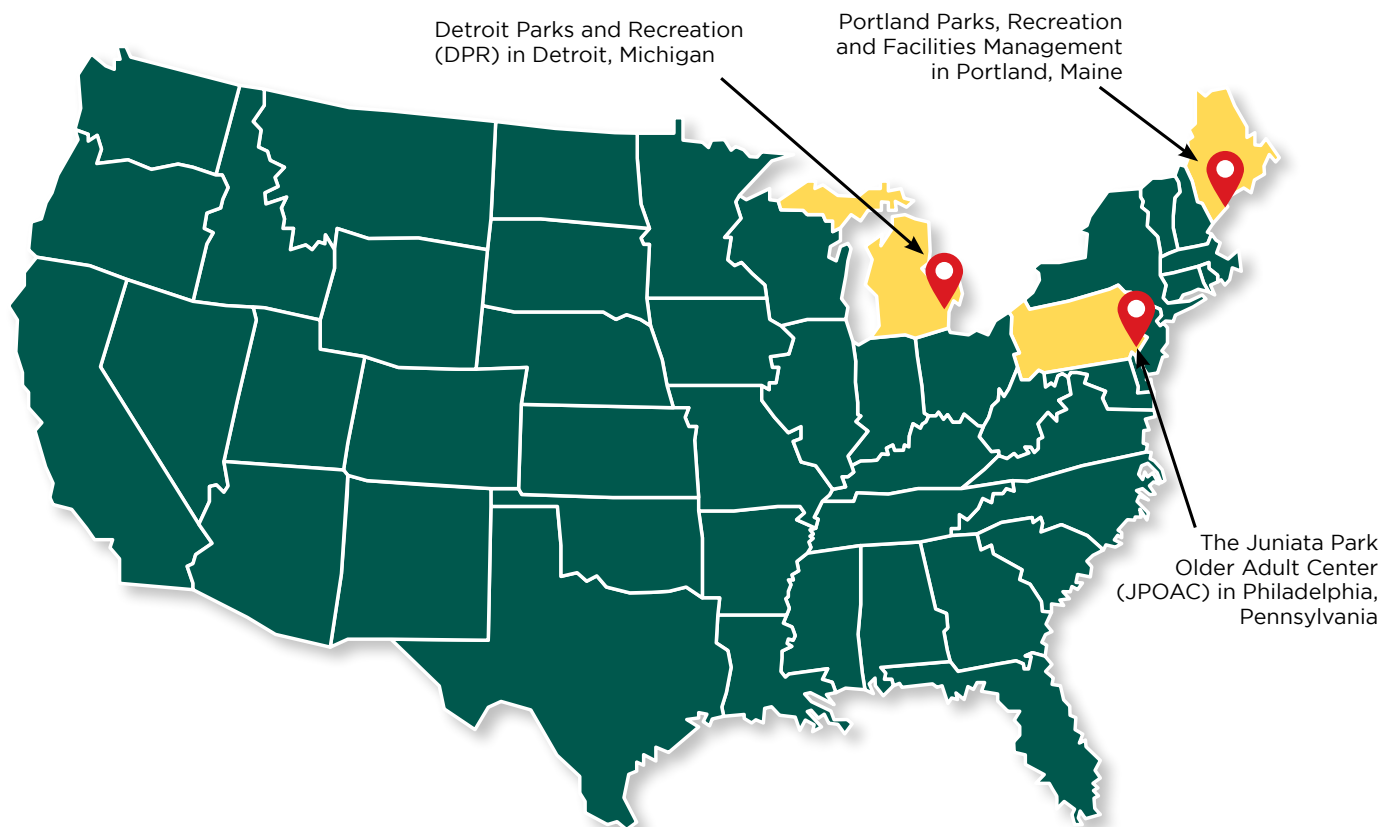


Community of Practice Findings

Supporting Older Adults

Introduction

Detroit Parks and Recreation (DPR) in Detroit, Michigan; The Juniata Park Older Adult Center (JPOAC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management in Portland, Maine, were awarded a Supporting Healthy Aging Through Parks and Recreation grant from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). The grant included funding to provide capacity-building support to the agency, no-cost instructor trainings to certify physical activity instructors and support from NRPA. Additionally, a subset of those selected for the grant participate in an 18-month Community of Practice (CoP) where members engage with each other, industry experts and health equity subject matter experts to learn how to offer evidence-based physical activity programs in a way that focuses on equity to ensure all people have access to the health benefits of parks and recreation. Participants work together to learn how to apply [NRPA's Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action \(Healthy Equity Framework\)](#) and strategize what it means to embark on systems change work that centers on equity in their communities. This case study resource features three agencies that have completed the 18-month CoP and implemented their learnings along with the Health Equity Framework in their communities.



