



Actionable Public Health Strategies to Boost Community Well-Being with Safe Routes to Parks



Communities are healthier when people can use and access parks and green spaces. New research findings from the [Community Preventive Services Task Force \(CPSTF\)](#) point to a measurable increase in physical activity when parks, greenways, and trails are coupled with at least one of these strategies: community engagement, structured programming, public awareness, and access enhancements. This resource provides actionable strategies and inspiring examples for public health agencies to take an active role in their communities' Safe Routes to Parks efforts.

About This Resource and Why Now

In a systematic review, the Community Preventive Services Task Force found that when parks, greenways, and trails are paired with at least one other intervention – community engagement, structured programs, public awareness, and/or access enhancements – people use parks more, having a significant impact on increased rates of physical activity, boosting the health benefits that come from being active in the outdoors and in nature.¹ This factsheet outlines what public health uniquely brings to the table in supporting these evidence-based interventions and how to incorporate these park access strategies into existing public health programs to maximize their impact.

WHAT IS SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS?

Safe Routes to Parks is a movement to make access to great parks by walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation safer, more convenient, and more equitable for people, especially in low-income communities and communities of color, where less investment has gone into the routes to and the facilities in parks. To learn more, visit [Safe Routes to Parks](#).

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CPSTF'S FINDINGS

Findings from the Community Preventative Services Task Force tell us that people use parks when:

- They have a voice in shaping park design and improvements. When community members are engaged in planning processes, it increases their sense of ownership of those spaces, directly impacting their use. **[Community Engagement]**
- They can participate in programs like walking groups, exercise classes, sports, or other social opportunities. Structured and tailored programs or classes help activate park spaces and encourage people to connect with each other and be active. **[Structured Programs]**
- They are informed about what a park has to offer them. From wayfinding signage to promotional campaigns, there are a variety of communications tactics that can be tailored to meet the needs of different audiences and that work to highlight park assets, amenities, and programs. **[Public Awareness]**
- They can safely and comfortably walk, bike or roll to them, and can easily access park spaces at times and locations that are convenient for them. Whether it is a safe, comfortable connected route to a park or a shared-used playground that can be accessed by community members, these enhancements make a difference in making sure that everyone can use parks. **[Access Enhancements]**

Adding just one of these interventions increases park use and has a measurable impact on increased rates of physical activity. On the flip side, the findings underscore that on their own, parks, greenways, and trails don't have this measurable impact on getting people active. So, weaving these interventions as strategies into public health policy, programs, and practice is really what will make a difference in boosting community health.



Photo Credit: Bike Fort Collins



Photo Credit: Central Arkansas Library System

Public Health's Call to Action

There are so many ways public health agencies and practitioners can leverage the skills and competencies of the field and better align existing programs to improve park use and access. As you read through the strategies identified in the CPSTF recommendations, consider the role your agency may take, whether it is supporting a community already leading park access work, integrating park access goals into existing public health initiatives, or spearheading something totally new.

Each of the four strategies outlined below aligns with the four interventions recommended by CPSTF: community engagement, structured programs, public awareness, and access enhancements.

1. ELEVATE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PRIORITIES AND NEEDS AROUND PARK ACCESS

Community engagement is the cornerstone of the [Safe Routes to Parks framework](#), a practical guide to creating safe and equitable access to parks for all people. Public health practitioners value centering community needs with data collection, and below are a few ways to align this key skillset to support the evidence and practice-based guidance of the Safe Routes to Parks framework whether working at the local, regional, or state-level to promote park access.

FACILITATE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DATA COLLECTION TO ASSESS PARK USE AND ACCESS

Provide support and training to assist community members in leading Safe Routes to Park audits in their communities. These audits can highlight needs and opportunities to improve parks and routes leading to parks. Public health can also support by leveraging agency funding to purchase supplies like cameras for documentation, sunscreen, water, clipboards, and printing for maps and recruitment flyers. Check out the [Safe Routes to Parks Walk Audit](#) for ideas in working alongside the community to better understand community needs and assets ([available in Spanish](#), too).

Turn these opportunities into action by helping community members connect to key stakeholders who can support identified needs that come from these assessments. Make connections to decision-makers or agency staff in transportation and parks so that together on-the-ground improvements can become a reality.



Photo Credit: Verde - Living Cully Walks

INCREASING ACCESS TO PARKS FOR ALL BOZEMANITES

In 2021, Bozeman, Montana, was selected as a Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities grantee and used the opportunity to pilot a community liaison program that aimed to establish a genuine and trusted connection between the city and communities that have been systematically excluded from municipal planning processes. The program was developed and inspired by a Community Health Worker model, a public health-oriented approach that aims to engage racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse communities bridging public health practice and policies through hiring trusted community members to lead health promotion and education.

