**, which placed particular emphasis on the value that community needs assessments have in supporting sustainable, successful program planning.
 - **Feeding your community**, which encouraged grantees to leverage the federal nutrition programs and advocacy tools to help reduce local food insecurity.
 - **Trailblazing in your community**, which encouraged grantee innovation in nutrition hub strategy and program development.

Essential to the initiative’s mission are its core themes of advancing equity, partnership and community engagement. As such, NRPA took great care to design all sessions keeping these main tenets as its guiding stars. To set the stage and center the day’s focus on these thematic objectives, the training kicked-off with warm welcomes from Kristine Stratton, President and CEO of NRPA, and Maureen Neumann, NRPA’s lead Program Manager for the Parks as Nutrition Hubs initiative. In their remarks, both Kristine and Maureen reiterated



Figure 2: Shelly Strasser of West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation Department shared fun facts about her team and community during an icebreaker session.

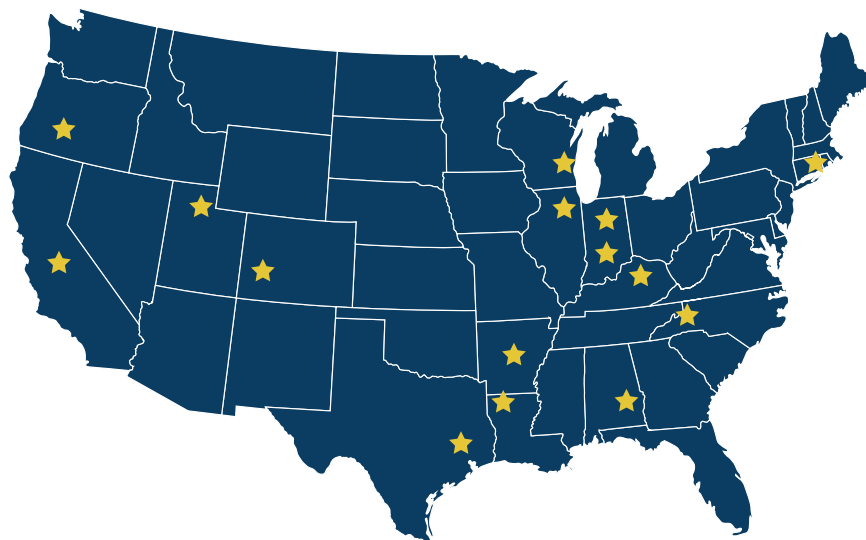
- **Engaging your community**, which discussed ways grantees can engage community members and partners to advance program impact.
- An overview of tools to support early steps in **planning for success**.

The meeting was thoughtfully designed to engage grantees, adapting creatively to the confines of the virtual setting required by COVID-19. Throughout the day, grantees were given time to network and get to know one another; they shared icebreakers as part of three **meet your communities** micro-sessions, danced it out during physical activity breaks, and participated in interactive polls and small-group breakout discussions. Grantees left the training informed, excited and inspired for the work on the project to come.

TRAINING PRESENTERS

- Allison Colman, Director of Health — NRPA
- Alyia Gaskins, Founder and CEO — CitiesRx, LLC
- Arianna Gordillo, Director of Strategic Initiatives — National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics (NAFC)
- Clarissa Hayes, Senior Child Nutrition Policy Analyst — Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
- Daniel Hatcher, Director, Community Partnerships — Alliance for a Healthier Generation
- Darlene Wolnik, Training and Technical Assistance Director — Farmers Market Coalition
- Ellen Vollinger, Legal Director — FRAC
- Elvis Cordova, Vice President of Public Policy and Advocacy — NRPA
- Geri Henchy, Director of Nutrition Policy & Early Education Programs — FRAC
- Kevin Brady, Senior Evaluation Manager — NRPA
- Kristine Stratton, President & CEO — NRPA
- Lauren Redmore, Ph.D., Evaluation Manager — NRPA
- Martina Leforce, Berea (Kentucky) Kids Eat Coordinator — Grow Appalachia
- Maureen Neumann, Program Manager — NRPA
- Michael Meit, Senior Fellow — Public Health Research — National Opinion Research Center (NORC) & Director of Research and Programs — Eastern Tennessee State University Center for Rural Health Research
- Noelle Miesfeld, Principal Research Analyst-Public Health — NORC
- Pam Linn, Manager, Recreation Facilities Project — Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Recreation
- Stephanie Weiss, Senior Program Analyst — National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO)
- Tiffany Pertillar, Co-Founder & CEO — Epic Health Solutions

GRANTEE ORGANIZATION LOCATIONS



KEYNOTE ADDRESS: EPIC HEALTH SOLUTIONS

For the first educational session of the day, NRPA turned to the topic of equity — the most vital, core value that will be woven into every aspect of the cohort’s work as grantees. To provide historical context on the systemic, institutional injustice of racism in the nation and discuss the fierce urgency of integrating equity in park and recreation program planning, development and implementation today, NRPA invited Epic Health Solutions’ Tiffany Pertillar and CitiesRx’s Alyia Gaskins to welcome the grantees with a powerfully enlightening, equity-focused keynote address.

ELEVATING EQUITY IN PARKS: THE URGENCY OF NOW

Alyia Gaskins began the keynote presentation by placing the current events of our nation in context: the United States is currently fighting not one, but two deadly viruses — the coronavirus and racism. Americans are grappling with the fact that there are persistent and deep racial disparities in communities which are direct consequences of racism, discriminatory practices and disinvestment, with the most profound impact being made on communities in most need. These conversations have also spotlighted parks and the role that parks and open spaces can play in promoting — or hindering — equity in communities.

As Alyia elucidated, parks have become the essential escape to connect people to the outdoors in the midst of a pandemic where many are forced to shelter indoors. Nonetheless, a great challenge exists in the fact that not everyone feels safe in parks, has access to programs or the activities they enjoy, or can reap the socio-economic rewards that parks can provide. As such, Alyia challenged the grantees: if park leaders want to see change, there is no time for complacency — the time to act is now. As agencies look to build their nutrition hubs, grantees must take the time today to evaluate how to ensure the hub is not just something that they’ve envisioned, but instead is something that is co-created with communities. Specifically, it is critical that agencies integrate an intentional focus on equity in the conception, planning, implementation and sustainability of their nutrition hubs — as well as their park management and programming overall.

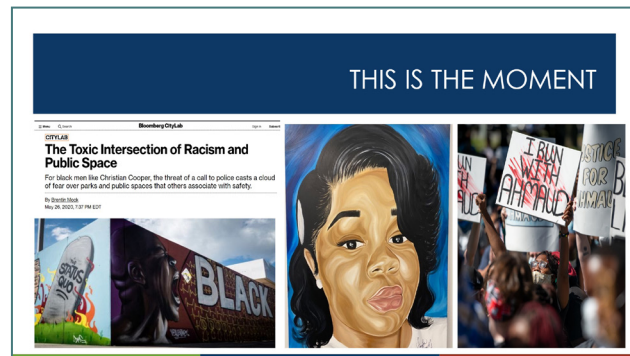


Figure 3: Alyia Gaskins gave a presentation that stressed the need to act against racism now.

