

# Building Local Partnerships to Support Youth in Parks and Recreation



Park and recreation agencies serve as Community Wellness Hubs — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life. As such, park and recreation agencies frequently connect youth and their families to other municipal or community resources. This can look like anything from workforce development opportunities to emergency housing, food assistance, mental health support and much more.



The Youth Mentorship Program in Mount Airy provides a variety of information for youth and families at its community resource table. Photo courtesy of Mount Airy (North Carolina) Parks and Recreation.

This resource provides tips for park and recreation professionals to build local partnerships, along with examples from the field of agencies supporting youth with challenges around substance misuse and mental health.

Park and recreation programs — such as youth mentorship, after-school programs and sports — all help to support positive youth development. However, young people face many challenges in today's world and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) — potentially difficult experiences or aspects of a child's environment that undermine their experience of safety, stability or bonding — are common (CDC). While park and recreation professionals do so much, they can't always do it all. Partnering with organizations or professionals to provide education and resources on the challenges youth face can enhance park and recreation programming and support families.

## Three Tips for Connecting Youth to Essential Services

01

### Tip 1: Build Your Partnership Network.

Create positive exposure for your programs! Look for community-based organizations, local businesses, universities, business associations or service groups whose missions or interests align with your program's goals. Reaching out to these groups can be a great place to start recruiting volunteers or guest speakers, organizing field trips for youth or identifying mutually beneficial ways to collaborate.

02

### Tip 2: Invite Partners to You.

Not knowing what's available can be a barrier preventing youth and families from accessing services. Consider creative ways to build awareness about the resources in your community. This could look like a resource fair combined with your program orientation or inviting a few partners to present at a family engagement night themed around topics like financial literacy or substance use prevention. Making these events fun and welcoming can reduce stigma associated with seeking services.

03

### Tip 3: Reduce Stigma.

Finding appropriate ways to have open conversations with youth and families about things like mental health, self-care, healthy coping mechanisms and much more can reduce stigma around these topics and normalize asking for help. Using evidence-based curriculum to support staff in leading these conversations or bringing in trained professionals from partner agencies are two ways to provide education and facilitate discussions.

## Examples From the Field

### How City of Auburn's (Maine) Recreation Department Connects Youth to Mental Health Supports

*\* Content Warning: Please be advised, this resource contains sensitive information and references to distressing events.*

In October 2023, City of Auburn's sister city of Lewiston, Maine, experienced a mass shooting. In the wake of this tragedy, the need for parenting and youth services for families who frequently move between the two cities became evident. In October 2024, City of Auburn officially partnered with a local mental health provider through its recreation department. With this partnership, recreation staff can make referrals or parents/caregivers can directly request services. Families have said that they've benefited significantly from this partnership and having counseling services available in a familiar setting, such as the recreation department or the Police Activities League (PAL) Center, helps to reduce hesitation with asking for help.

As one recreation staff member shared: "These crises have impacted our youth, families and staff. The availability of a counselor — albeit not full time — has been a blessing. We recognized that not all 'react' in the same way or within the same time frame. We needed access to a mental health professional who could assist as needed with social and behavioral issues (as they arise)."

The Auburn PAL Center also works with a community-based art van program that provides mobile art therapy through youth-centered activities. This mental health service comes once a week and has been especially helpful for youth who need a safe space and the chance to talk with a trusted adult.

### How Carter County Drug Prevention in Elizabethton, Tennessee, Leverages Credible Messengers to Mentor Youth Impacted by Substance Misuse

Carter County Drug Prevention (CCDP) is an organization based in Elizabethton, Tennessee, whose mission is to reduce substance abuse through collaborative planning, community action and policy advocacy. CCDP partners with Elizabethton Parks and Recreation through its PEAK (Promoting Esteem Among Kids) Mentoring Program, which helps young people build healthy and positive relationships with adults. Through this program, the organization has found success working with local recovery living communities to recruit volunteer mentors who serve as credible messengers and positive role models for the youth. Program staff have worked closely with recovery living community partners to identify residents who are established in their recovery journey, can pass a background check want to give back to the community. They refer these individuals to CCDP as volunteers to be screened and trained as mentors. New mentors are paired with more experienced mentors until they gain enough confidence to be matched with a mentee on their own.

This program model has been very successful thus far, as mentors serve as credible messengers to the youth, many of whom have also been impacted by substance misuse directly or indirectly. CCDP's relationship with recovery living community partner organizations has been possible through its staff's outreach and relationship-building expertise and the outcome has been positive for both mentees, who receive support and encouragement from individuals with similar life experiences to them, and mentors who know they are making a positive difference in the life of a young person.

## How Monroe's (Michigan) Opportunity Center Partners With Its Local School System on Vaping Prevention

Monroe County Opportunity Program (MCOP) provides recreation programs for youth and families in Monroe, Michigan, through its Opportunity Center. Staff work closely with partners in their city, including the local school system, and recently began a vaping prevention program at their middle school. This partnership came about in response to concerns from teachers and administrators about the high number of youth vaping in high, middle and even elementary schools. MCOP stepped in to help and through discussions with the middle school assistant principal, they decided to bring vaping prevention curriculum to the entire middle school student body during their Trojan Family Time, which takes place each day before first period. MCOP's Youth Program Director and two other staff received training on an evidence-based vaping prevention curriculum called "Catch My Breath," which emphasizes peer-led learning and informed decision making. They then brought this curriculum to the school and went to every homeroom class over a two-month period, facilitating short presentations with groups of around 15 students at a time. These sessions were interactive and gave students the opportunity to have open conversations about vaping and its effects.

Through this experience, they found that there were some students who were habitual e-cigarette users and who were getting in trouble repeatedly. The school requested MCOP to lead smaller sessions with these youth, and they subsequently began facilitating small group discussions during lunch periods.

Monroe Opportunity Center also has led substance use prevention programs at their community center using another curriculum called "Keepin' It Real." Through this program and their collaboration with the school system, they aim to equip youth with the tools and knowledge to make healthy decisions. They credit their success with these programs to good relationships and being flexible. As one staff member shared:

---

*"Us going into the middle school does not happen unless there are already relationships established with the leadership in charge of those schools. So really, everything hinges upon the relationship that you have with the local school systems or the community, because once you're a trusted resource and ally, then they empower you to go forward. So, relationship building is a huge one, but [so is] being flexible with knowing what the biggest need is within the school system and letting the administration know we're here to support you in whatever way you see fit."*

---

■■■■■

In summary, there are countless ways to partner with organizations or groups in your community to enhance your programs and connect youth and families to essential services. The examples shared in this resource illustrate some of the innovative ways local agencies are responding to pressing issues youth face in communities across the United States, such as substance misuse and mental health struggles. Through outreach and relationship building, it's possible to collaborate with groups doing similar work to increase your impact and provide more support to community members.



## Additional Resources

[Parks and Recreation: Addressing Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders](#)

[NRPA's Mentoring Resources](#)



## Acknowledgements

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for contributing, providing feedback and developing this resource:

**Author:** Olivia Peterson

**Contributing Authors:** Jason Aaron, Kayla Castonguay, Valdare Johnson, Maureen Neumann

**Review and Design:** Charissa Hipp, Ivy McCormick, Vitisia Paynich, Meagan Yee

### About the National Recreation and Park Association

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. For more information, visit [www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org). For digital access to NRPA's flagship publication, Parks & Recreation, visit [parksandrecreation.org](http://parksandrecreation.org).

This resource is supported by Grants #15PJDP-22-GG-03735-MENT and 15PJDP-22-GG-03844-MENT awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.