Together, the Human Resources Development Council, the Western Transportation Institute, and the City of Bozeman piloted a program, hiring community members to lead culturally and community-appropriate engagement activities to inform parks planning and active transportation opportunities connecting to parks. The project team helped equip community liaisons with assessment and evaluation skills, training them on how to facilitate walk audits and focus groups, and teaching qualitative data collection methods like asking open-ended questions and notetaking.

With these tools in hand, community liaisons directed engagement efforts using creative and relevant outreach activities like hosting three-on-three basketball games and PhotoVoice workshops to initiate community discussions on desires for park improvements and access. This strategy brought meaningful engagement with low-income households, Spanish-speaking community members, and Black, Indigenous, people of color, and people with disabilities.



Photo Credit: Western Transportation Institute

ENHANCING RECREATION SPACES IN MENOMINEE COUNTY/NATION

As part of an initiative funded with support from a five-year grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension along with the community members in the Menominee County/Nation sought to grow a deeper understanding of community priorities related to physical activity. Dubbing the project “Kemāmaceqtaq” (“We’re All Moving” in the Menominee language), the project team engaged two Menominee communities, working with community partners, adults, and youth to lead three walk audits.² These assessments focused on two community parks and helped to identify potential improvements like traffic calming, signage, lighting, and sidewalk maintenance, as well as opportunities to enhance the parks through art, signage, and park clean-ups.

This process was a valuable opportunity for intergenerational learning. The connections made through this community-driven assessment reinforced a shared commitment to working on park and park access improvements, fueling creative ideas like creating “slow down” signs featuring Menominee language and art and adding signage indicating distances to local sites.³



Photo Credit: Wisconsin Extension Menominee

STRENGTHEN PLANNING FOR PARK ACCESS BY SHARING COMMUNITY HEALTH DATA AND SUPPORTING DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS

Public health agencies lead regional health data collection efforts like Community Health Needs Assessments and use a variety of techniques to engage communities in collecting this information. Health indicators like obesity, air quality, rates of physical activity, and road injury data can be shared and used to inform planning efforts and highlight disparities that are impacted by park and park access improvements.⁴

Go deeper and see if there is new data that needs to be collected to make the case for park-related improvements and leverage public health skills to determine the best methods to collect that data. Check out this [step-by-step guide](#) to evaluating Safe Routes to Parks, which may inspire ideas on how you can support data collection efforts to both inform and evaluate possible park improvements. become a reality.

PARTNER AND ADVISE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS WHEN PLANNING PARKS ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

By actively participating in state, regional, or municipal planning efforts by serving on a technical advisory committee or other coalition, public health practitioners can highlight community outreach needs like language translation and accessibility needs.⁵ Use partnerships to maximize community engagement efforts to reach community groups that planning agencies may not have existing partnerships with.



Photo Credit: Healthy Ride Pittsburgh

CONNECTING TRANSPORTATION AND HEALTH DATA TO INFORM HEALTHY COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS IN UTAH

[Move Utah](#), a collaborative initiative with Utah's Department of Health, Department of Transportation, and Get Healthy Utah, implements policies, programs, and projects to advance health in transportation decision-making. Together, these agencies have worked to fund transportation-related questions to official public health surveys, developed online mapping tools that integrate health and transportation data, and updated prioritization criteria to promote projects that support active living and directly address physical activity.⁶

One of their significant collaborative strategies included developing and funding a question on the Utah Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a public health survey based on the nation's premier public health data collection system, to ask Utahans specifically about transportation challenges in accessing places for work, school, and play. The agencies also worked together to include physical inactivity, obesity, and self-reported health as metrics that would be included in transportation project prioritization, another impactful and novel approach!⁷

2. PROMOTE PARK USE AND ACCESS THROUGH HEALTH PROMOTION AND CHRONIC DISEASE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Parks are natural gathering spaces, and when parks are activated with regularly structured programs like walking groups and fitness classes to reach a diversity of audiences, they further encourage people to connect and be physically active.

IDENTIFY WAYS FOR PEOPLE TO CONNECT TO PARKS THROUGH NO-COST HEALTH PROMOTION PROGRAMS

Safe Routes to School, Walk With Ease, Park Rx, and SNAP-Ed described below are some of the many health promotion and chronic disease management programs often housed and coordinated by public health agencies and that engage residents in no-cost programs that encourage healthy and active lifestyles. Consider how you can use these and other health promotion programs as opportunities to bring people together in parks, plan walks to start and end at parks, develop walking maps that highlight parks, and/or partner with local parks and/or transportation departments to host program events.

