



COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
HEALTH SYSTEM

Title: Passport to Parks: A Collaboration Between Parks and Health

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Background

Like its surrounding neighbors San Francisco, Silicon Valley, and Napa (the metro region also known as the “Bay Area”), San Mateo County is dealing with rises in obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Two in ten adults are obese; five in ten are overweight.ⁱ Diabetes is up 2.5 times over the past ten years. Many of this has to do with the reality that 54% of adults do not exercise regularly and 64% of 7th graders are not passing their fitness tests. Sedentary lifestyles are permeating the residents’ lives.

More non-public health entities are now starting to address these problems. An APHA telephone poll showed that 75% of respondents agreed that parks and recreations should play a role in addressing obesity. One such way is to engage in the use of their parks. Literature shows that being physically active in park or natural settings have demonstrated lower risks of chronic diseases, blood pressure, cholesterol, stress, and anxiety, and enhanced one’s chance of survival after a heart attack and behavior for children with ADHD and behavioral disorders.^{ii iii iv v vi} If every inactive adult were to become physically active, the potential medical cost savings could be \$76.6 billion in dollar value from the year 2000.^{vii} One of the biggest benefits about using public spaces, such as parks, is that it is free or low cost.ⁱ Children and teenagers are more likely to be physically active when they are outdoors than indoors.^{viii} The general population is also more likely to use parks when organized activities are available.^{ix x}

To improve collaboration between public health and non-public health agencies, a group of healthcare agencies, parks and recreations, and the local health department united to form a collaborative called Active Access in 2009. Their mission has been to “promote healthy physical activity in community places throughout San Mateo County”. Their three pillars are to: 1) improve physical and mental health, 2) activate the use of public spaces, and 3) enhance social connectedness. A Public Health Educator from San Mateo County Health System staffs the collaborative.

Passport to Parks

Active Access launched a year-long “Passport to Parks” (P2P) campaign in 2015 to send residents on a “scavenger hunt” to discover some of their cities’ parks. P2P enhances parks’ visibilities and use while it engages residents in active transportation (e.g., walk, bike). Participants find a series of clues about the next destination until they reach the final destination. P2P includes routes and parks that are amenable to families, older adults and people with disabilities. In an effort to be sensitive to families, older adults and adults with disabilities, the routes were no more than 1 mile long and were wheelchair-accessible. Exceptions were noted on P2P’s website.

Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating

Active Access initially created the P2P project plan and protocol that was easy for anyone to replicate. The scope of work clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities of the county staff and Parks & Recreations helped set clear expectations of their commitment and resources. The county staff and a few interns did the preparation work and designed the campaign and protocol for participating in Passport to Parks. They created the clues and instructions, translated them into Spanish and tested out the instructions to assess the accuracy of the directions and the accessibility of the routes for children and people with disabilities. They sought sponsorships for prizes and created the evaluations. They also printed the signs. Even though there was limited funding, Parks & Recreations were willing to contribute their own staff and resources, which was minimal, to affixing the signs and promoting the campaign. Upon completion of the campaign, Active Access will create a toolkit that includes the protocol, sample signs, etc. and share the toolkit with other cities and counties who are interested in replicating the toolkit.

The implementation phase involves continuous promotion of P2P and monitoring of the evaluations. The evaluation consists of a survey that can be picked up or by scanning a QR code (which links to an electronic survey) on the final sign of each route. The survey asks respondents about the destinations that they reached during each route to ensure actual participation. It also includes questions about their satisfaction with the route, reasons for participating in P2P, demographic information, and physical activity information. Prizes are used to incentivize participation in the

evaluation. The results will help inform Active Access and Parks and Recreations about the type of physical activity opportunities that residents are interested in and the type of people that P2P is attracting. The results will also help inform Active Access of opportunities for policy development and environmental changes that would allow residents to safely walk and bike more.

As of October 2015, the results showed that 36 adults and 20 children have participated in 7 cities' routes. 75% expressed satisfaction with the route and recommended for more cities to participate and longer (and tougher) routes. Their comments showed that they enjoyed the "atmosphere" of the route, the "scavenger hunt feel", and the "clues [that] made it fun for kids". The most popular reason for participating in P2P was that they "wanted to get out and move". The most popular method of hearing about P2P was through their Parks and Recreation's activity guides, followed by word of mouth and community bulletin board.

Benefits

The benefits of this type of multi-agency collaboration include but are not limited to savings in programmatic and healthcare costs, increased attention to Parks & Recreations, utilization of under-used public spaces, and enhancement of social connectedness. Instead of duplicating efforts (e.g., Active Access and Parks & Recreations each creating their own version of P2P), sharing resources and staff time helps save both entities money in the long run. If Active Access and Parks & Recreations continue to collaborate on similar programs and set up a system for referring high-risk clients (e.g., obese) to participate, then the clients will have increased opportunities to exercise. The potential savings in healthcare costs will be tremendous if and when the clients are physically active and are able to prevent or manage their obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases. Subsequently, Parks & Recreations would be gaining more attention through these types of activities, thereby earning more profits and attracting more users at under-used parks. Meanwhile, clients who utilize these types of activities become more connected with their families or communities, as P2P has demonstrated through the survey responses.

Challenges

There are several financial, systemic and environmental barriers that can prevent a multi-agency collaboration from thriving. Due to the recent economic recession, Parks & Recreations downsized their workforce while trying to retain their existing programs, which made new activities and programs unattractive to overworked staff. They ultimately have to choose between prioritizing their existing programs over new collaborative opportunities, such as P2P. Subsequently, Active Access does not have the finances and staffing capacity to be able to accommodate survey respondents' requests for more routes. Active Access and Parks & Recreations have to work with their existing city infrastructures, which may not always be bikeable or walkable, especially between parks. At the same time, P2P also does not address access to parks, particularly in low-income communities, which requires cities' planning and parks departments to make political decisions to improve their environments.

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