CONFRONTING HISTORY

To provide the necessary background to understand this call to action, Alyia shared an overview of park and recreation’s history as it pertains to the role it has played in supporting racist and discriminatory practices around use of public space. In her opening, Alyia stressed that every space someone enters has been shaped by decades of decisions by policy makers, planners, park professionals and others. As such, it’s important to understand how these decisions have perpetuated oppression in America. Without this knowledge, it will be impossible to unlearn these practices and change the system and culture moving forward. Specifically:

- **Jim Crow Laws** were state and local statutes that legalized segregation. Under Jim Crow, spaces were separate and unequal (despite stating otherwise), and in many communities in the South, facilities and spaces for Blacks were far away from those designated for whites (picnic grounds, cabins, etc.).
- **Planning practices, including zoning, racial covenants and redlining** have been used to perpetuate inequity:
 - *Racial zoning ordinances* were used to physically keep Black people, white people and other ethnic

- minorities separate; these ordinances served to exclude populations of color from neighborhoods with better access to jobs, transit and amenities.
- *Racial covenants* emerged once zoning ordinances were outlawed by the Supreme Court; these served to promote racial segregation by barring Black and other minorities from living in areas designated for white people.
- *Redlining* — the federal government’s practice of grading neighborhoods’ mortgage credit worthiness that has been implemented by home loan corporations — exacerbated disinvestment in neighborhoods. Redlining directly impacted the “built environment” and influenced which neighborhoods had investment in parks and jobs and what neighborhoods did not.
- *Affordable housing zoning regulations* still exacerbate inequities; there remain zoning regulations that limit affordable housing, social movements to stop affordable housing, and disparities on where resources are invested.
- **Urban renewal** policies (also described by some as slum removal) were used to demolish impoverished areas — essentially wiping out neighborhoods of color. In many cases, communities were completely destroyed in order to create freeways, expand downtown areas, and redevelop land. In particular, highway expansion in the 1950s and 1960s facilitated “white flight” to the suburbs and left many urban neighborhoods abandoned and underinvested.

In closing, Alyia highlighted the fact that this review of our history requires us to question the relationship of power and privilege with the systems that have been created; we must question our history so we don’t repeat the trauma of the past. To do so, Americans need to move upstream and focus on equitably improving policies, conditions and institutions that directly affect things like access, programs and services — including parks and recreation.

THE WORK AHEAD

- Diversity asks, “Who comes to our park and recreation facilities?”
 - Equity responds, “Who is trying to come in but can’t? Whose presence in the park is under constant suspicion or threat?”
- Inclusion asks, “Does everyone feel welcomed in our programs and services?”
 - Equity responds, “Who should have power in designing our programs and services? Who actually has power?”
- Diversity asks, “How many more [pick any marginalized group] have we served at our facilities compared to last year?”
 - Equity responds, “What conditions have we created within our parks that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority?”

Adapted from the work of Dafina-Lazarus Stewart

Figure 4: Alyia shared critical questions that grantees should consider when developing their programming.

MOVING TOWARD JUSTICE: SHARED LANGUAGE

Alyia then turned things over to Tiffany to discuss the opportunity park and recreation has to advance systems of equity. By confronting an individual’s own power and privilege and doing the deep self-work of becoming anti-racist, park and recreation professionals can take key steps to ensure that all park users have just, fair and safe access to parks. As Tiffany explained, a starting point for this important work is the adoption of a shared language. Shared language can ground people and is one of the tenants that will allow equity work to progress. Some common words and definitions highlighted by Tiffany that are critical for all grantees to understand include:

- **Equity:** Not equivalent to equality (defined as “the same”), equity requires that fair and just opportunities be afforded to everyone so that all people can attain their highest level of health. Equity requires resource allocation to take place on the basis of need, and heavily focuses on directing resources to address unjust, unfair and avoidable historical, social and political injustices. Health equity in particular takes into consideration all of the aspects of what makes someone healthy or unhealthy.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** There is a difference between diversity and inclusion. Diversity can be considered “mixing it up,” but inclusion — which is a sharing of power, a calibration of difference — is “fixing it up.”

Therefore, when building nutrition hubs, the goal should be for agencies to move towards an inclusion strategy.

- **Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is the complex, cumulative and interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. In simple terms, oppression doesn't happen in a vacuum; people are viewed within complex categories that society has arranged. As such, it's critical to take into account the whole of a person and not just one group when designing programs and services, as it's vital to create programs and services that encompass and serve all.
- **Stereotypes and Implicit Bias:** Implicit biases are unconscious; people don't think about these biases and most often don't realize they are there. Stereotypes are an overgeneralization of a person or group.

Additional terms and definitions can be found in the glossary provided to grantees as part of the training's participant guide.

PARKS IN ACTION: EQUITY IN PRACTICE

With the value of shared language now explained, Tiffany next moved toward the opportunity that grantees have to integrate equity in practice as they build their nutrition hubs. Specifically, Tiffany covered seven key considerations that grantees can apply immediately as they begin the program planning phase of the grant, including:

1. **Perspective Transformation:** Data can show what is happening in communities, but there are also personal stories and perspectives. Grantees were encouraged to ask why they believe what they believe about certain groups of people. What experiences have informed those thoughts about that group — and is the thought correct?
2. **Examine Background and Bias:** When examining background and bias, grantees should assess their own racial experiences growing up. Who is in their current sphere of influence? How many friends do they have who don't look like them? Are they taking the steps to be anti-racist?
3. **Question Power, Privilege and Oppression:** What do circumstances or systems look like for the people in power — and how do they look for those who don't have power? Grantees should question these factors and try to find solutions that uphold justice.
4. **Engage Community:** It's critical that grantees integrate community engagement in program design. Who is part of the decision-making process? Whose voice is missing at the table? How can equitable approaches be created to allow all people to be active participants? Grantees should be sure to check out NRPA's [Community Engagement Guide](#) (discussed in the training's Understanding Your Community session) as part of this work.
5. **Asses Benefits and Burdens:** Who is benefitting and who is being burdened? A clear goal of grantees should be maximizing benefits to those deeply burdened in communities and minimizing burdens that have been brought on from policies.
6. **Guard Against White Is Right:** It's critical that grantees look beyond closing gaps. What values are placed on cultural norms associated with whiteness? What would it look like instead if everyone used justice and fairness as the standard to make decisions?



