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Parks: An Opportunity to Leverage Environmental Health

Editor's Note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In these columns, EHSB and guest authors share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

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Do you know your local parks and recreation director? He or she could be a great public health ally. Parks and recreation departments align with environmental public health on many cross-cutting activities such as swimming pool inspections, mosquito control, rabies management, and food permits. Parks also provide children access to safe and healthy places to play. Furthermore, they can mitigate safety hazards by protecting land such as flood plains and unstable slopes from inappropriate development. Public health and parks and recreation departments have many synergistic goals that could be leveraged to make both more effective.

In communities across the country, parks and recreation departments implement environmentally responsible land management practices and can be an important partner for environmental health programs. Parks often protect environmentally sensitive areas. For

example, flood plains that are protected from inappropriate development in parks can store storm water, reducing downstream flooding. Protection of groundwater recharge areas allows storm water to seep into the ground, filtering non-point source pollutants and preventing them from entering streams. Tree canopies in parks can mitigate urban heat islands by providing shade and absorbing carbon dioxide and pollutants (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015).

In addition, parks provide opportunities for public health promotion including physical exercise, stress relief, and education programs. Studies have shown that access to green space can reduce the effects of poverty on health (Maas et al., 2009; Mitchell & Popham, 2008). A study of social interactions among residents of a public housing project in Chicago found that access to green space reduced aggression and improved social

interactions (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Other studies have found that children who walk or bike to parks visit them more frequently and are more active (Grow et al., 2008; Mackett & Paskins, 2008). Because many environmental public health benefits are associated with parks, a strong partnership with your local parks and recreation department could be a great advantage to your department.

Here are some questions you can use to start a dialogue with the communities your department serves.

1. Does your community have a master plan that includes an inventory of environmentally sensitive sites and ecosystems that need protection?

If not, encourage the creation of a map of flood plains, steep slopes, and other areas that should be protected as the foundation for a green space system. Work with parks or planning staff to establish a vision plan that makes environmental health concerns a priority. This could include establishing buffers around key resources such as flood plains and groundwater recharge areas. Setbacks or buffers help protect resources and create locations for facilities such as trails, playgrounds, and picnic areas that leverage community investments.

2. Do at-risk children in your community have a park that they can walk to?

Sometimes a park is intended to serve a neighborhood, but its entrance has an inconvenient location (e.g., on a busy street that requires a long, roundabout walk). Adding a new entrance that is easy and safe to reach can increase community access. A park access analysis comparing the number of



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people who live within a half mile of a park to the number of people who have less than a half-mile walk route to a park entrance can identify opportunities to increase park access.

3. Do safe walking and biking routes exist that join parks to nearby schools?

An analysis of children who walk or bike to after school activities can be used to develop supportive infrastructure or create programs to bridge this gap. This may be particularly important for children whose parents are not able to provide after school transportation.

4. Are new development plans reviewed for opportunities to create pedestrian-friendly streets leading to or adjoining nearby parks?

Pedestrian-friendly streets can make parks more visible and safer. Early reviews of rezoning and subdivision plans by either public health or parks and recreation officials provide opportunities to encourage desirable street patterns.

5. Is there an appropriate adult presence in parks during after school hours?

This presence could range from activity leaders to adults in a community garden or public health outreach initiatives. Knowing park sites that would benefit from adult presence helps target opportunities. A park might be an ideal location for programs like health fairs and fresh food markets.

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Useful Resources for Parks and Public Health

Active Living Research

- Making the Case for Designing Active Cities report:
<http://activelivingresearch.org/making-case-designing-active-cities>

Healthy Community Design Initiative (HCDI)

- Access resources about developing healthy places in your community.
- More information on HCDI can be found at www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces.