Case Study 1

Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks at Detroit Parks and Recreation

The Detroit Parks and Recreation (DPR) was awarded a Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks grant from NRPA. The NRPA grant program has helped DPR offer several arthritis-appropriate, evidence-based interventions (AAEBIs) including, Tai Chi for Arthritis, Fit and Strong, and Walk with Ease. These classes are supported by a large, full-time recreation staff that includes 11 instructors who have been specifically assigned to teach older adult programming. Classes meet two times per week at both the East and West locations of DPR.

Older adults are choosing to repeat the classes at nearly a one hundred percent rate. The return of students, season after season, shows a positive impact on older adults and the greater community for Lisa Cunningham, assistant recreation activities coordinator of special activities at DPR. This success aligns with DPR's vision to improve the quality of life for all Detroiters through parks, greenways, recreation centers and programs using an equity framework.



Outdoor fitness classes are often popular with older adults when the temperatures are not extreme. Photo courtesy of Department of Parks and Recreation, Prince George's County (Maryland).

Connecting Community Members to Inclusive Programming

Many types of vulnerable populations were served by DPR with their classes. Students were mostly what Lisa calls "golden agers," or those over the age of 65 who live in under-resourced areas. Instructors made sure that classes were accessible for each of these students so they could participate at their own pace. Most of the participants were women who resided in older adult living apartments and assisted living communities. Some of the older adults were receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) along with their retirement funding. For older adults who are Detroit residents, all classes and memberships are free of charge.

The instructors who are assigned to teach older adult-specific classes are representative of the demographics of Detroit. These individuals also have an affinity for working with older adults and prefer morning shifts, which is when classes are typically held for this population. When a course instructor is a contractor instead of a city employee, there are systems in place that ensure that local, minority-owned and female-owned businesses get preference on contracts so that money spent has a social impact beyond just instruction of older adults.

Prioritizing Community Feedback to Achieve Equity

Programming for older adults can only be successful when they can easily share their priorities and offer feedback. DPR ensured that outreach to the community and feedback opportunities were always available in Spanish and Arabic translations to meet the needs of non-English speaking residents in the community. Support for this translation came from the mayor's office and included access to an American Sign Language (ASL) translator. When a planning session was held by DPR, they welcomed engagement from the community so they could better understand their needs and so that residents had buy-in and ownership of the programming.

The largest guiding document DPR uses to support achieving health equity is their Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan, which was adopted by their city council on November 15, 2022. This plan looks at parks and recreation through an equity lens to determine which centers receive what type of support. Walkability is a key focus to ensure that every resident has recreation assets within a ten-minute walk of their home. When creating the plan, DPR held focus groups for all community members and offered a six-month comment period to get input from the community on the plan.

Offering Multiple Communication Pathways

Recognizing that not everyone has access to a computer or the internet to share their feedback and learn about classes, DPR hosts in-person Lunch and Learn opportunities at each of their senior sites, which are attended by 35-75 older adults on average. This event includes a 30-minute presentation on a topic of interest and Lisa will also speak about upcoming classes for older adults. Beyond this type of word-of-mouth engagement, DPR also uses, print media, social media and local news media to get the word out about classes.

Lisa suggests that park and recreation agencies with low attendance numbers use social media, set aside money in the budget for advertising and consider offering older adults some incentives for completing classes, such as a certificate or a t-shirt. It is important to be creative as well. Within the Community of Practice, Lisa learned from a grantee in North Carolina that encouraging older adults to post a selfie with a note about the class on social media empowered them to become ambassadors for marketing to potential students. DPR successfully used this strategy to grow attendance at their computer classes.

The DPR team also markets class offerings in "Your City, Your Voice," a citywide newsletter distributed to all city residents. This also helped them network with many community agencies that became referral sources.

“Try not to be easily discouraged if you don’t see an overwhelming response to classes you offer at first. Make sure that the classes you offer are those that people in your community want to take,” shared Lisa when asked for advice for other grantees.

Overcoming Obstacles to Serve Older Adults in Need

The weather became a challenge for DPR during the winter months. Due to the cold weather, it became difficult to get older adults to come out to classes. To address this, DPR made Walk with Ease a hybrid program; participants came to the center two days a week, and they were encouraged to a self-paced walk at home for the third day of the weekly program. This pivot was well received by participants, who shared in testimonials that they experienced increased and improved mobility. Some went from needing a walker to only needing a cane, and others went from using a cane to walking unassisted. One participant lost twenty pounds after participating in the classes.