A group of protestors attend a Black Lives Matter march. Photo by Life Matters via Pexels

7. **Common Error Patterns in Equity Work:** Equity work — too often regulated to a committee or considered “outside the domain” of day-to-day responsibilities — is a life-long process that is a marathon, not a sprint. It should be included in all aspects of an organization’s operations.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In closing, Tiffany reviewed five core guiding principles of equity that all grantees should integrate into their work moving forward. These include:

1. **Centering Equity:** To achieve justice, agencies need to fundamentally shift the way they plan, design, build and maintain their park and recreation facilities, policies, programs and services by putting equity at the center of their work. By leading with a commitment to equity and generating that commitment in their communities, grantees can: 1) expand and diversify decision-making tables, 2) acknowledge, share and dismantle traditional power structures, and 3) create more inclusive spaces, programs and services.
2. **Parks Are the Pathway:** Parks are the tools that should be used to center equity and reimagine inclusion. Parks can play a vital role in health (or the lack thereof) and can serve as a conduit, connecting community need with community-based programming and services.
3. **Reimagine Inclusion:** It’s critical that grantees recognize that inclusion extends beyond ability and access; rather it’s sustained through authentic relationships and the balance of power. True inclusion seeks to right the wrongs of history and advance justice — but it does not guarantee equitable outcomes.
4. **Focus on People:** At the end of the day, grantees’ focus should be on people. This includes park and recreation professionals, as well as the people they serve. There must be an acknowledgement and celebration of the differences that exist between individuals. There is work for all to do in order to create just, fair and safe access to parks for every community member.
5. **Respect the Environment:** It’s vital that the important connection between healthy people and a healthy environment is understood, and likewise that the connection between access to green spaces and the health and well-being of people is understood. Furthermore, it must be affirmed that park professionals and the open green spaces and green infrastructure that they manage are catalysts for community-climate readiness — creating, maintaining and activating spaces that are not only resilient and regenerative, but also engage the community in transformative work to create a culture that celebrates diversity.



Figure 5: Tiffany explained how to apply an equity lens to parks and recreation’s facilities and programming.

Tiffany left grantees with a final thought regarding collective action. Quoting Howard Zinn, she shared, “There is a power that can be created out of pent-up indignation, courage, and the inspiration of a common cause, and that if enough people put their minds and bodies into that cause, they can win. It is a phenomenon recorded again and against in the history of popular movements against injustice all over the world.”

AGENTS OF PUBLIC HEALTH: NRPA

NRPA firmly believes that all park and recreation professionals are truly agents of change — even if this fact may not be recognized on a regular basis. Public health is advanced each day via the powerful work that park and recreation professionals do to support community wellness; accordingly, NRPA feels these efforts should be acknowledged and celebrated, both by the public and within the field itself. To discuss this topic in more detail, NRPA's Director of Health Allison Colman took the virtual stage in a session dedicated toward honoring this vital role that grantees play.

To begin this session, Allison led off with a core fact: grantees should be proud of the work they do, as it is essential to the resiliency and vitality of all individuals in their communities. After all, park and recreation professionals provide daily access to critical infrastructure, programs and services that improve lives. From maintaining green space and offering access to the outdoors, to creating social and community connections, to promoting cultural enrichment and expression, such services contribute to the community fabric and are intrinsic to advancing local health, well-being and quality of life.

Nonetheless, Allison stressed that NRPA also believes in the power of its professionals to do more. By focusing upstream on factors affecting health, environmental and social issues, she believes meaningful change can happen, and it already is happening in parks and recreation via initiatives like the nutrition hubs. Allison underscored that a constant theme to this change is the people — park and recreation professionals are incredibly capable individuals that have the potential and power to do it all.



ADVOCATING FOR OUR WORK

- We are trusted leaders of our communities
- We bring lifesaving benefits to our communities
- We create and implement upstream solutions to our most pressing challenges
- We put people first – centering the lives of those most vulnerable in the equation
- We are connected across the community to people and partners
- We are maintainers of vital spaces, including treasured outdoors access
- We rise up when called upon and take swift actions to support health and resiliency
- We serve all people, creating welcoming and inclusive environments
- We are champions for change and we get the job done

Figure 6: Allison Colman's presentation encouraged grantees to advocate for their work.

Even so, Allison shared that despite making such impact, park and recreation professionals frequently remain undervalued by decision makers and under-recognized in the roles they play — she believes it's time to change this narrative. Grantees have a true opportunity as they embark on this project to share their stories, to become better spokespeople for the work they do, and to make the case that park and recreation professionals are public health agents. By advocating for themselves and their work and fighting for the prominence and recognition they deserve as a key part of the public health system, decision makers will begin to see park and recreation professionals as the true agents of change they are. She encourages grantees to be confident, strong and clear as they talk about their work, making sure partners and stakeholders recognize that they are a key part of the solution with unparalleled potential. In closing, Allison emphasized: NRPA believes park and recreation professionals are public health professionals and grantees should too!

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS

This “Working Br(unch)” session featured two presentations focused on the grant’s evaluation process: one by NRPA’s Evaluation Manager Lauren Redmore, and one by NORC’s Michael Meit and Noelle Miesfeld, who are serving as the evaluation partners for this grant.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: NRPA

Lauren began the session by sharing how, as a social scientist, she is thrilled to be helping grantees bridge connections between culture, food security, environmental health and human health. She then dove into the nuts and bolts of the grant evaluation process, making sure to underscore the importance of reviewing any results in the appropriate context. For example: after highlighting a list of reporting metrics that NRPA will be tracking and sharing with their partner evaluator, NORC, Lauren clarified that while these numbers will help grantees monitor progress, when used alone these numbers won’t illuminate why teams aren’t meeting goals or provide insight for how to improve the quality of their service delivery. To illustrate her point, she referenced a personal story Alyia shared in the morning’s keynote presentation on how Alyia immersed herself in deep conversational inquiry within her Washington, D.C., community to better understand the drivers of inequity. As such, Lauren will help grantees use this type of inquiry and other evaluation strategies to better understand the needs and barriers of their constituents while designing evaluation questions and surveys.

Lauren then revealed the results of two surveys NRPA sent to grantees. The first asked how often grantees collect data in specific health and well-being areas. Based on the results, she has concluded that most grantees are not collecting data and many grantees are not collecting data often enough. However, Lauren also acknowledged that the way her question was phrased might have been misinterpreted by grantees because it lacked specificity

regarding whether external data sources could count as part of data collection; as such, she asked agencies to email her with any corrections. She encouraged grantees to move toward collecting and collating data more frequently to not only recognize if they are making an impact in the community but also learn how.

The second survey asked grantees about the ways in which they collect community health and well-being data and found that most grantees collect data from other sources, followed by attendance and surveys. She urged grantees to reference the handout that outlines numerous ways they can collect, use and review data using an equity lens to obtain meaningful data that will help them modify their programs and create a greater impact in their community.

Lauren wrapped up her session by outlining the next steps for NRPA’s data collection efforts:

1. **Surveys:** Grantees can expect to work with Lauren to develop pre- and post-surveys for program participants to gauge changes in nutrition literacy, perceptions on food access and behavior over time. Grantees will track changes within individuals (vs. in aggregate), and Lauren will work with grantees to create a secure database and train key staff to ensure the protection of grantee constituents.

