

Park, Recreation, Fitness, and Sport Sector Recommendations for a More Physically Active America: A White Paper for the United States National Physical Activity Plan

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Background: The United States' first National Physical Activity Plan is now under development. This plan follows the release of new physical activity guidelines and seeks to address the nation's ongoing physical inactivity and obesity crisis. For this plan to be successful, all facets of American culture need to unify behind its recommendations and action steps. Guidance for this plan involves active participation from a variety of sectors, including the park, recreation, fitness, and sport (PRFS) sector. **Purpose:** In this white paper, we discuss the potential of the PRFS sector in addressing America's physical inactivity. Specifically, we provide a brief description, history, and scope of the PRFS sector; present evidence concerning linkages between this sector and physical activity; and discuss existing challenges and emerging opportunities for promoting physical activity. We conclude by suggesting PRFS recommendations to promote physical activity based on anticipated effectiveness, reach, scope, and sustainability. **Methods:** Academic articles, professional reports, and physical activity plans were reviewed to summarize the evidence concerning PRFS sector strategies for increasing physical activity. **Recommendations:** Based on our review, we propose several sector-specific proximity, place, program, partnership, promotion, people, policy, and performance indicator recommendations for improving physical activity in the United States.

Keywords: physical activity, parks, obesity, health promotion strategies

America the Sedentary

America has become a largely sedentary nation. The conveniences of our modern infrastructure have resulted in physical activity declines across many aspects of our lives.¹ While the amount of free time for leisure activity has increased,² this extra time has come in smaller chunks and is often spent in a passive, sedentary manner (eg, interacting with cell phones, videos, television, and the web).³ While spending in all areas of the leisure sector has grown at a faster pace than the overall US economy, growth in areas likely to promote sedentary behavior (such as media and spectator sports) has outpaced growth in areas associated with physical activity (such as sports equipment and fitness facility memberships).² The result is that 1 in 4 Americans participates in no leisure-time physical activity.⁴ Despite increasing recognition of the negative health consequences of physical inactivity, growth in the fitness and health industry, and numerous efforts to promote individual exercise and fitness habits, a majority of Americans (particularly youth, low-income families, minority citizens, and females) still do not achieve recommended physical activity levels.⁵ Combined with changes in dietary habits, these circumstances have resulted in an overweight and obese population that is likely to have a shorter lifespan than the generation that preceded it.^{6,7}

Individuals are more likely to engage in physical activity when it is intrinsically motivating.⁸ Therefore, providing access, education, and resources that allow people to incorporate enjoyable and meaningful recreation activity into their daily lives may prove a more effective strategy for increasing physical activity than interventions based on fear of the negative consequences of inactivity.³ The capacity of the park, recreation, fitness, and sport sector (PRFS) to encourage daily leisure-time physical activity across a broad population is considerable. Leveraging existing PRFS sector assets will, however, require active engagement and cooperation across a number of other sectors.

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To organize and assign joint accountability for these physical activity promotion efforts, a comprehensive national physical activity plan is warranted. In late 2008, efforts to develop the first US National Physical Activity Plan were launched. A Coordinating Committee was charged with organizing a National Physical Activity Plan Conference to solicit stakeholder input and begin the process of drafting the National Plan. To inform and stimulate dialogue at this Conference, the Committee also solicited white papers that summarized evidence from scientific and professional literatures on physical activity generation in each of 8 specified sectors. All white paper authors were given guidelines on white paper structure, types of evidence to be cited, as well as the process for soliciting working group participant feedback at the National Physical Activity Plan Conference. The authors of this particular white paper were asked to focus on the park, recreations, fitness, and sport sector (PRFS) and develop recommendations based upon existing literature and practice. This paper provides a brief description, history and scope of the PRFS sector; presents evidence concerning the linkages between this sector and physical activity; and discusses existing challenges and emerging opportunities for promoting physical activity. The paper concludes by offering priority PRFS recommendations to promote daily physical activity based on anticipated effectiveness, reach, scope, and sustainability.

