

Recreation And Park Agencies Play A Key Role In Promoting Healthy Lifestyles

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When community leaders brainstorm ways to improve the health and well-being of youth and families, a team usually brings together doctors and health care professionals, hospitals, public health organizations and schools. But recreation and park agencies are another key player in the fight against childhood obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and chronic diseases says a new report.

"Community recreation and parks is the health provider that you don't know about," says Andrew Mowen, Ph.D., lead author and associate professor of recreation and park management at Penn State. "Traditionally, these agencies are considered as organizers of games and sports in a town's parks or ball fields. But our study shows that 9 out of 10 recreation and park professionals are actively involved in a health partnership, sometimes several of them."

Mowen and his research team conducted a nationwide survey of over 1,200 recreation and park administrators, who were members of the National Recreation and Park Association. Also, in-depth interviews were completed with 16 recreation professionals across the United States in order to understand key themes and issues for the survey.

"Twenty years ago, health care providers didn't consider recreation and park professionals to be a partner in the campaigns to promote health. But in the 1990s, community-based health partnerships were starting to consider the role of recreation and parks in promoting physical activity and quality of life, since many related programs are offered by recreation and park managers," said Geoffrey Godbey, co-principal investigator of the study, and professor emeritus in the recreation, park and tourism management department.

The study found that 88 percent said their organization was involved in a health partnership, with an average of four partnerships per agency. The most common partners were schools, public health agencies and non-profit organizations.

Municipal recreation and parks agencies provide access to low-cost facilities such as ball fields, parks and walking trails for programs, which are highly visible and well known to local residents. Such agencies already reach out to at-risk groups targeted in health campaigns such as children, older adults, low-income and minority families.

"Health campaigns naturally involve recreation and park departments because they provide low-cost, close-to-home opportunities for physical activity, such as trails, recreation centers, outdoor courts, and outdoor swimming facilities," says Mowen. "Parks, trails and recreation centers can also serve as settings for physical rehabilitation."

Successful partnerships were likely to show high levels of trust among partner agencies, a recognized need for the collaboration, administrative support, and staff empowerment. Common health partnership challenges include a lack of seed funding, communication and turf issues, and garnering full support from community stakeholders such as local government or school board members. Despite these barriers, study results suggest that small, rural recreation and park departments are increasingly interested in being an active health partnership participant.

"Having facilities is critical, but then, programs also have to be established to bring in residents and encourage them to take part," say Mowen. "Partnerships that include after-school programs, diet and nutritional information, and policy efforts to promote recreational settings should be encouraged."

"The study was designed to provide baseline information on the state of current health partnership practices within the profession, their successes and their challenges," says the Penn State researcher. "Such information can be used to help a community effectively develop a program in health and physical activity promotion."

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Other study authors are Laura Payne, University of Illinois, and Elizabeth Oresaga-Smith, University of Delaware.

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