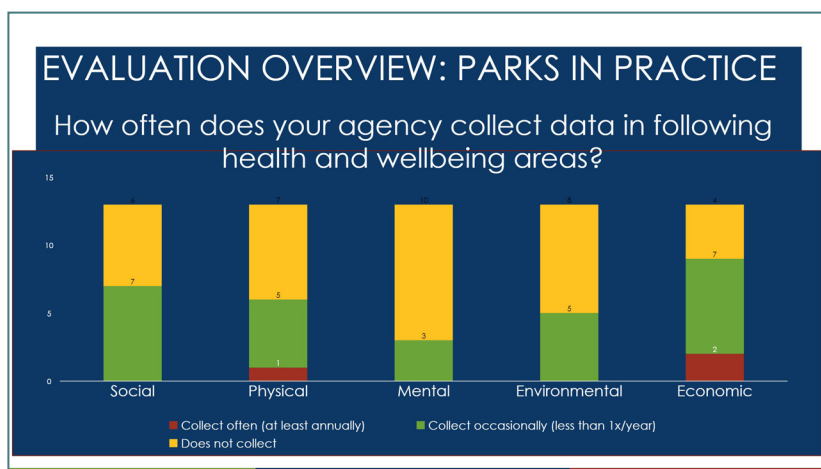


Figure 7: Lauren shared the results of a grantee survey

2. **Site Visits:** Lauren will embark on a more in-depth analysis and observation with four sites focused on lessons learned and key takeaways on program implementation, grant management and other outcomes, including the overall impact of parks as nutrition hubs. Given COVID-19, these site visits will likely occur virtually as well as later in 2021.
3. **Needs Assessments:** Lauren will be available to guide grantees with customizing needs assessments during the program planning phase of their projects, to ensure they are applying an equity lens to their efforts.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW: NORC

Michael Meit began NORC’s evaluation presentation by sharing “why” evaluation is so critical to the success and sustainability of program interventions. Overarchingly, evaluation allows grantees to make judgements about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future program development. However, he acknowledged that most organizations struggle with justifying evaluation costs since it often doesn’t feel right for them to divert funding that would have been used for programs, like those that feed people, for an evaluation. Michael stressed that in reality, these two points do not need to compete; evaluation allows organizations to not only monitor and improve their programs, but also justify “why” their programs are important. In turn, this justification can serve as an organization’s ammunition for program renewals and funding to ensure program sustainability, enabling the program to actually serve more people over a longer period of time.

Reinforcing NRPA’s strong commitment to equity, NORC then discussed how they are applying an equity lens to the grant’s evaluation design by:

- **Acknowledging** the persistence of inequities in America due to historical institutional racism and discrimination
- **Recognizing** personal assumptions and biases
- **Being aware** of cultural differences across grantee sites
- **Tailoring** questions to regional and local culture
- **Recruiting a diverse sample of respondents** to participate in interviews and focus groups
- **Ensuring** that evaluation questions address racial equity and health equity

A theme that was reinforced throughout the day was how grantees could leverage storytelling to advance their efforts. NORC offered their perspective by stressing that while they will capture quantitative data to show outcomes, they will also study qualitative data to identify nuances in the outcomes. This qualitative data will help grantees more effectively tell their stories to policy makers, because a compelling story will trump numbers any day of the week. Michael acknowledged this is often a struggle for public health and shared an example from the work around vaccines to better illustrate his point. Sharing numbers about vaccine safety and how many people are served sometimes isn’t as effective when compared to the story of someone talking about a few children who were harmed by vaccines. People tend to throw data out the window because it’s more compelling to see and hear personalized stories. He encouraged grantees to begin to think about storytelling and ensure they have a “face” for their stories.



Figure 8: Michael Meit shared this data-importance theme with grantees throughout the day.

With that framing in mind, NORC's Noelle Miesfeld stepped in to ensure grantees gained insight into NORC's evaluation methodology and timeline. First, Noelle shared the evaluation research questions, co-developed with NRPA, that will frame the evaluation activities including the development of interview and focus group questions as well as data analysis:

- Which model(s) in rural, suburban or urban communities are most effective in creating community-wide, sustainable solutions to food insecurity? What elements can be expanded to scale nutrition hub models?
- What model(s) are most effective in screening individuals for food insecurity and successfully connecting people to SNAP?
- What measures can assess the effectiveness of models and food access programming?
- What barriers continue to exist and where is additional support needed to reduce food insecurity across communities?
- What considerations do agencies need to make when applying an equity lens to building a nutrition hub?

Noelle then outlined the evaluation objectives and timeline for the grant, which include:

1. **Designing data collection protocols** and submitting to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval
2. **Conducting 30 key informant interviews** (two per site) and four site visits with two focus groups in the summer of 2021
3. **Analyzing qualitative interview and focus group data and conducting quantitative analysis of survey data** provided by NRPA that was referenced by Lauren

Noelle wrapped up by confirming that at the end of the evaluation, grantees can expect to receive a final evaluation report and a digital Nutrition Hub Toolkit that will feature the model(s) that are determined to be effective solutions to addressing food insecurity, with best practices and case studies to support the planning, implementation, and sustainability of nutrition hubs at agencies across the country.



An interview between two people. Photo by Christina Morillo via Pexels

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY

NRPA's Maureen Neumann kicked off this core session by providing grantees with a high-level overview of the fundamental components needed to begin developing their partnership, coalition-building and community engagement work. Underscoring the training's core theme of community, Maureen stressed the importance of community buy-in, meeting community members where they are and using an equitable lens when developing programming for grantee constituents. By integrating these core tenets into foundational program planning work such as community needs assessments (required for all grantee teams), grantees will ensure the creation of sustainable programming that reduces health disparities and advances social determinants of health — essential for addressing complex challenges like hunger and food insecurity across generations.

To assist grantees with planning for critical early steps in grant implementation, Maureen invited NRPA's Kevin Brady, NACCHO's Stephanie Weiss, and Milwaukee Recreation's Pam Linn to share resources, expertise and guidance on developing effective community needs assessments — a key early step toward understanding your community.

ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES: NRPA

As they begin their community surveying process, Kevin guided grantees through two important tools found in NRPA's online Resource Hub. While both tools highlight the essential steps to performing meaningful community engagement, grantees will need to tailor the steps and tips to fit the unique characteristics and needs of their communities.

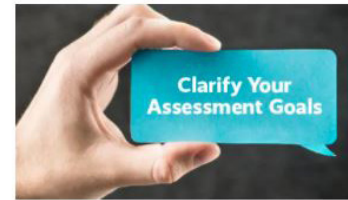
The first resource, NRPA's [Community Needs Assessment Toolkit](#), guides grantees through the lifecycle of creating a community needs assessment and offers general tips, best practices and tools for community surveying in four steps:

1. **Clarifying your assessment goals**
2. **Creating the assessment**
3. **Administering the assessment**
4. **Taking action on the assessment**

The second resource, NRPA's [Community Engagement Resource Guide](#), provides a roadmap to implement equitable and inclusive community engagement strategies to ensure programs are created with maximum input from the people they are intended to serve. It explores:

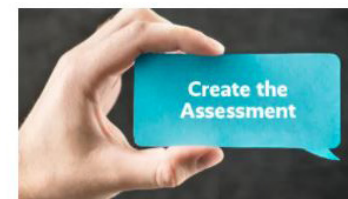
1. **Internal assessments**
2. **Building trust with communities**
3. **Community engagement strategies**
4. **Evaluation**

Step 1: Clarify Your Assessment Goals



What is prompting your needs assessment? Do you want feedback about a wide range of facilities and programs or just some of your offerings?

Step 2: Create the Assessment



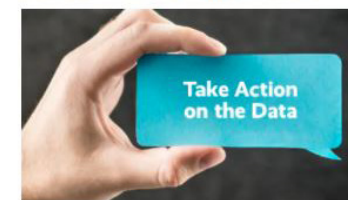
Design an assessment that will tell you how your community currently engages with your agency and how you may want to change your programming, staffing or other key aspects of your department based on community feedback.