When it comes to transportation, the older adults who go to DPR are generally within walking distance, and this also helps them get their steps in for the day. For those who need assistance getting to the program, a city van that fits 11 people is available for use. When attendance is greater, the program can request to use a 45-passenger school-type bus. Other older adults use the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) system, which offers a door-to-door pick up and drop off for those living with a disability. Sometimes older adults utilize ride-share services, such as Uber or Lyft, to get to class.

In the east and west locations of DPR, there are dense populations of older adults. However, these locations lack swimming pools, and one of the locations has no gym. By choosing the Tai Chi program, after surveying older adults to see what program they wanted, DPR was still able to meet the needs of older adults, because the class could be implemented with minimal investment in equipment.

Reaching Goals with Support from NRPA and the Community of Practice

For Lisa, the bi-monthly CoP calls were great, because they were always discussing a new and relevant topic. The peer-to-peer discussion and networking available at these gatherings helped the DPR team try new things and discuss what was working well. The chat function of the CoP was a helpful tool on the NRPA website, because it was easy to post about successes, ask questions and refer to helpful information posted there.

According to Lisa, the added layer of support from the NRPA team greatly enhanced the overall experience. NRPA offered one-on-one sessions for support for specific situations or just general help. They also didn't delay answering questions:

“The NRPA team was wonderful to me. They sent me all the information I ever asked for.”

Equity Goal for the Future

DPR used to have a strong focus on offering programs for adults living with intellectual disabilities. This has wavered more recently, and past programs are mostly siloed to specific locations that can cater to this population's needs. Moving forward, similar to the public education system, DPR aims to serve adults living with intellectual disabilities within their regular schedule of everyday programs. They are looking for ways to increase adaptive programming for this population across all their recreation centers. To achieve this, they will need to build a stronger staffing base and have support from organizations like NRPA to begin to make these plans toward health equity.

Case Study 2

Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks at Juniata Park Older Adult Center

The Juniata Park Older Adult Center (JPOAC) in Philadelphia was awarded a Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks grant from NRPA. The NRPA grant program helped JPOAC offer Tai Chi for Arthritis, an arthritis-appropriate, evidence-based intervention.

The JPOAC is a older adult center for residents ages 55 and older; it is run by the city of Philadelphia. The Tai Chi program participants served include low-income individuals, non-English speaking persons, the Asian American, Hispanic and Latino, and Black communities. The JPOAC also serves people living with disabilities and chronic health conditions. The center has four staff members, which includes Center Director Jacqueline Maldonado, the program director, a social worker and the clerk. Both Jacqueline and the program director took on the responsibility of running the program, including applying for the grant, managing it, reporting progress and tracking participation. The program director was the certified Tai Chi instructor at the time of the grant.

Garnering Program Support from Key Partners

The JPOAC is a part of the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA), which is one of the nation's largest Area Agencies on Aging. PCA provides and sponsors a range of programs and services that benefit older Philadelphians and those living with disabilities. The center was able to use the PCA network and everything on their digital system to help with entering and retrieving the Tai Chi program records. This made collecting and sending data very easy for the team, who could then manage information daily. "We couldn't do it without them, they are such a good partner. They are very involved with supporting our funding, transportation, congregate meal programs and purchasing items for our center," Jacqueline shared. The PCA's program manager acts as a liaison with JPOAC.



Older adults use hand weights in fitness class. Photo courtesy of City of Lake Elsinore (California).

Accessibility and Creating a Welcoming Space

Participants at JPOAC's Tai Chi program always felt welcomed, valued and respected, because the staff and instructors made sure that the program was fully accessible so that everyone had the opportunity to participate without any barriers. In fact, if a participant couldn't stand during the class, they were invited to do the program seated. The class was also held in a space that had a calming and cozy atmosphere. Staff and instructors would turn the lights on low, close blinds, choose relaxing music and ensure the room was quiet for participants while the program was running.

The Center took care of the membership fee for all participants using the NRPA grant funds, ensuring equitable access; low-income older adults wouldn't struggle to participate due to cost. They also covered the costs of using SEPTA Access (formerly CCT Connect) services, which is a program that provides paratransit services to individuals living with disabilities and older adults. While the JPOAC also let participants know that they could cover the cost of Uber shared rides, no one took advantage of this option.