The Capacity and Reach of America's Park, Recreation, Sport, and Fitness Infrastructure

The origins of the American park, recreation, fitness, and sport sector can be traced to the industrialization era of the late 19th century. A perceived need to provide wholesome recreation activities and park experiences during free time was a major goal of the rational recreation movement and spawned the creation of a number of public and nonprofit agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. During the first part of the 20th century, many organizations fought to establish national, state, and local parks, trails, sport fields, and playgrounds in America.

Today, this sector represents a broad range of public, nonprofit, and commercial sector facilities and services at federal, state, and local levels.⁹ Community-based PRFS services are widespread and provide opportunities for many Americans to be active on a regular basis at low or no cost to participants. Municipal recreation and park departments are a common local government service in North America. These agencies are often members of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and their state park and recreation associations. NRPA member organizations provide more than 108,000 outdoor public park and recreation facilities and 65,000 indoor facilities.³ Park and recreation capacity is particularly high in urban areas; across

all major U.S. cities, there are approximately 20,000 individual parks and 10,000 playgrounds.¹⁰ The total area covered by urban parkland in the United States exceeds 1 million acres.¹⁰

Parks are a common setting in which people participate in outdoor recreation activities. A recent survey of a representative sample of US adults found that 30% engaged in physical activity at a park, 25% on a walking and jogging trail, 25% on a treadmill, and 21% at an indoor gym.¹¹ A majority of youth participate in sports,¹² and many schools, parks and recreation agencies, nonprofits (such as the YMCA), and commercial entities provide youth sports opportunities. Approximately 20% of adults participate in strength training at least 2 days per week.¹³

There is surprising little recent data regarding the US populations' use of local park and recreation services. An older nationwide survey of Americans' use of local park and recreation services found that 3 out of 4 adults reported visiting a local park or playground, with a majority reporting only occasional use and a minority reporting frequent park use.¹⁴ Other, more recent national surveys also support this notion of widespread park use. For example, a 2008 survey commissioned by NRPA noted that Americans made an average of 4.8 visits to local public parks.¹⁵ However, this survey only examined Americans' use of parks in the month of January 2008.

Contributions of the PRFS sector to increasing daily physical activity can be enhanced through strategies and initiatives focused on facilities, programs, partnerships, and policies. A wide range of sector-specific recommendations to increase physical activity are now being actively considered as part of the National Physical Activity Plan. The evidence concerning the contributions of this sector in promoting physical activity provides some basis for these recommendations. The following sections provide a summary of key findings and conclusions based upon the current evidence base. Methods for reviewing, synthesizing, and summarizing this knowledge are first discussed.

Methods for Reviewing the Evidence

Evidence and recommendations from key reports (eg, The Guide to Community Preventive Services), systematic reviews, state-level physical activity plans (eg, Pennsylvania, Washington, Arizona, South Dakota, Georgia), other national plans (eg, United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia), and sector-specific reports were examined to identify areas of focus. Based on this review, the authors decided to organize potential recommendations using a social marketing framework that encompassed place, people, program, partnership, policy strategies for increasing physical activity. The authors then searched 2 databases, PubMed (Medline) and PsychInfo, to identify relevant research articles published in English between 1988 and 2008. Search terms included physical activity or exercise or energy

expenditure combined with parks or recreation or leisure or trails or play or sports. Fitness was not used as a search term as it generated extensive lists regarding evolutionary fitness and other topics unrelated to the current focus. The database search was delimited to 1988 to 2008 as this represented a 20 year time frame before the search. The reference lists of the reviewed reports were also used to locate sources. Selected evidence from this search (as well as the recommendations listed in other physical activity plans) provided the basis for the recommended physical activity promotion strategies proposed in this PRFS white paper.

Examining the Evidence: How Does the PRFS Sector Contribute to Physical Activity?