Step 3: Administer the Assessment



Involve your whole community in your assessment outreach — not just frequent users of recreation centers and parks. Achieve a high response rate that is representative of your whole community.

Step 4: Take Action on the Assessment Data



How will you use the feedback you receive to make longer-term shifts in strategy and resource allocation? Decide on quick wins that you can achieve in the short-term.

Figure 9: Steps outlined in NRPA's [Community Needs Assessment Toolkit](#).

The guide also includes case studies from agencies across the United States to help grantees with ideas and avoid pitfalls.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD: MILWAUKEE RECREATION

To bring the needs assessment process to life, NRPA invited Milwaukee Recreation's Pam Linn to share lessons learned from the implementation of Milwaukee Recreation's Outdoor Recreation Facility Master Plan. As part of the plan, they developed, and continue to develop, community needs assessments to quantifiably evaluate playfields ensuring that their investments are equitably targeted.

When Pam started working on this project, 60 percent of Milwaukee's facilities were rated fair or poor — demonstrating the disinvestment present across Milwaukee. As grantees learned from Alyia's keynote address, redlining and urban renewal had shaped Milwaukee into what it looks like today, so it was critical for Pam to apply an equity lens to the project from the onset in order to truly understand the needs of the community. As most of the outdoor spaces weren't usable and satisfaction was poor at best, Pam knew that in order to activate those spaces, she would need to understand the needs of the community through deep community engagement. Now in her fourth year of conducting community engagement sessions and on the redevelopment of her eighth playfield, Pam shared the following four takeaways with grantees:

1. **Have a Clear Goal:** One of Milwaukee's objectives was to deliver community-design driven solutions. They knew they needed to listen, learn, understand and foster neighborhood buy-in so communities have a sense of ownership. Integrating inclusion strategies into their engagement was critical to understanding the needs of the community to ensure that what they were renovating is of the community, and in their voice. After each community engagement session, Pam's team would ask themselves, "Did we listen? Did we hear multiple points of view?" As an example, Pam shared that they had a community meeting in a neighborhood with predominately minority residents, however they realized that most of the people who attended the meeting were white — so they knew they weren't connecting with the full neighborhood and needed to look at different strategies to ensure they were developing equitable solutions. They had more meetings and eventually reached what they felt was feedback from a representative group of those living in the neighborhood.
2. **Community Feedback Is a Continual Process:** As illustrated by Pam, grantees can expect to encounter "learning failures" in their community engagement strategies and should consider building in additional time to allow for extra sessions; engagement strategies don't follow a "one size fits all model" and may differ from one community to another. For example, they once hired neighborhood kids to hand out fliers for a community meeting but later learned that the fliers were never actually handed out. Regardless, they did have three people and five staff attend the meeting and while it wasn't well attended, they were able to spend that time learning from the people who did show up about how to reach constituents in the neighborhood. Had they not allowed for flexibility in their meeting timeline and only scheduled three meetings instead of five, they would've not equitably captured the needs of the community.
3. **Language Is Important:** Pam shared that they once had a consultant who opened their presentation of a plan for a playfield with the phrase, "Here is our concept." Pam knew that such language wasn't helpful, and in fact, was inaccurate — the plan for the playfield is and should be the community's concept. As such, her team learned to change their language and instead lead with phrases such as, "Here is the community concept for the playfield, did we listen? Let us know if we heard you."
4. **Dispelling the Concept of Experts:** Despite being a landscape architect who's been designing parks for 20 years, Pam doesn't see herself as an "expert" and does not portray herself as one when she's engaging with the community — she knows that her role is to facilitate the meeting process. Pam understands and respects that the experts are the stakeholders in the community — those who have been advocating for playfields for years and running ad hoc leagues. Recognizing and legitimizing the neighbors that

have been doing this for a long time in their communities is a critical part of any needs assessment or community engagement process.

In closing, Pam also acknowledged that she and her team are currently working on figuring out different outreach strategies for community engagement during COVID-19. She offered to share her experiences with grantees at a later time.

CONNECTING WITH LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENTS: NACCHO

As multiple speakers stressed throughout the day, data collection is a resource-heavy process — and while grantees should develop and collect their own data, they should also be aware of other data sources that they can use to supplement their efforts. NACCHO is a member organization of more than 3,000 public health departments that serve as the backbone of the public health system. As Stephanie Weiss shared, NACCHO will be assisting grantees through this grant lifecycle by connecting them with datasets, partnerships and resources available through their local public health departments that can be utilized in both the program planning and implementation stages. To begin this process, Stephanie presented a high-level overview of three critical resources that may help grantees begin their work:

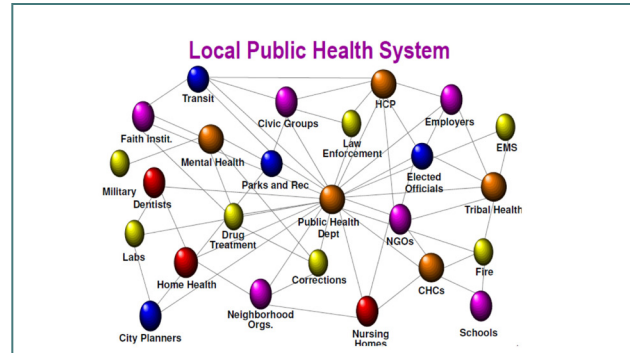


Figure 10: Stephanie Weiss shared the breadth of community stakeholders that are usually included in the development of a community's Community Health Assessment and Mobilizing Action through Planning & Partnerships .

- **Community Health Assessment (CHA):** A CHA is a comprehensive systematic collection of data that highlights key public health challenges and assets in a given community. These data points are used to inform public health programs, policies and partnerships. It includes a variety of community health indicators including health behaviors, health conditions, healthcare factors and social and environmental determinants of health. The primary data is collected via community surveying, listening sessions, interviews and observations and is often coupled with secondary sources of data to create a comprehensive overview of the community.
- **Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP):** The CHIP is an action plan that uses the data collected through the CHA to address the public health issues in the community. A CHIP includes goals, objectives, strategies and partners and is updated every three to five years.
- **Mobilizing Action through Planning & Partnerships (MAPP):** This tool is a framework designed to guide public health facilitators through the CHA and CHIP processes. MAPP ensures the community voice is included in the process and helps balance priorities between partners and stakeholders in the community.

Lastly, Stephanie encouraged grantees to find their local health department's CHA and CHIP, as well as to identify at least one priority area or strategy that connects with their project priorities.

CONDUCTING NEEDS ASSESSMENTS DURING COVID-19: SMALL GROUP BREAKOUTS

To round out this session, grantees were separated into three breakout groups moderated by Commonality's Anne Valik, Elizabeth Vegas and Jenny Bogard to discuss the challenges of community engagement and data collection during the era of COVID-19. Grantees discussed their challenges and began brainstorming solutions and ideas to support engaging their communities during the needs assessment process. Takeaways include:

Challenges

- Site closures and limited openings make conducting community assessments a massive challenge.
- It becomes difficult to conduct community engagement and to survey stakeholders at sites that are partially open while adhering to social distancing rules. It becomes even more difficult when members of the community hold differing perspectives on some of the health mandates, like wearing masks.
- A public health department grantee partner shared that she would like to use social media to conduct outreach to local communities, but is unable to do so given her agency's restriction on using social media.
- A grantee shared that language barriers have been challenging as they tried to collect data for their feeding programs and have hired a translator to assist with collecting information.

