

# Planning for Public Health

Incorporating Parks and Recreation into your Community's Health Routine

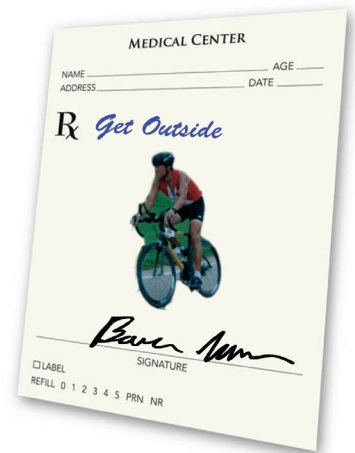
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**P**arks and Recreation Master Plans are a necessity for every organization. Along with providing an updated inventory of park and recreation services and amenities, as well as their current conditions, these plans paint a picture of the agency's system as a whole. Often, considerable public outreach and involvement is included in their development, so an agency can also gauge how its system is being utilized and perceived by the community. More recently, parks and recreation agencies have become essential to maintaining the health and wellness of a community. The master plan is a tool that can be used to help an agency fill this role in a more effective manner. To evaluate your agency's role in public health, and to guide implementation, incorporate the following steps into the development of your plan.

**1. Involve leaders and key stakeholders from all facets related to public health in the plan development.** Public health and wellness encompasses more than just recreation and fitness. To proactively plan for improving the public's wellness, a variety of stakeholders should be involved. Transportation experts should evaluate possible connectivity and accessibility barriers to use of park and recreation facilities. They can also provide information related to alternative transportation connections that can be made for different areas of the community. Police

can contribute information related to crime and perception of crime that may affect participation. Public health and medical personnel may be able to provide information related to food availability, health data and equity, and other efforts related to the overall health and wellness of the community, along with suggestions as to how these can be enhanced in the parks and recreation realm.

**2. Identify potential barriers to healthy lifestyles.** In a 2009 article in the American Journal of Medicine entitled, "Active Living Research and the Movement for Healthy Communities," Angela Glover Blackwell, JD, states, "It is difficult, if not impossible, to follow guidelines for physical activity when one lives in a neighborhood that does not facilitate an active lifestyle." Barriers to healthy living such as lack of accessibility, lack of safety, and lack of awareness, among others, are key in preventing the development of healthy habits. A parks and recreation master plan can bring these issues to light, allowing an agency to evaluate areas of the community in which public wellness may be impeded. Engaging people in these sections of the community can help them to become more vested in the process, and can also allow them to become part of the solution. Public engagement tools such as Mind-Mixer, an online community forum utilized by GreenPlay on several projects, can reach people who may not attend public meetings. By allowing these sectors of the community the ability to participate, the master planning process can be more successful in solving public health issues.



**3. Identify potentially unmet needs in community wellness.** While many parks and recreation agencies track trends and do their best to provide services and amenities that the community wants, there are some that they may not be aware of. Several community programs have evolved from identifying “unsanctioned” activities. By engaging the public in the master planning process, potential new desired wellness amenities can be brought to light. In addition, a master plan can also help the agency to determine programs that may not be utilized, saving the agency from wasting money developing a site for an activity that will not be well used.

**4. Allocate appropriate resources to solving public wellness issues.** After a detailed needs assessment and inventory has been completed, the agency can begin developing strategies to better provide amenities that will improve the health of the community. In the past five years, agencies have been faced with the task of doing more with fewer resources. While focus on health and wellness is a strong positive trend right now, it is important to put the findings and recommendations in context with all of the other aspects that the agency owns and has to manage within their purview. Having a master plan in place provides a clearer picture of what is needed and what it will potentially cost to solve the necessity. Involving key stakeholders from other areas can pave the way for mutually beneficial partnerships, allowing for a better utilization of resources and a higher level of service to the community, without the department having to “do it all.”

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Master Planning can go a long way toward improving community health and wellness by helping an agency paint a clear picture of its situation. It can also be a valuable tool for creating public awareness and interest, and identifying potential partners in service provision. Rather than thinking of this process as a chore that needs to be done every 5-10 years, think of it as an opportunity to help position your agency as a key public health provider, and improve the livability and vibrancy of your community.