Achieving Success with Support from NRPA

The JPOAC team appreciated the support, leadership and constant availability of NRPA staff who always quickly responded to questions or concerns and hosted informative meetings. Jacqueline shared that she enjoyed the engagement with other agencies that the Community of Practice offered and found it valuable to learn from others. She felt that the comradery and meeting with other grantees from across the United States was helpful and educational because you could see how they were implementing their own programs and taking steps to center and advance health equity. Ultimately, she took what she learned from this peer support group and incorporated it into JPOAC's program: "I believe our program was very successful based on support from the Community of Practice meetings," Jacqueline shared.

Jacqueline did recognize that to be successful, agencies should be prepared to invest time and resources. To help ensure success, an organization needs to be organized, keep all their records straight and attend all the meetings hosted by NRPA. Ultimately though, she believes it is a very rewarding experience.



Helping older adults stay active and healthy is rewarding for the fitness instructor. Photo courtesy of Newport News (Virginia) Parks and Recreation.

Advancing Health Equity for Participants

Philadelphia Parks and Recreation is committed to creating equitable access to programs and services that advance health equity for all residents but especially those living in under-resourced neighborhoods. JPOAC's vision for the Center and its members is also centered around equity. Staff members prioritize connecting with individuals daily who have different lived experiences and have discussions with those individuals about the support they need. The team prides itself on being very close to the membership, which is a predominantly Hispanic, Latino and low-income community.

The JPOAC staff is shifting decision-making power over to its members as a way of demonstrating their dedication to equity. The Center has taken time to translate their newsletter information into additional languages. This year, they will also begin hosting lunch workshops with members to learn more about inequities they are facing and how to address them. The team is also committed to elevating the Black, Hispanic, Latino and Asian American community members into positions of power in the center's advisory council as well as in lead volunteer roles.

There is still work to be done when it comes to advancing equity for the Center's current membership as well as potential members living in the community. The team plans to provide Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training for staff and members in the future, which will include suggested DEI reading lists. They also plan to work with the city government to make use of their translation services to help with additional marketing and outreach in the community.

Engaging Community Members

While the JPOAC was able to engage community members through their newsletter and Facebook page, they did find that most program participants were already members of the Center. A few people joined specifically for the Tai Chi program, which they heard about through word of mouth and consequently decided to become members of the Center when the program ended.

One obstacle the program faced was reaching underserved populations beyond those who subscribe to their newsletter and follow them on Facebook. In fact, the biggest impediment they faced to the program, according to Jacqueline, was agency restrictions on going out into the community for marketing and outreach. This atmosphere prevented staff from taking a proactive approach to targeted outreach in the community. Jacqueline believes it is important for organizations that want to implement AAEBIs and advance health equity strategies to get the full commitment of their agency, otherwise the mission of the program won't be supported.

Celebrating and Building on Success

Ultimately, the Tai Chi program led by the JPOAC was a success, serving nearly 90 participants. The Center was proud of reaching this number, because they had been struggling with attendance and losing members because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was encouraging to see that those who participated really enjoyed it and said they looked forward to it every week. Staff and instructors would stay after each class to socialize with the participants and hear their feedback. According to Jacqueline, it was the committed staff and instructors that made this class successful. The team has trained and hired an outside fitness instructor to run the program once a week. She now runs the program and facilitates while the Center's program director can step in when she is unavailable. The Tai Chi program was so successful, they have decided to continue offering it.

Case Study 3

Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks at Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management

Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management in Portland, Maine, was awarded a Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks grant from NRPA.

The Portland Parks Division manages a park system that includes more than 60 parks and playgrounds, 7.5 miles of multi-use trails, 10 community gardens, two stadiums, 16 cemeteries, and dozens of athletic fields and courts. The recreation division offers programs and clinics for preschool, youth, family, teens, adults and senior adults. This includes after-school programs in Portland's nine elementary schools, a 62 and older program for seniors, aquatics programs, therapeutic and inclusion programs, and basketball for K-6 grade students. The public assembly facilities division is responsible for the scheduling and management of Merrill Auditorium, Portland Exposition Building, Hadlock Field, Ocean Gateway and Maine State Pier.

According to Deputy Director Angela O'Connor at the Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management, it was the enthusiastic support from the leadership team that made their Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks program successful.