Solutions/Ideas

- After Hurricane Katrina, the city of New Orleans used the infrastructure of the farmers markets to bring food to communities. In addition to providing the community with food, mobile health and other public health partners and advocates were able to set up space in the markets to learn more about the community's needs and provide the help needed.
- Since outdoor events are considered lower risk by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, agencies are in a good position to use their outdoor spaces to conduct socially distant community meetings.
- A grantee agency, Indianapolis Parks Foundation, shared that they plan on learning from the social distancing protocols their day camps used to inform how they can conduct outdoor community engagement sessions.
- Many grantees discussed leveraging social media or other online technologies (i.e., Facebook Live, Zoom) to reach their stakeholders — however many grantees shared that most communities still lack equitable access to Wi-Fi. Since the pandemic started, schools have supplied children with Wi-Fi-enabled devices and cities have expanded free Wi-Fi access to support online learning; this online access has helped sites reach constituents they otherwise would have not been able to reach. A grantee agency, Grow Appalachia, shared that buses will be driving into communities to create mobile hotspots so families will be able to access the internet, and some agencies shared that they are expanding Wi-Fi access in their community centers and parks in an equitable manner as well.
- Partnerships, especially with schools, have played a critical role in helping many grantees reach community members.
- A site shared that they've seen a big uptick in telehealth and were considering asking local healthcare providers to ask a few questions on their behalf for their needs assessments.

FEEDING YOUR COMMUNITY

As previously discussed, the overarching goal of this grant is to develop programming that positions parks as nutrition hubs, helping communities reduce food insecurity. As part of this work, grantees will build their capacity to leverage the federal nutrition programs (Summer Food Service Program, Child and Adult Care Feeding Programs, National School Lunch Program) — increasing each organization’s ability to offer healthy meals, food insecurity screenings, opportunities for benefit enrollment and retention assistance. NRPA accordingly, designed the Feeding Your Community session with this mission in mind. They invited experts from FRAC to provide an overview of the federal nutrition programs and discuss the challenges and opportunities that grantees may face in implementing such programming due to COVID-19. To round out this session, grantees also heard from NRPA’s Vice President of Advocacy Elvis Cordova on how to develop successful advocacy campaigns that resonate with policy makers and partners.

PLENARY: FRAC

As one of the country’s leading food security experts and advocates, Geri Henchy from FRAC delivered the plenary session to provide grantees with overarching information on the state of food insecurity in the United States due to COVID-19. Geri shared significantly alarming statistics on the current levels of food insecurity, especially for individuals and families of color who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Coupled with the effects of historic and systemic racism, the United States is currently at a level of food insecurity that researchers haven’t seen before:

- 23 percent of all households are currently food insecure — and for those with children, the rate is higher at 34 percent.
- 42 percent of Hispanic households that include children and 38 percent of Black households that include children are experiencing food insecurity.

As Geri explained, research has shown that food insecurity has serious health consequences for both adults and children. Food insecure adults, for example, are at a greater risk for pregnancy complications, diabetes, hypertension, depression and mental health problems. Additionally, children experiencing food insecurity are at a greater risk for poor overall health, asthma, mental health and behavioral problems and have poorer educational outcomes. Accordingly, using the SNAP, WIC and the child nutrition programs to expand access to healthy food during COVID-19 is especially critical right now, and thankfully — due to the advocacy efforts of FRAC and their partners — the federal government has issued several program flexibilities to help alleviate some of the programs’ burdens. For example, due to the waivers, individuals are now able to enroll in WIC over the phone rather than through a clinic visit, and the child nutrition programs are now able to operate as non-congregate sites, offering grab-and-go and curbside meals.

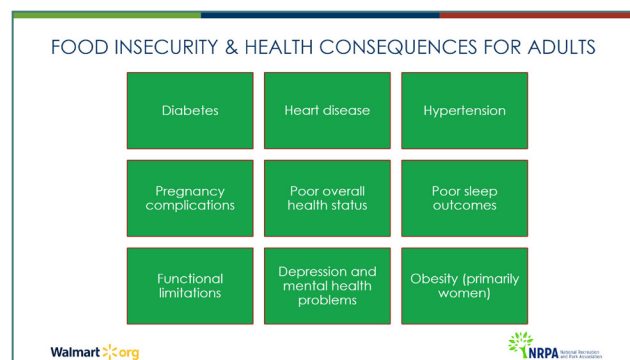


Figure 11: Geri Henchy shared the health consequences of food insecurity.

With this challenging context in mind, Geri stressed how grantees are in the right position to make a significant difference at this very moment in fighting local food insecurity. Communities trust their park and recreation sites, enabling grantees to reach underserved communities and those newly eligible easier than other organizations.

Following the session plenary, grantees were split into three breakout groups to learn more about: 1) how they can leverage systems of referral to reach those who are in need, 2) some of the flexibilities in the federal child nutrition program's summer and at risk afterschool meals programs, and 3) how to develop effective advocacy campaigns to support NRPA's and FRAC's efforts as they advocate for continued flexibility and important changes to the federal nutrition programs.

BREAKOUT 1: ESTABLISHING AND EXPANDING SYSTEMS OF REFERRAL

Geri Henchy and Ellen Vollinger from FRAC led this critical discussion exploring not only the vital role that SNAP and WIC can play in alleviating food insecurity, but also the ways strong systems of referral can help bolster community SNAP and WIC program utilization.

The program kicked-off with Geri leading grantees through an overview of SNAP — both the program overall, and also the powerful role that grantees can play in bolstering its utilization today. Specifically, Geri shared that SNAP is a federally funded entitlement program overseen by the USDA, which seeks to provide benefits to anyone who qualifies. Since it is not a “one size fits all” program, the SNAP benefits received depend on how many people are in the house and the income level of the household. Operated by states and counties, SNAP is experiencing an increase in the number of eligible enrollees due to the repercussions of COVID-19 on unemployment — even though many of the newly eligible may be unfamiliar with the SNAP application process, uncomfortable with the prospect of applying in general, or not even aware of their eligibility at all.

Accordingly, Geri stressed that trusted messengers — like those found in park and recreation settings or related referral systems — can play a vital role in helping people to navigate this process. Federal laws have changed recently, so states have more flexibility to work with most SNAP recipients (i.e., issuing waivers and enrolling people prior to conducting an interview). Grantee agencies are more vital than ever in ensuring eligible parties have access to the benefits available. Geri wrapped up by stressing that grantees are encouraged to keep checking on [FRAC's COVID-19 website](#) regarding SNAP since it's a fluid landscape and things are changing regularly.

