The issue of homelessness is affecting more and more parks and recreation agencies. The presence of homeless in our park systems necessitated development of new strategies to address the many problems associated with homelessness while providing for public safety and protecting community resources.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines a homeless person as “an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets; stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle; or any other unstable or non-permanent situation.” Research finds that approximately 30 percent of homeless individuals are unsheltered, living on the street, a park, or in an abandoned building.

A new HUD report, released in December 2017, shows that total homelessness increased last year for the first time since 2010. The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress reports that on a single night in 2017, 553,742 people were identified as experiencing homelessness, representing an increase of less than one percent over the previous year.

Despite that overall increase, the report also showed that the majority of states and communities in the nation reported decreases in homelessness. In fact, current levels are two percent lower than they were in 2015, and 13 percent lower than in 2010. The report comes at a time when cities across the nation are facing an affordable housing crisis. Rents are going up in 89 of the 100 largest cities, according to the Apartment List National Report, with rent growth out-pacing inflation, and just slightly ahead of average hourly earnings.

However, the AHAR report also shows a significant rise in unsheltered homelessness (12 percent), with the largest increases in major cities, including Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, Seattle, San Diego, Las Vegas, New York, and Washington, D.C. In addition, the HUD reports increases among homeless veterans – a population that has received targeted federal resources for the past several years. This year’s two percent increase is the first for homeless veterans since 2010. It was mostly noted in major cities, with smaller cities and rural areas continuing to see decreases.

Nationally, homelessness is on the radar for most major metropolitan govern-
ments and strategies are surfacing across the country to directly address housing, rental assistance, and supportive services like job training, substance abuse counseling and mental health treatment.

Parks and recreation agencies are on the front lines of dealing with the daily realities of homelessness. Park agencies are striving to balance the needs of daily park users and the homeless, and to show compassion for individuals while enforcing park rules or maintenance standards.

There are many legal and safety issues that parks & recreation departments across the nation are working to resolve, such as definitions of “camping,” “urban camping,” and violations of the law (stolen property, abandonment of property, damaging property, drug use, illegal fires, littering, rights, privacy issues, etc.). Agencies are searching for effective methods of approaching an individual or encampment in a safe but humane way in order to promote cooperation; making areas less inviting and/or opening them up visually; and clean-up of inhabited or previously inhabited sites. Personal safety for law enforcement officers, rangers, and other park personnel is a critical issue addressed through proper equipment, inoculations, and rotations to avoid burnout. The cost of managing this entire homelessness effort is becoming a larger percentage of agency budgets.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has been actively involved in studying the issue of homelessness in our parks, open space and recreation facilities. They recently conducted a survey of park and recreation departments and other local government agencies to gain an understanding of their thoughts and actions related to homelessness. Results published in 2017 indicate that while nonprofit organizations, departments of health and human services, and the police are most frequently the leaders in combating homelessness, roughly three in five park and recreation agencies are partners in their cities’ mitigation strategies. Opinions differ on whether homeless people in parks constitute a different type of park user with different needs or are simply criminals to be dispensed with, but one in six urban park and recreation directors report that their agency is working to better serve and provide regular programming for their communities’ homeless population.

In January 2017, The NRPA co-hosted with the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks an “Innovation Lab” which offered a program for park planners, park & city officials, and homelessness experts where perspectives, research and experiences were shared and discussed. According to a report on the Innovation Lab, one major conclusion was that collaboration between federal departments, state and city agencies, and non-profits
emerged as a successful model for leveraging the resources of many groups, helping connect homeless individuals to much-needed social services, and effectively taking on the burden of this major social issue together.

A recent article in Parks and Recreation magazine describes park systems as “ground zero” for much of the drug activity in local communities. Drug abusers “are people who have lost their way and parks are where they find refuge. It can be the start of where we can help them to become as healthy as possible,” says Jared Bunde, a registered nurse with the Department of Health’s Homeless Outreach Team in San Francisco. While illicit drugs (particularly opiates) and alcohol abuse are highly complicated subjects to understand and address, the article concludes: “the clear message for the park system is to:

- Work with a dedicated coalition of professionals in the community to identify and treat substance abuse disorders.
- Design or adopt a protocol for addressing needle disposal that keeps everyone safe.
- Consistently identify and mitigate “at risk” or untended areas within a park to prevent dealers and users, particularly at night and early in the morning.[sic]
- Offer activities and programs that give people a community to be a part of, including sports, and welcoming faith, emotional and drug abuse support programs to meet and host gatherings in the parks.” (Ibrahim & Jones, 2017)

Several states have legislation protecting the civil and human rights of homeless people. At issue are local codes that outlaw loitering, vagrancy, sitting or lying on the sidewalk, begging, eating in public and other behaviors that disproportionately affect homeless people. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty says this “criminalizes homelessness.” Other communities, like the city of Miami, have formalized processes that they have all their parks and recreation employees use when engaging homeless persons regarding rule violations or abandoned property. They work in conjunction with Police, Social Services Agencies, Health Care Providers and Veterans Agencies to shift the culture to compassion and positive action. The City works under the rules established as a result of the so-called Pottinger Settlement Agreement that specifies protection of rights for homeless people while allowing the community to regulate various homeless activities.

Chris Dropinski, GreenPlay Principal and Managing Member, says that “a clearer understanding of the true relationship between our parks and open spaces and the homeless is needed.” She feels that we need better data on the characteristics of the homeless in parks and sharing of effective strategies for dealing with these issues is critical. The identification of the true financial impacts to parks, recreation, and open space operations and management resources would allow communities to make better decisions and address the issue more effectively, providing an urgency to resolution of the bigger issue. Also, she believes that parks and recreation agencies need to be at the table and play a bigger role in the community’s discussion on these issues.
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