



COMMUNITY RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING GUIDANCE AND BEST PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this community recreation programming is to provide ideas about a variety of recreational opportunities that meet the needs and interests of community members, promote healthy living and social interaction, and contribute to the overall well-being of the community. The plan should be flexible and adaptive to changing conditions and priorities, including ongoing evaluation and feedback from partners and users.

MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY RECREATION PROGRAMMING

Offering recreation programming opportunities within your community is a vital piece of ensuring overall community health. By serving as community wellness hubs, parks, and recreation can address systemic barriers to the social determinants of health and integrate more holistic health and wellness services into agency facilities and programming. This will ensure that park and recreation operations, programs and services center equity so that all people in a community have fair and just opportunities to be as healthy as possible so they can thrive (NRPA 2021). This integrated approach can offer greater opportunities to advance physical, mental, and social benefits that improve community conditions and support both individuals' and community health.

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY RECREATION PROGRAMMING

Community Recreation Programming offers a range of benefits to individuals and communities as a whole. When viewed through the lenses of health equity and community design, these benefits can impact the overall health and well-being of the community and result in improvement in physical, mental, social, economic, and environmental health.

1. Promoting Health Equity: These programs can help bridge health disparities within communities by providing accessible and affordable recreational opportunities to all, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or age. This inclusivity ensures that health benefits associated with physical activity are available to everyone.

2. Enhancing Physical Accessibility: Thoughtfully designed recreation spaces can be made accessible to individuals with disabilities, encouraging their participation and ensuring equal opportunities for physical activity. This includes wheelchair-accessible facilities and programs tailored for those with special needs.

3. Mental Health Support in Underserved Areas: Recreational programs can offer mental health benefits, particularly in underserved communities where access to mental health resources may be limited. These programs provide a form of therapeutic engagement and stress relief, contributing to overall mental wellbeing.

4. Social Determinants of Health: Community recreation can address social determinants of health by providing a safe and supportive environment for social interaction, community engagement, and the development of social networks, all of which are crucial for overall well-being.

5. Urban Design and Green Spaces: In urban areas, the integration of green spaces and recreational facilities can improve the physical environment, making cities more livable and enhancing residents' quality of

life. Well-designed parks and recreational areas also contribute to environmental health.

6. Community Cohesion and Safety: Programs that bring diverse groups together can foster a stronger sense of community, reducing social isolation and potentially lowering crime rates and incarceration rates. This strengthens community ties and promotes a safer living environment.

7. Economic Inclusivity: By offering low-cost or free recreational options, these programs ensure that financial barriers do not prevent individuals from participating, thereby promoting economic inclusivity.

8. Cultural Sensitivity and Diversity: Programs that are culturally sensitive and celebrate diversity can enhance social cohesion and understanding within multicultural communities.

9. Education on Health and Wellness: Community recreation programs can serve as platforms for health education, disseminating information on topics like nutrition, exercise, and healthy living, which is particularly important in communities with limited access to such resources.

10. Long-term Health Outcomes: By fostering environments that support regular physical activity and social engagement, these programs contribute to better long-term health outcomes for the community by reducing both the incidence and severity of illness and disability. This, in turn, can reduce healthcare costs and improve life expectancy.

In essence, community recreation programming is not just about providing leisure activities, but about creating equitable, inclusive, and healthy environments that benefit all members of the community. (Town of Windsor, 2023; Newport News Parks and Recreation, n.d.)

ASSESSING READINESS

The main indicator of readiness for community recreation programming is the capacity for implementation and sustainability. Capacity could include staffing, funding, equipment, physical space, and other logistical concerns.

USING A DATA-DRIVE APPROACH

The key to ensuring the sustainability of programs is tailoring recreation programming to the community of focus. Using data such as community surveys, community conversations, or focus groups will better inform the selected programs to meet the needs and desires of your community of focus. The Healthy Communities VT Toolbox has resources that you can use to create a community survey.

IMPLEMENTATION

In this section answer/address the following: What steps are needed to effectively implement strategies and best practices?

1. Identify the desires of community members for use of desired space:

- a. Gather information on what recreational activities community members are interested in via some means of data collection (i.e., survey, community meetings, photovoice, community vision board, etc.).
- b. Analyze and disaggregate (by race, gender, ethnicity, income and wealth, ability, language, etc.) demographic data to the best ability to identify any specific needs or interests within the community.

2. Develop a list of potential recreational programs:

- a. Based on the survey and demographic data, create a list of recreational programs that would be of interest to the community.
- b. Research and compile information on each program, including any necessary equipment, facilities, personnel, and cost - include community benefit.
 - i. KEEP COMMUNITY MEMBERS INVOLVED at all levels of the data collection process: if applicable, share an identified list of resources with people who engaged in the data collection, response, and analysis process.

3. Assess available resources:

- a. Evaluate the availability and suitability of existing facilities and equipment in the community, including potential relationships and collaborations.
- b. Determine the need for additional resources, such as new facilities, equipment, or staffing.
 - i. Follow up with folks who have expressed interest, capacity, and resources, to support priority programs identified by the community.

4. Prioritize and plan:

- a. Prioritize the list of recreational programs based on feasibility, popularity, connectivity, equitability, and cost.
- b. Develop a plan for implementing the prioritized programs, including timelines, budgets, and resource allocation.
- c. “We heard you. Here’s what we heard.” Share data collection activities and analysis back to community members. Ask for feedback on how to adjust/revise and implement plans. Revise again, if needed. (Feedback loop).
- d. Create feedback channels for program participants to provide suggestions.
 - i. Develop surveys, hold facilitated survey meetings, etc.

5. Provide training and education:

- a. Provide training and education to staff and volunteers on how to effectively implement and manage recreational programs.
 - i. Review step 3 to consider capacity, time, cost, materials, personnel, etc. that goes into the training and education process and execution.
- b. Offer educational opportunities for community members to learn new skills and techniques related to the recreational programs.
 - i. Consider accessible opportunities for recreational education programs, such as transportation, child and eldercare, food access support, etc.

6. Implement:

- a. Implement the planned programs, ensuring that they are accessible and inclusive to all community members. (i.e., culturally-appropriate language, physical and cognitive accessibility, addressing various perceptions of safety, etc.)

7. Evaluate:

- a. Evaluate the success of the recreational programs and make adjustments as necessary based on feedback from the community.
 - i. Review and adjust step 4d as needed.

8. Promote and sustain:

- a. Promote the recreational programs to the community through various channels, such as social media, flyers, and word-of-mouth.
- b. Develop strategies for sustaining the recreational programs over time, such as securing funding, recruiting volunteers, paying people for their time and commitment, and establishing partnerships with local businesses, organizations, and community advocates.

COMMUNITY RECREATION PROGRAMMING IN ACTION

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) examined case study examples of multiple community recreation programs offered by municipal agencies throughout the country, following responses received from a survey to support recreation professionals within their communities. From guided walking groups in the Smoky Mountains, to youth soccer in Las Vegas, within a majority of the communities surveyed the key to sustainability of programs was establishing connections with participants and emphasizing their needs from design through evaluation.



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- [The National Recreation and Park Association \(NRPA\)](#)
- [Recreation | Vermont Department of Forests](#)

REFERENCES

Advancing Community Health and Well-being | National Recreation and Park Association. (2021).

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