Safe Routes to School: Safe Routes to School practitioners actively influence programs, infrastructure, policies, and investments in their communities, with an eye toward children's health, safety, and physical activity levels. Safe Routes to School practitioners activate parks for Park and Walks and meeting locations for Walking School Buses and Bike Trains. Incorporating considerations of Safe Routes to Parks into these activities may be an easy way to expand the effectiveness and reach.⁸ Take a look at our [Safe Routes to School Meets Safe Routes to Parks](#) for more inspiration.



Walk With Ease: This evidenced-based program was developed by the Arthritis Foundation to increase physical activity in people with arthritis and chronic pain conditions and reduce the pain associated with arthritis. The program can also be beneficial for others who are looking to increase physical activity, including older adults. The program combines health education, stretching and strengthening exercises, and walking to help people make safe physical activity part of their everyday life. Walk With Ease is a good example of how chronic disease management programs are enhanced by walkable access to parks and recreation facilities.⁹

Park Rx: This public health initiative promotes healthy communities through partnerships with healthcare providers to promote access to nature and the outdoors. Program sites are located across the country and partnerships with social service providers, public health agencies, and parks agencies take on many different forms.¹⁰ Park Rx can activate parks and encourage communities to connect to their local parks and green spaces.

SNAP-Ed: The SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education) program focuses on nutrition education. SNAP-Ed supports implementing policy, systems, and environmental changes that affect the food and activity environments where people live, learn, work and play. Lead implementing agencies often include local cooperative extensions, state and local health departments, and health and human services agencies. The program aims to engage low-income individuals who receive federal food assistance and are often working in communities that encounter barriers to park use and access.¹¹



Photo Credit: Hayti Heritage Center

OREGON CONNECTS PEOPLE WITH ARTHRITIS AND CHRONIC PAIN TO PARKS

Oregon Health Authority supports Oregon State University's Extension Agency to lead evidence-based programming for people with arthritis at local parks and in communities across Oregon. The Walk With Ease Program offers classes that reduce the pain and discomfort of arthritis, build confidence in the ability to be physically active, and improves overall health.

Oregon Health Authority recognized that evidence-based programs such as Walk With Ease and other programming that address arthritis and fall prevention are enhanced by walkable access to parks and recreation facilities and began supporting community-based efforts to increase access to local parks and improve community walkability. Parks and recreation agencies are major service providers for older adults. Whether they are the main provider in their community or part of a broader network, parks and recreation agencies can support overall health and wellbeing by making their facilities and programming more accessible via Safe Routes to Parks.



3. USE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROMOTIONS & COMMUNICATIONS TO HIGHLIGHT PARKS AND CONNECTIONS TO PARKS

Parks are public spaces for people of all ages, abilities, and disabilities, and it is also their broad utility that makes communicating what parks offer important to ensure they are welcoming and inclusive places that appeal to the needs of different audiences. This strategy can include tailored messaging and marketing to highlight specific aspects of parks to targeted audiences. For example, some parks offer accessible playgrounds for children with disabilities, others offer facilities for older adults, and it's important to convey these specific benefits to their intended audiences. Whether it is wayfinding signage that guides people on foot or bicycle along a low-stress route to the park, or a promotional campaign to promote park activities for older residents, there is a multitude of communication strategies and tactics that can help increase public awareness of these vital community spaces.

HIGHLIGHT PARKS AS COMMUNITY DESTINATIONS

Chronic disease management programs like Walk With Ease or diabetes self-management programs often integrate physical activity promotion in individual and group coaching. Similarly, maybe your public health agency coordinates a Safe Routes to School program. Find ways you can highlight parks in existing promotions within your existing programs. For instance, adding parks to walking route maps, and pointing out local connections to parks, trails, and greenways. Or perhaps, partnering with other agencies to create and fund wayfinding signage that highlights walking and biking routes to/from parks.



Photo Credit: Verde - Living Cully Walks

SUPPORT AGENCY PARTNERS TO DEVELOP ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION ABOUT PARKS

Public health brings to the forefront the importance of effective communication and messaging that is easy to understand and tailored so that educational materials resonate with a target audience. Bring those skills along to your partnerships with parks, transportation, and other community groups to support the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate promotional materials to ensure that parks are community destinations that are inviting for everyone. Use appropriate channels to reach specific audiences, and leverage your agencies' own communication channels to disseminate information. For instance, mailers may reach nearby residents, while social media may attract different audiences to your message.

