

Engaging Communities in Increasing Park-Based Physical Activity

Implementation Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This manual serves as a guide for engaging a local community in assessing park use and developing a physical activity intervention based on community input. The tools mentioned here are meant to be adapted to make sure that you are measuring what is most important to and usable by the local community.

This manual is based on a project implemented in a city in which the research team had a relationship with the recreation and parks department, and a park system in which each recreation center had an existing park advisory board. Each recreation center also had an onsite park director and recreation staff. The steps outlined below assume an existing park advisory board, as this was the case for this project, but it is not necessary to have one to implement an intervention similar to the one described here. While the steps recommended here reflect a project spanning numerous recreation centers, they can be adapted to work with a few or even a single recreation center.

KEY PROJECT COMPONENTS

There are five main phases to the project: 1) Community engagement and planning, 2) Baseline park assessment, 3) Data interpretation and intervention development, 4) Intervention implementation, and 5) Follow up park assessment. The components described below will be needed to accomplish the tasks entailed.

- **Park Advisory Board (PAB):** This group of local residents will help to determine how data collection tools should be implemented and develop an intervention based on baseline findings. While it is not necessary to have a PAB to implement this project, an advisory board consisting of neighborhood residents interested in the park can be a great way to get input from park users regarding how to design the intervention. In some cases they might also be able to assist with fundraising if needed for the intervention. If a community board cannot be formed, you might consider involving park staff in a role similar to what is described below for the PAB.
- **System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC):** This adaptable data collection tool allows for the systematic assessment of park use and social variables (e.g., whether there are supervised activities, whether a park area is accessible or usable).
- **Park user and resident survey:** In addition to the SOPARC assessments, surveys are administered to individuals in the park and local residents to obtain information on who is using the park, how the park is used, and desired park improvements.
- **Data collection equipment:** We used mechanical counters to record SOPARC observations, but have since developed a browser-based app to record park user counts. Similarly, we used PDAs to enter SOPARC and survey data, but have since moved to using tablets for this purpose. There are numerous free and paid software packages that allow the user to create data entry forms and manage data.
- **Marketing strategy:** The intervention (e.g., activities, events) should be promoted within the community to increase participation. Banners, flyers, public service announcements (PSAs), email blasts, and social media are all potentially useful marketing tools.
- **Park intervention:** Each intervention is tailored to the individual recreation center based on the baseline findings and input from the PAB. As such, the required materials will vary. Some