The Tai Chi for Arthritis program was a core element of the Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks program and was subsidized by the grant funds from NRPA, which allowed the organization to train staff so that they could work with older adults and individuals living with disabilities. The grant funding helped to launch a beginner Tai Chi for Arthritis program. The retention rate for participants was about 82 percent for the 62 and older program. This high retention rate led to the launch of an intermediate and then an advanced Tai Chi for Arthritis program. The most recent program held was so popular that it had almost twice as many new participants compared to the first program.



Walking helps improve overall health for older adults. Photo courtesy of City of Menifee (California).

Implementing Health Equity Strategies

Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management has worked with other departments across the city to ensure that all programming follows a Health Equity framework. Two specific strategic plans they follow that go hand in hand with the Health Equity framework are Portland, Maine: *Age Friendly Community Work Plan, Health of Portland Report (2019-2020)* and *Using Data to Promote Health Equity, Portland Community Health Improvement Plan (2022-2025)*.

While implementing the Supporting Healthy Aging in Parks grant, the following health equity strategies were used:

- Modifying programs to fit the specific needs of program participants living with disabilities through the Therapeutic Recreation/Inclusion Program, including a modified version of Tai Chi for Arthritis
- Creating community interest by offering a free trial for the Tai Chi for Arthritis program
- Collaborating with the Public Health Department on a program accessibility plan to make sure that new Maine residents better understand what the recreation division has to offer them and how they can register for programs
- Working with the Public Health Department and their community health workers to provide better accessibility to non-English speaking communities
- Developing a better partnership with Portland Public Housing and their new management, with help from Public Health and Social Services, so that programming can be offered to those residents
- Offering transportation to pick-up and drop-off program participants at their doorsteps when needed



Fitness instructor leads outdoor class. Photo courtesy of Department of Parks and Recreation, Prince George's County (Maryland).

Adapting to Program Obstacles

The Tai Chi for Arthritis program was focused on older adults between the ages of 60 and 80, and that meant that some individuals were more able than others to participate without any accessibility modifications. Many participants did drive to the program location, but there also was a park and recreation mini bus that would do pick ups for those who needed it. There was a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, but the course was priced very reasonably to start at just \$30 and a subsidy was made available to those who couldn't afford it when the price was eventually raised to \$60.

One challenge for hosting the program was finding physical space for classes, and this has become a city-wide issue. The City of Portland does not have a stand-alone community center. The three community centers they have are part of the community elementary schools. This means that running programming can be difficult at these locations, especially when school is in session. The Tai Chi for Arthritis program ended up being held at the organization's main office, which is one of the only programs held at that location. One of the large spaces at the main office was turned into a community room for older adults that was accessible to them. Sometimes when participants and staff wanted to adjust by going outside for the program, the high temperatures could be a problem and outside classes had to be primarily chair-based due to the heat.

Getting the Word Out and Support from NRPA

Portland Parks, Recreation and Facilities Management has a robust mailing list that consists of more than 600 people. The program was a success in part because the team was able to target their community outreach using the mailing list, social media, a press release written by the city communications officer and a bi-monthly older adult newsletter. The effective marketing campaign was picked up by the local Council on Aging as well as a hospital, and two strong partnerships developed with these entities, which are relationships that continue to grow.

NRPA provided technical assistance throughout the grant, including support with the data collection and management process for grantees. Angela shared that the process was easy to implement and helped give a real understanding of the age range and demographics the organization was serving and that the overall support provided by NRPA was a key part of Portland's success.



Older adults participate in fitness class. Photo courtesy of Parks and Recreation Department, City of Shawnee (Oklahoma).

Program Growth and Continued Success

The Tai Chi for Arthritis program currently has four instructors, one of which was already certified when the course began. One instructor has been dedicated specifically to the 62 and older program and their consistency has been one reason why seniors keep coming back and new seniors join the program. Another instructor is also the supervising park ranger. She introduced Tai Chi for Arthritis to park visitors throughout the summer and will bring this back in the summer of 2025. The other two instructors work in the Therapeutic Recreation/Inclusion Programs, and they have introduced Tai Chi for Arthritis in some of their adaptive programs.

Each instructor caters to the needs of participants and understands the balance of it all, which has been a great experience. Since the first cohort of participants in the program, the team has been thrilled to see how committed they are to attending every Tuesday and Thursday. Ever since the start of this program, the same faces consistently show up. Many participants have moved from the beginner program over to the intermediate program and frequently express their gratitude. Participants will email staff members to share how the class has changed their lives and how successful it has been. For Angela and the staff, seeing how they are helping make someone else's life better is the most rewarding part. Moving forward, the plan is to bring on additional Tai Chi instructors to continue to grow and sustain the program into the future.

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