The evidence specifically linking PRFS to physical activity levels is continually expanding, yet most studies have used cross-sectional measures and few include analyses of intervention effectiveness.¹⁶ Our review of the scholarly and professional literature revealed only a handful of studies with experimental designs, and a Cochrane report came to a similar conclusion regarding the lack of intervention studies in the amateur sports field.¹⁷ This limited evidence base makes it difficult to determine the relative efficacy of specific sector recommendations. Nevertheless, existing cross-sectional evidence, emerging sector-specific intervention studies, recommendations from the Guide to Community Preventive Services, and existing state nutrition and physical activity plans provide some justification for several PRFS recommendations for improving physical activity in the United States.

Proximity and Place Characteristics. People who live closer (and have easier access) to PRFS opportunities use them more frequently and are more physically active. The majority of studies on this topic have found a positive relationship between facility proximity and physical activity levels. In a study of US adults, individuals who perceived that they had access to parks and recreational facilities were almost twice as likely to meet physical activity recommendations as those who did not.¹¹ According to recent research, youth who lived in close proximity to 1 or more parks were 2 to 3 times more likely to engage in at least 1 walking trip over the course of 2 days.¹⁸ In another study, each park within a 1-mile radius of an adolescent girl's home was associated with an increase of 17 minutes per day of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.¹⁹ Proximity also can be influenced by the degree of connectivity; convenient and safe routes to PRFS services promote more frequent use of and transportation to such amenities.^{20,21} Finally, a systematic review of the relationship between park and recreation settings (PRS) and physical activity²² found that proximity to PRS was linked with positive or mixed associations with physical activity. The authors of this systematic review noted that the existing cross-

sectional evidence was limited by a lack of intervention evaluations and translational research.²²

Access to and use of public recreation facilities may be particularly important for low socioeconomic status (SES) urban youth. For example, one study reported that having access to a safe park was associated with higher levels of physical activity among low-income and urban youth.²³ Despite the potential of public recreation facilities to provide opportunities for physical activity for these populations, the availability of free PRFS facilities may be poorer in low income communities.^{24,25} For example, Estabrooks et al²⁶ found no difference in the number of paid facilities across low, medium, and high socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods. However, low and medium SES neighborhoods had significantly fewer free PRFS facilities than high SES neighborhoods. It should be noted, however, that a number of other studies have not found PRFS disparities (in terms of the number of parks) across low income neighborhoods.²⁷

In addition to disparities in park access, there are racial/ethnic and socioeconomic inequities in sport participation. A representative sample of US adolescents found gender and ethnic differences in sport participation.¹² More males (69.9%) than females (53.4%) and more White students (65.4%) than African-American (55.2%) or Hispanic (52.5%) students participated in sports. Rates of varsity school sport participation are about 33% for girls and 37% for boys across SES and racial/ethnic groups, with lower rates among racial/ethnic minority and low SES students.²⁸ Collectively, the evidence concerning the relationship between PRFS facility proximity and physical activity is sufficient to recommend close-to-home access to such opportunities and improved travel connections between residential areas and these PRFS settings, particularly where gaps are found to exist.

A number of PRFS place characteristics also may influence active use of these facilities. The presence of activity-supporting features (eg, trails, playgrounds, sport courts), the condition/aesthetics of these features, and perceived safety may influence use of PRFS facilities and services. Emerging evidence suggests that park and recreation characteristics, including the presence of trails/paths, sport facilities, and playgrounds, and user perceptions of adequate maintenance, aesthetics, and safety are associated with greater use and physical activity. For example, the presence of trails, sport fields/courts, and playgrounds at these settings was associated with higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity in several studies.²⁹⁻³¹ Other studies also have suggested that parks are more likely to promote physical activity if they are perceived as aesthetically pleasing.³² Evidence is mixed or nonexistent regarding the role of perceived safety and facility maintenance/condition in terms of physical activity outcomes. For example, Babey et al²³ found that proximity to a safe park was significantly associated with physical activity among low-income, urban youth, but Cohen et al³³ found that

perceptions of safety were unrelated to observed levels of park visitation after a series of renovations. Moreover, Lee et al³⁴ found that the condition of physical activity resources (specifically the presence of incivilities such as graffiti, litter, vandalism) were pervasive in low income communities, but direct comparisons between these incivilities and physical activity levels were not made. Finally, a study by Colabianchi et al³⁵ examined use and physical activity renovated vs. unrenovated school playgrounds. They found that playground improvements resulted in increased use, but did not find differences in condition or cleanliness between renovated and unrenovated playgrounds.