WAYFINDING SIGNAGE IN KLAMATH FALLS, OREGON CONNECTS COMMUNITIES TO RIVER TRAILS

In 2021, Blue Zone Project – Healthy Klamath, a public health organization housed within Sky Lakes Medical Center joined the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities cohort with support from the Oregon Health Authority. With a track record of working on improving health through a variety of initiatives such as Safe Routes to School and improved food access, they wanted to work to make the extensive trails system in Klamath Falls more accessible. Guided by the Safe Routes to Parks Framework, Blue Zone Project – Healthy Klamath worked with community members and community partners to identify challenges to park access, especially in communities with limited park access and for populations that require more accessible trails, such as seniors and others with limited mobility.

Through this process, they identified that the development and implementation of a wayfinding signage plan would be a feasible early action to address some of the community concerns. In response to feedback from seniors, they also planned to design, print, and distribute maps that indicated ADA accessibility throughout the trail system. With funding from National Recreation and Parks Association, they contracted with a consultant to write a wayfinding signage plan for the trail system to make navigation easier and make the experience more seamless regardless of differences in trail ownership. While they continue to address various action plan items, last fall, the group was able to celebrate the installation of their first wayfinding signs.¹²



Photo Credit: Healthy Klamath

HAWAII'S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH CREATES COLORFUL WALKING MAPS TO HIGHLIGHT CONNECTIONS TO PARKS AND BEACHES

[Start Living Healthy Hawaii](#), is the Hawaii Department of Health's statewide health promotion brand, which is part of their chronic disease prevention and management program targeting a number of different health strategies. Their past media campaign, "Step It Up Hawaii", aimed to have easy-to-understand information to encourage 30 minutes of walking a day. They created these [Fitness Fun Maps](#), colorfully illustrated maps to highlight walking routes that connect to parks and beaches.

3. ADVANCE ON-THE-GROUND IMPROVEMENTS THAT MAKE PARKS EASY TO ACCESS AND SAFE AND CONVENIENT TO WALK AND BIKE TO

Public health practitioners can play a foundational role in bridging community needs to planning initiatives so that communities can see on-the-ground improvements to physical connections to parks. They can bring together stakeholders and champion policies and practices that make parks convenient, safe, and comfortable to walk and bike to.

CONVENE STAKEHOLDERS TO ADVANCE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT IMPROVED PARKS AND PARK ACCESS

Public health excels at mobilizing partnerships and can bring together agencies like transportation, parks, and natural resources to work together on park access and use. Every community has different priorities, and it is always helpful to work together to achieve shared goals, accomplishing even more than what each entity could do separately. For a primer on how different roles and partnerships can amplify Safe Routes to Parks, check out the “Engage” section of the [Connecting People to Parks toolkit](#).



Photo Credit: Blue Zones Project Hawaii

USE SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS TO EXPAND PARK ACCESS

Shared use, also known as joint use, occurs when one entity agrees to open or broaden access to their property and/or facilities for community use, such as recreational activities. The partnerships can be formalized through legal agreements or informally based on historical practices. Formal arrangements are often documented through an agreement that sets forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of the property or facility. Successful partnerships generally rely on pooling resources to expand community access and use public space more efficiently. These agreements can meaningfully expand play. For more details on the potential forms of shared use policies, use [this factsheet](#) on the spectrum of shared use policies and agreements to get started.

LEAD A HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT TO BRING A HEALTH ANALYSIS TO POTENTIAL PARK ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

A health impact assessment is a process of analysis and is a useful tool to help make the case for the many benefits of Safe Routes to Parks. While the positive health impacts of parks and green space may seem obvious, decision-makers often want data to help weigh the costs and benefits of a change or to select among different strategies to benefit health. [Read more](#) on how this tool can help park advocates engage stakeholders and gather data in support of safe, equitable park access.

SUPPORT “POP-UP” IMPROVEMENTS TO MAKE ROUTES TO/FROM PARKS MORE WALKABLE, BIKEABLE, ATTRACTIVE, AND USEFUL

“Pop-up” projects or tactical urbanism projects are usually temporary, low-cost enhancements used to engage community members and inform potential enhancements that make routes safer and more comfortable for people using the street. Safe Routes Partnership published [this guide](#) to highlight how Safe Routes to School programs can use tactical urbanism to engage and inform route improvements near schools. In a similar fashion, parks can also be destinations and hubs of engagement to center these issues of access.