Ellen Vollinger then stepped in to discuss WIC. She shared that families can enroll in WIC online or over the phone, and its benefits come in the form of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) which can be downloaded remotely in almost all of the grantees' states. Although WIC is a powerful program that can support many (especially in the time of COVID-19), common barriers to participation do exist, including:

- Misconceptions about eligibility
- Transportation and other costs to reach WIC clinics
- Negative clinic experiences
- Language and cultural barriers
- Loss of time away from work
- Dissatisfaction with the children's food package
- Difficulty redeeming benefits

Therefore, Ellen stressed that grantees — which have an opportunity to play a vital role in increasing WIC enrollment in their communities — must structure their outreach accordingly to counter these barriers. Recommended strategies include:

- Establishing a partnership with state and local WIC agencies
- Conducting WIC outreach through park and recreation programs, networks and communities to ensure that community members know how to apply for WIC

- Making sure people understand they do not have to be physically present at a WIC clinic for enrollment and services
- Urging state and local WIC agencies to provide WIC information in Spanish and other languages as necessary
- Encouraging state agencies to employ flexibilities in WIC food package choices to ensure clients can make culturally appropriate choices

To address a key support to both the SNAP and WIC programs, Geri and Ellen discussed referral. Ever evolving in the face of COVID-19 (for example, telephonic signature is a relatively new aspect of the application process which will have an effect on how people are referred), coordinated referral systems are key to enrollment and utilization success and many resources exist to support this process. Best practices for referral include:



Figure 12: Ellen Vollinger shared how grantees can help their community members enroll in WIC

- Providing staff with scripts and talking points
- Holding staff trainings
- Hosting joint meetings between frontline staff and park and recreation agencies (where exchange of knowledge and resources can occur)
- Offering training and resources for community members

In closing, grantees learned about resources that can help them today as they bolster their enrollment and/or referral processes. For example, NRPA is developing tools to support enrollment and referral, including SNAP and WIC enrollment checklists as well as guides for community members on what to bring to the appointments. Additionally, SNAP itself offers several resources which are available [online](#) and Geri and Ellen highlighted during the session.

BREAKOUT 2: SERVING MEALS DURING COVID-19

Clarissa Hayes from FRAC led this timely breakout session to share a high-level overview of the summer feeding program and how grantees can take advantage of the waivers now issued by the federal government while they implement this program today. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Child and Adult Care Feeding Programs (CACFP) are funded by USDA and administered by state agencies. While the CACFP offers meals in childcare centers, afterschool programs and for individuals to pick up for home year-round, SFSP provides children up to age 18 with up to two free meals and snacks that meet federal nutrition guidelines daily during the summer. The federal government has recently issued waivers to expand the reach of these programs given the unprecedented food insecurity facing the nation during COVID-19. As Clarissa explained, new flexibilities include:

1. **Summer Meal Site Participation:** Normally, there is an eligibility criterion that states that a site must be located in an area where at least 50 percent of children receive free and reduced priced lunch to participate in SFSP; this eligibility has been waived.

2. **Expansion of CACFP and Summer Meals During the School Year:** At the beginning of the pandemic, USDA issued a very critical waiver that enabled schools and community-based sponsors to use SFSP and CACFP to serve meals during unanticipated school closures due to COVID-19.
3. **Congregate Feeding Waiver:** The congregate feeding mandate has been waived, enabling parents to pick up meals instead of having kids eat on-site.
4. **Flexible Distribution:** Sites are able to offer one week's worth of meals at pick up and even offer delivery options maintaining social distancing protocols.

To support grantees during this time, FRAC has recently created a [toolkit of best practices](#) employed by feeding sites during COVID-19. To highlight the toolkit's findings, Clarissa shared a few of the practices detailed in the toolkit that stood out to her, including:

- The most successful programs utilized **all** flexibilities and waivers, especially the waiver to offer a week's worth of meals at one time.
- The range of distribution strategies that are being utilized is incredible and worth exploring; Clarissa's seen everything from a meal drive-through to schools using school bus routes to deliver meals to kids.
- Unique and customized personal protective equipment best practices are very valuable.
- Effectively communicating the new flexibilities of the program to communities was a critical strategy for successful programs.
- Successful sites are creative with small menu adjustments to combat menu fatigue.
- The most effective sites also had strategic partners for other services because no one can do this work alone.

During the discussion that followed, grantees highlighted their own related experience with meal service during COVID-19. Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, shared that they have adjusted many aspects of their service including: 1) partnering with their transportation system to allow participants to get free rides to sites for food, and 2) working to keep their community centers open, so kids have somewhere to use the internet and get their work done on days when school is virtual.



Figure 13: Clarissa Hayes shared best practices for Summer Meals.

Looking to the fall, Clarissa shared that grantees can use the At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program, run by USDA FNS, to serve snacks and supper. FRAC and their partners will continue their advocacy efforts for waivers across the program and will keep grantees updated with new information.

BREAKOUT 3: TRANSFORM YOUR WORK INTO EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY PRACTICES

In an effort to demystify advocacy, Elvis Cordova, NRPA's Vice President of Public Policy and Advocacy, guided grantees through the lifecycle of an advocacy campaign. In opening his session, Elvis stated that while advocacy is defined in the dictionary as "the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal," he finds it much more relevant and powerful to define it as "telling your story in a relatable way." Effective storytelling is a theme that grantees heard earlier the day during the Measuring Your Success and Understanding Your Community sessions — and this session furthered that theme by reinforcing how success stories and data can be harnessed to create successful advocacy campaigns.

To expand upon this idea, Elvis cited two important factors that define a successful campaign. First, he urged grantees to begin to think about their work and how they might adapt the call to action for different audiences. For example, messaging to an elected official might be different than what would resonate with partners, so it's key that grantees adapt their call to action as necessary. Second, Elvis stressed that grantees should spend time to assemble key supporters that will help amplify the message. Elvis then shared his “Four Step Game Plan” for developing effective advocacy campaigns:

1. **Set Goals and Planning:** He advised grantees to think about what they want to accomplish and include both short- and long-term objectives.
2. **Engage, Assign and Assess:** It's critical that grantees identify and engage partners, as well as set timelines and deliverables.
3. **Data and Messaging:** Elvis underscored that this is a very critical step that will determine the success of the campaign. Grantees should:
 - a) compile their data, b) refine and adapt their messaging to raise awareness, and c) personally engage and conduct follow up activities with target groups. Effective social media use is key in this step, since it will enable grantees to easily share messaging and make that messaging easy for partners to amplify.
4. **Measure, Adjust and Attain:** It's critical for grantees to continually track their key performance indicators and review and adjust their campaigns to ensure success, especially since being flexible will also help with the unexpected, like COVID-19. Elvis stressed the importance of having an exit strategy that outlines how the campaign will end or transform.



Figure 14: Elvis Cordova shared his game-winning campaign strategy.

In closing, Elvis shared that NRPA has an [online advocacy platform](#) with toolkits and other resources to help grantees amplify their voices and successes. He recommends that all grantees check it out while remembering to follow his personal advice for advocacy work, namely, to be **SMART** in all actions:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Actionable**
- **Realistic**
- **Time-bound**

After all, as Elvis said, “It’s good to work hard, but be sure to also work smart!”