In summary, the evidence concerning the role of place characteristics on use and physical activity levels is mixed. Some limited evidence suggests that aesthetics, perceived safety, and facility maintenance/condition are associated with the use of PRFS assets, but little evidence as yet connects these characteristics with onsite levels of physical activity. Stronger evidence suggests that creating more activity-friendly features within PRFS settings (eg, trails, playgrounds, and sport fields) can promote physical activity. Prospective and intervention studies that examine the role of park infrastructure investments, particularly as they relate to improved perceptions of park safety and maintenance and the impact of these changes upon facility use and physical activity levels are warranted.

Programs, Partnerships, and Promotions. A number of programs and services can encourage active use of PRFS opportunities. According to the Guide to Community Preventive Services,³⁶ health programs are a recommended strategy to promote physical activity. PRFS offer a wide range of physical activity programs that appeal to different populations and communities. For example, a recent study of NRPA member agencies found that 8 out of 10 agencies offered fitness, sport, and family/youth programs.³⁷ However, systematic evaluations concerning the impact of such programs on physical activity levels are few, and existing intervention studies have typically operated in educational or clinical settings rather than at park and recreation facilities.

Youth, particularly those who do not participate in competitive sport programs, should have access to non-competitive leisure-time physical activity programs that do not require above-average athletic skills. School-based and PRFS-based physical activity programs could teach children ways to identify leisure and physical activities that are interesting to them and establish a foundation for a lifetime of activity. Such programs could also serve as a catalyst to connect children with nature and the outdoors.

A few intervention studies have demonstrated promising connections between physical activity education programs and health outcomes.^{38,39} For example, Bush et al³⁸ evaluated a 6-week obesity prevention program (Project KidFIT), which included physical activity

and exposed children to local park and recreation services in their communities. The program resulted in significant increases in physical fitness and nutrition knowledge. Improvements in body weight and BMI also were observed, but the sample size was insufficient to yield significant results.

Another intervention study, which focused on park and community facility renovations, found that increased programming was associated with an increase in users and that limited programming was associated with a reduction in the number of users.³³ The researchers concluded that programming and staffing represented ongoing costs critical to the number of users and the types of physical activity that occur in PRFS settings. Despite the evidence from these promising intervention studies, comprehensive evaluations and systematic reviews regarding leisure-time physical activity programs and their impact on active use of PRFS assets is very limited.

Health behavior programs that focus on individuals within one sector as a means to improve population activity levels can be labor, time, and money intensive. However, partnerships that link PRFS programs with public health, education, and other sectors could create efficiencies, enhance use of community-based physical activity programs, and increase physical activity. Community-wide social marketing campaigns and promotions (another recommended action from the Guide to Community Preventive Services³⁶) are typically conducted as part of a broader community partnership that includes different sectors and organizations.⁴⁰ These collaborative campaigns often incorporate physical activity programs provided by PRFS services as part of their approach (eg, walk to school, after-school park programs, and senior walking programs).

