

Unlocking Wellness through Parks and Recreation



Evidence suggests that Parks and Recreation agencies provide meaningful opportunities for participants to advance their wellness through provision of programs, maintenance of facilities, and stewardship of natural spaces. But what does this look like on the ground?



This resource outlines different ways that Parks and Recreation agencies can support the 8 Dimensions of Wellness, as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The information outlined in this resource is derived from conversations with Parks and Recreation professionals, the research literature, and the Community Health in Parks and Recreation (CHRP) research project.

Dimension	Definition	Contribution of Parks and Recreation
Physical Wellness	Recognizing the need for physical activity, diet, sleep and nutrition.	Parks and recreation offerings are instrumental in promoting physical wellness by providing opportunities for exercise, physical activity, and overall health improvement. Sports programs, fitness classes, and recreational facilities encourage individuals to engage in regular physical activity, leading to improved cardiovascular health, strength, flexibility, and overall physical fitness. Moreover, access to outdoor spaces like parks and trails encourages people to be more active, whether through walking, jogging, cycling, or participating in recreational sports.
Emotional Wellness	Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships.	Parks and recreation play a vital role in promoting emotional wellness by providing spaces and activities that encourage stress relief, relaxation, and emotional expression. Engaging in outdoor activities like hiking, picnicking, or simply spending time in nature can significantly reduce stress levels and improve mood. Additionally, participating in group fitness classes or team sports fosters a sense of community and belonging, which can alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Team sports can also act as a valuable developmental setting for youth, providing opportunities to develop social-emotional skills like emotion regulation that in turn benefit youth in other areas of their lives.

<p>Social Wellness</p>	<p>Developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system.</p>	<p>Parks and recreation facilities serve as hubs for social interaction and community engagement, thereby enhancing social wellness. Community events, such as festivals, concerts, and races bring people together, fostering connections and strengthening social ties. Additionally, team sports and group fitness classes provide opportunities for people to meet others with similar interests, build friendships, and develop a sense of belonging within their community. Social wellness in turn enhances physical wellness. Whether it's exercising with friends, joining sports teams, or participating in group fitness classes, social connections can provide encouragement and companionship, making it more likely for individuals to stick to their physical activity routines.</p>
<p>Intellectual Wellness</p>	<p>Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills.</p>	<p>Parks and recreation play a vital role in nurturing intellectual wellness by offering diverse opportunities for skill development and personal growth. Whether through educational workshops, recreational classes, or hands-on experiences, individuals have the chance to set and achieve goals, fostering a sense of accomplishment and intellectual stimulation. Moreover, these environments serve as fertile grounds for discovering new interests and passions, encouraging lifelong learning and curiosity. Additionally, spending time in natural settings or engaging in recreational activities has been shown to restore attention and promote cognitive functioning, providing mental rejuvenation and clarity. In essence, parks and recreation initiatives contribute to intellectual wellness by providing avenues for continuous learning, personal development, and cognitive enrichment.</p>
<p>Environmental Wellness</p>	<p>Occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support wellbeing.</p>	<p>Parks and recreation play a crucial role in supporting environmental wellness by providing access to pleasant, safe, and stimulating environments that promote well-being. Well-maintained recreation facilities including pools, tracks, gymnasiums, and other recreational spaces allow people to safely pursue leisure activities, often with support from employees with valuable expertise. Parks and recreation agencies play a key role in preserving natural habitats, protecting biodiversity, and advocating for environmental conservation. Parks serve as green spaces that mitigate pollution, regulate climate, and improve air quality, contributing to a healthier environment for both humans and wildlife. Additionally, parks sometimes provide educational programs and volunteer opportunities that raise awareness about environmental issues and encourage sustainable behaviors among community members.</p>

Financial Wellness	Satisfaction with current and future financial situations.	Parks and recreation offerings contribute to financial wellness by providing affordable or free activities and amenities that promote overall well-being. Access to public parks, trails, and recreational facilities reduces the need for costly gym memberships or recreational expenses, making it easier for individuals to prioritize physical activity and leisure without financial strain. Furthermore, by encouraging regular physical activity and providing spaces for leisure pursuits, parks and recreation facilities contribute to preventing chronic health conditions and promoting healthier lifestyles, ultimately leading to reduced healthcare expenses for individuals and society as a whole.
Spiritual Wellness	Expanding our sense of purpose and meaning in life.	Parks and recreation offerings are essential conduits for nurturing spiritual wellness, offering individuals avenues to delve into their sense of purpose, discover meaning in leisure pursuits, and contribute to collective well-being. Within the tranquil embrace of natural settings or the vibrant community atmosphere of recreational events, individuals find opportunities for introspection and connection with something greater than themselves. Whether through solitary reflection during a nature walk, participation in communal cultural celebrations, or engagement in volunteer activities aimed at improving local communities, parks and recreation initiatives inspire individuals to explore their innermost aspirations, infuse leisure moments with significance, and actively contribute to the betterment of society. In essence, these offerings serve as vital pathways for individuals to cultivate spiritual fulfillment and deepen their sense of connection to the world around them.
Occupational Wellness	Personal satisfaction and enrichment derived from one's work.	Parks and recreation agencies foster occupational wellness for those working in the field and those pursuing recreational opportunities as a meaningful pastime. Employment in the field of parks and recreation provides an avenue for many people to align their passions with their professional pursuits. Additionally, these agencies encourage the exploration of hobbies and interests beyond the workplace, fostering self-discovery and personal fulfillment. By celebrating and harnessing unique talents through volunteerism and specialized programs, they empower individuals to make meaningful contributions to their communities. Moreover, parks and recreation agencies can facilitate the pursuit of work-life balance, encouraging people to seek out the recreational activities that "fill their bucket" and help them to develop long-term healthy habits despite constraints on their time.

Note. The definitions in this table are drawn from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Wellness Wheel. Chat GPT was used to generate summaries of how parks and recreation contributes to each dimension of wellness. The conclusions contained within these summaries have been fact-checked against the research literature and findings from the Community Health in Recreation and Parks project. Peer-reviewed publications from this research are in preparation as of March 2024.