Making Streets Welcoming for Walking

- Identifies important principles for creating streets that welcome pedestrians:
http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Streets-Welcome-for-Walking_FINAL_20131206_0.pdf

National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network indicator “Access to Parks” (see “Search Community Design Data” tool)

- Provides national, state, and county data on selected indicators as maps, tables, and charts:
<http://ephtracking.cdc.gov/showCommunityDesign.action>

National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) Walking Initiative

- The NRPA “Safe Routes to Parks” (www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/Park-Access-Report.pdf) guide provides professionals with well-researched tools to ensure parks are accessible to all users.
www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Walking-Initiatives/

Parks and Trails Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Toolkit

- Summarizes the strategies recommended in 11 HIAs and with supporting citations:
www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/parks_trails/default.htm

Parks, Trails, and Health Workbook

- A tool for planners, parks and recreational professionals, and health practitioners:
<http://go.nps.gov/communityhealthworkbook>

Pedestrian Friendly Code Directory

- Links to zoning and subdivision codes positioned to create streets and neighborhoods that are safe, comfortable, and convenient for pedestrians, transit users, and bicyclists.
<http://changelabsolutions.org/childhood-obesity/pedestrian-friendly-code>

Planning and Community Health Center Webinar Series

- A variety of topics related to planning and public health, including strategies to advance active living, healthy eating, and cross-sector and community collaborations.
www.planning.org/nationalcenters/health/webinars/
- Safe Routes to Parks:
<http://media2.planning.org/media/stream/saferoutes/lib/playback.html>

Urban River Parkways: An Essential Tool for Public Health

- University of California, Los Angeles report on the health benefits of Urban River Parkways:
Report summary/brochure: <http://bit.ly/1xCORmQ>
Full report: <http://bit.ly/1s5AwzC>

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6. Does the parks and recreation department have healthy vending policies?

Work with the department to promote healthy food choices such as drinking water and fresh fruit.

7. Are parks visible?

Provide signs, Web sites, and maps to make parks more visible.

Community health depends on teamwork and communication among all stakeholders. Call your local parks and recreation director today and start the conversation. 🗣️

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EH CALENDAR

UPCOMING NEHA CONFERENCE

June 13–16, 2016: NEHA 2016 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition and HUD Healthy Homes Conference, San Antonio, TX. For more information, visit www.neha.org/aec.

NEHA AFFILIATE AND REGIONAL LISTINGS

Alabama

April 12–14, 2016: 2016 Interstate Environmental Health Seminar, hosted by the Alabama Environmental Health Association and held in conjunction with its Annual Education Conference, Guntersville, AL. For more information, visit www.aeha-online.com/upcoming-events.html.

California

March 21–25, 2016: 65th Annual Educational Symposium, hosted by the California Environmental Health Association, Oakland, CA. For more information, visit www.ceha.org.

Idaho

March 16–17, 2016: Annual Education Conference, hosted by the Idaho Environmental Health Association, Boise, ID. For more information, visit www.ieha.wildapricot.org.

Indiana

April 14, 2016: Spring Conference, hosted by the Indiana Environmental Health Association, Indianapolis, IN. For more information, visit www.iehaind.org/Conference.

Kentucky

February 17–19, 2016: Annual Conference, hosted by the Kentucky Environmental Health Association, Florence, KY. For more information, visit www.kamfes.com.

Michigan

March 16–18, 2016: Annual Education Conference, hosted by the Michigan Environmental Health Association, Bay City, MI. For more information, visit www.meha.net/AEC.

Minnesota

January 28, 2016: Winter Conference, hosted by the Minnesota Environmental Health Association, St. Paul, MN. For more information, visit www.mehaonline.org.

Ohio

April 18–20, 2016: Annual Education Conference, hosted by the Ohio Environmental Health Association, Columbus, OH. For more information, visit www.ohioeha.org/annual-education-conference.aspx.

Utah

April 27–29, 2016: Spring Conference, hosted by the Utah Environmental Health Association, Springdale, UT. For more information, visit www.ueha.org/events.html.

TOPICAL LISTING

Public Health

April 12–13, 2016: Iowa Governor's Conference on Public Health, Navigating a Changing Landscape: Partnerships for Population Health, Des Moines, IA. For more information, visit www.ieha.net. 🗣️