Two people review graphs of data. Photo by Bongkarn Thanyakij via Pexels

TRAILBLAZING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

A main objective for the Parks as Nutrition Hubs initiative is for grantees to conceptualize, plan and test innovative and equitable new food access strategies in their communities. Rather than replicating past models, grantees instead are planning to be pioneers — forging new territory and developing powerful new programs and methods to advance food access locally. To inspire grantees with ideas of what might be possible and achieved, NRPA conceptualized “Trailblazing in Your Community” — a panel presentation focused on encouraging grantees to think critically about innovating food access in their communities. This panel presentation was moderated by Commonality’s Jenny Bogard, and featured expertise from NRPA’s Maureen Neumann, the Farmers Market Coalition’s Darlene Wolnik, and (a grantee herself) Grow Appalachia’s Marina Leforce.



A woman leads a group discussion. Photo by Antenna via Pexels

During this session, Jenny spent time questioning the speakers on topics ranging from establishing and/or leveraging farmers markets to increase SNAP and WIC utilization, to identifying creative ways to integrate nutrition education curricula into program offerings, to integrating innovative delivery mechanisms into program creation. The discussion was expansive and dynamic, and included several core takeaways including:

- **Community Customization:** As each community is unique and has its own challenges/strengths, it’s essential to think creatively and specifically in innovating food access. Strategies can’t be “one size fits all,” and panelists underscored that it may require iteration and testing to find the right fit.
- **Partnerships Are Key, and Innovative Doesn’t Necessarily Mean “New:”** Sometimes the most innovative part of a concept is the relationship building and partnership development that goes hand in hand with its successful implementation. Panelists stressed that grantees don’t need to reinvent the wheel or do something “new” to be innovative. Instead, NRPA urges grantees to look into their community needs assessments to leverage what already exists in creative new ways to achieve success.
- **Grassroots Practitioners Are the Experts:** Often the most innovative ideas come from engaging community members themselves. Creative ways to eradicate food access have been envisioned via focus

STRENGTHS-BASED PARTNERSHIPS

- I am ... (words that describe a unique talent you have)
- I am ... (words that describe how you positively impact others)
- My talents can ... (describe how you can use your talents to impact others)

Resource: [Mindfulness, Gratitude and Self-Affirmation](#)

Figure 15: Daniel Hatcher shared a self-affirmation activity with grantees.

groups; Darlene in particular mentioned that the Farmers Market Coalition has a lot of examples of this on its [website](#). It’s very important to always ask, “Does the community want it?” and “Does the community need it?” before pursuing a strategy. With COVID-19, it’s as important as ever for grantees to not simply rely on assumptions regarding who they think they are going to serve, and instead equitably redesign their program constantly based on what is happening in their communities.

- **Technology Is Useful — to a Point:** Some of the most impactful recent innovations in food access are technology based (i.e., wireless machines, veggie prescriptions), and in the time of COVID-19, technology can be more useful than ever in assisting with getting food to where it's needed. That said, technology isn't a perfect solution and won't always help; for example, panelists shared that technology has been struggling to keep up with the needs of communities when it comes to SNAP.
- **Data Supports Sustainability:** Grantees should look at places within their communities where they can collect data and information and use those learnings to build a sustainable program. In turn, panelists noted, such data can then be used to recruit potential community partners, secure new funding (essential for this project which has a funding end date), and market the new program in such a way that the need and purpose is clear (not redundant).
- **Nutrition Education Can Take Many Forms:** Panelists clarified that “nutrition education” doesn't need to take place in a formal, sit-down setting. Rather, it can be creatively introduced to people in fun, “bite-sized” ways — via such opportunities as taste testing at farmer markets, materials in pick-up, grab-and-go lunch bags or through a partnership with a local library.
- **Positive Environments Encourage Utilization:** Panelists urged grantees to think about the culture they'd like their programming to support while designing their strategies. Location, timing and inclusiveness matter — what would the families they serve want?

Lastly, in closing, the panelists stressed that innovation is truly rooted in strong action planning. Grantees were encouraged to take time during the action planning period to really become clear on: 1) who they are trying to serve, 2) what their overarching goals are, and 3) how they're planning to work with partners to achieve those goals. NRPA will offer grantees resources and support as they begin their action planning period, and technical assistance providers are available to answer questions as needed.



A vendor and customer exchange an apple at a farmers market. Photo by Erik Scheel via Pexels

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

Partnerships and community involvement were consistent key themes mentioned throughout the day. As a final core session, NRPA invited the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's (HG's) Daniel Hatcher to present on Engaging Your Community. During this interactive session, Daniel guided grantees through a series of activities designed to highlight ways to equitably advance family and community engagement and program utilization, partner with purpose and leverage partnerships to support program success.

The session started with grantees participating in a self-affirmation activity which encouraged them to think about what they each bring to the table in terms of talent — and then consider how they can use those talents to impact others. As talent and resource sharing is the bedrock of strong partnerships, Daniel stressed that by focusing on something tangible and positive, grantees can not only envision organizational success but also build on that success via shared learnings and collaboration with partners.

Grantees then were encouraged to reflect on the benefits of engaging youth in decision-making. Daniel shared examples of his own experience leading youth advisory boards and detailed how he found it to be a meaningful way to bring the voice of young people to the table. In a large group discussion, some grantees shared their own personal examples of youth engagement including how they had collaborated with youth in distributing meals, as part of teaching gardens, by offering youth opportunities to lead activities, or — like Daniel — via youth participation on boards. The key takeaway from this discussion was that all agreed youth engagement should be intentional — not just tokenism.

Next, Daniel invited a special guest to the virtual stage to discuss how innovative partnerships can be mutually beneficial: Ariana Gordillo, the Director of Strategic Initiatives at the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics (NAFC). NAFC is a partner of HG, and in this segment, Ariana provided an overview of NAFC and discussed how its members might serve as supportive partners for grantees looking to advance community well-being. NAFC members seek to provide patients with a variety of health-oriented lifestyle interventions that align well with nutrition hub goals — from nutrition classes, to cooking classes, and more — and, as healthcare providers, can in return serve as a referral resource for grantees. To identify a potential local partner, Ariana encouraged grantees to review NAFC's database of free and charitable clinics which is available on their [website](#).

As the session ended, Daniel emphasized that one of the most important things grantees can do when looking for a partner is to identify a strength that their organization doesn't have and seek out partnerships that can fill that gap. Collaboration takes a lot of work and there are many resources HG has for grantees to help support their partnership development process.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

As the day neared its close, and to jump-start the grantees' six-month planning period, NRPA shared a worksheet for grantees to review in the near future as a team. Drafted to support each team's action planning process, this worksheet — though not exhaustive — provides early direction and “food for thought” for teams as they commence structuring their strategies. NRPA encouraged grantees to meet and complete this worksheet in the days immediately following the training and relayed that Maureen would follow up with each team on their progress during upcoming one-on-one calls.



People enjoy a waterfront park. Photo courtesy of Steven Shaffer via Unsplash

ENDING REMARKS

To conclude the detailed, dynamic and motivational day of training, NRPA's Maureen came back to the virtual stage to thank all participants — especially given the virtual setting — for their energy, drive and attention throughout the day. She shared how inspired and excited NRPA was to kick-off this project, and mentioned that she found the day's core themes of equity, community and partnership to be true highlights. Maureen then detailed a few next steps (including scheduling bi-monthly team calls and beginning action planning and needs assessment work) and wrapped up by reminding all grantees: NRPA believes in the power of parks and applauds all grantees for their work and dedication!

APPENDIX: GRANTEE TRAINING PARTICIPANTS

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