INDIANA’S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH FUNDS POP-UP PROJECTS TO INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The Indiana Department of Health Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity administers a [Tactical Urbanism Program](#), providing grant funds and technical assistance to communities interested in using low-cost demonstration projects as part of their strategy toward long-term improvements that enhance walking and biking to everyday destinations. Their program goals clearly connect the dots from these demonstration projects to physical activity promotion and chronic disease prevention. Their grants also give “special consideration to projects that enhance access to parks, playgrounds, schools, childcare settings, shopping areas, transit stops, and other areas children visit often” recognizing these as priority destinations.¹³



Photo Credit: REV Birmingham

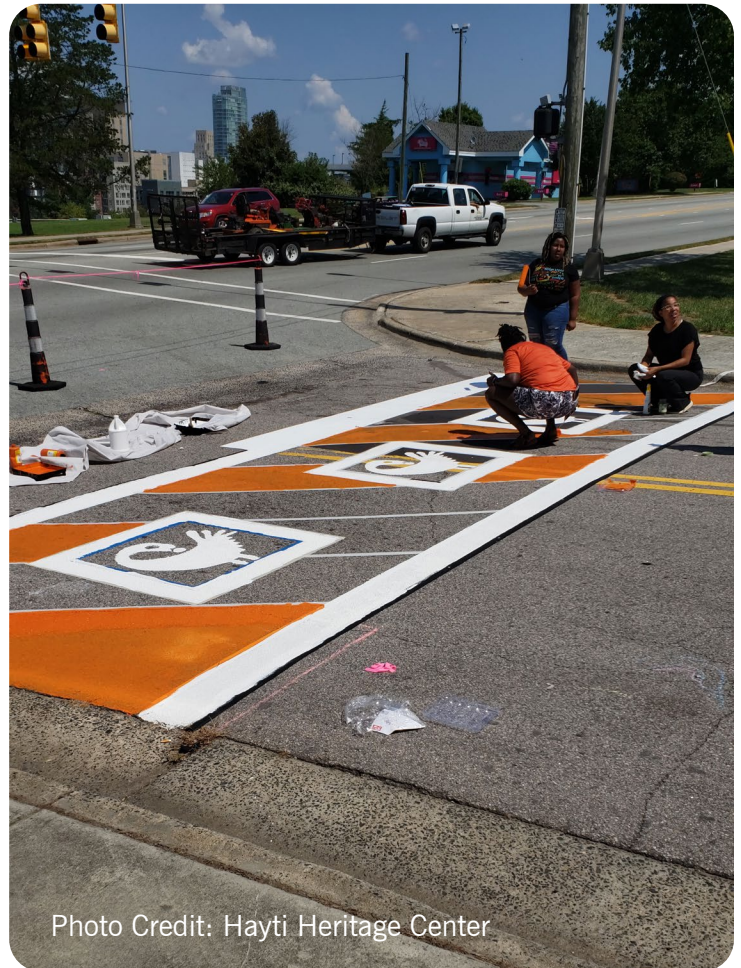


Photo Credit: Hayti Heritage Center

COLORADO'S MULTI-SECTOR COLLABORATIVE TO CROSS-POLLINATE IDEAS AND ADDRESS ACCESS TO PHYSICAL

The [Colorado Public Health/Parks & Recreation Collaborative](#) is a group of multi-sector professionals seeking to improve the health of all communities in Colorado through education, connection, and collaboration. Working towards collective impact, this group recognized a need to bridge the sectors of public health, parks, and recreation to better address community health and active living. Their pinnacle activity is an annual statewide summit that brings together practitioners across sectors working on the intersection of parks, public health, and active transportation to find the commonalities in their work as they work together towards the broader goal to help people move and be active.¹⁴



Photo Credit: Bike Fort Collins

Conclusion

Public health practitioners hold the key to amplifying the health benefits that parks, greenways, and trails can and should produce for everyone. Bringing strengths in data collection, addressing health inequities and centering community needs, mobilizing partnerships, and championing policies that support community health; public health agencies bring enormous value to Safe Routes to Parks. Share this resource with your team and partners to ignite a conversation about the steps you can take to operationalize the recommendations from the Community Prevention Services Task Force to get more people physically active in parks. The actions outlined above have the potential to integrate seamlessly into existing programs and approaches, and through weaving these evidence-based strategies, we can work to promote safe, convenient, and equitable access to local parks and green spaces.



Photo Credit: Health By Design



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