A recent survey of health partnerships within the PRFS sector found that 9 out of 10 agencies had partnered with an outside organization to promote health/wellness. Here, programs and special events (eg, health fairs, screenings) were the primary partnership mechanism to promote physical activity.³⁷ Despite these encouraging efforts, an older study of Americans' use of local park and recreation programs found only 30% of the population participated in PRFS programs annually.¹⁴ More updated data on Americans' use of public and nonprofit programs are needed to assess the extent that Americans participate in these programs (and how much physical activity occurs during these programs). Barriers to regular PRFS program participation include family/work time commitments, lack of interest in program content, program costs, and low awareness of close-to-home program offerings. These barriers are particularly problematic for low-income families.^{41,42}

While community-wide campaigns and health partnerships can promote widespread use of PRFS services, few studies have evaluated the impact of specific PRFS campaigns on physical activity levels across a broad population. One exception was an assessment of NRPA's *Hearts N' Parks* program which

found statistically significant improvements in public knowledge and awareness of heart healthy behaviors in program participants across 56 communities.⁴³ This assessment suggests that focusing PRFS programs on regular physical activity and increasing the number of those programs is a recommended strategy, particularly when such programs are linked with ongoing community physical activity campaigns. Based on this emerging evidence, existing PRFS programs could be expanded to target a wider cross-section of the U.S. population, and a wider range of PRFS programs could be designed specifically to incorporate physical activity into their content.

Lack of awareness is often cited as a reason that people do not use PRFS services, and the complexity, cost, and pervasiveness of today's media make it difficult for fiscally-constrained PRFS organizations to reach targeted audiences consistently. Similar to programming, PRFS promotional messages could be integrated more effectively into community-wide physical activity campaigns. Such promotions would serve to better position the message that the PRFS sector is a key element of the nation's preventive health system. PRFS messaging should target populations who are most at-risk for being physically inactive. In summary, PRFS collaboration with community campaigns should be pursued aggressively to promote PRFS programs/facilities for expanded reach and impact. Positioning and designing PRFS programs/facilities as interesting, enjoyable, and accessible—in terms of awareness, proximity, and cost—should be a priority for physical activity social marketing campaigns at the local, state, and national level. Moreover, performance indicators that can be used to assess the impact of these strategies should be developed and used nationwide.

People: Providers and Participants. Service providers and participants also can shape participation in leisure-time physical activity. PRFS professionals often develop and lead leisure-time physical activity experiences. These professionals (and volunteers) understand their organization's facilities, services, and resources and can connect target populations with physical activity opportunities provided by their organizations. However, PRFS staff may not have in-depth health knowledge or may not be aware of other physical activity alternatives in their community. Emerging evidence suggests that PRFS professionals could benefit from specialized training to understand the role of their facilities and programs in shaping physical activity and health.⁴⁴ In addition, recreation centers report that the primary barrier to providing physical activity programs at their facilities is inadequate staffing.⁴⁴ While increased staffing will involve additional resources, training programs for current staff may also facilitate the integration of physical activity into existing programs, promotions, and partnerships.

While PRFS professionals are a key element in providing activity-friendly programs, places, and promotions, participants themselves can help to sustain and

expand physical activity through social support networks, clubs, and services. For example, the Guide to Community Preventive Services³⁶ reviewed a number of community-based interventions and found that social support strategies helped people become more physically active. For example, a recent study across 6 U.S. cities found that social support for exercise provided by family and friends was significantly related to meeting recommended levels of leisure-time physical activity among older adults.⁴⁵ The evidence suggests that social support can help people initiate and sustain leisure-time physical activity. PRFS programs and community-based physical activity partnerships could be designed to promote appropriate social support networks (eg, walking clubs with a buddy system, social gatherings within parks, etc.) In addition, PRFS environments could be designed to encourage socialization and group-based recreation activities (eg, positioning park corridor and activity areas within close proximity to promote socialization). However, further evaluation is needed to document whether these socialization strategies would influence use and physical activity at PRFS programs and facilities.

Policies. Finally, the role of policy in shaping physical activity within the PRFS sector must be considered, as PRFS physical activity policies help to ensure that physical activity promotions, programs, and places are resourced and supported. Sallis and colleagues⁴⁶ highlighted the importance of policy in facilitating opportunities for physical activity. Funding support and mandates for creating and maintaining public facilities such as parks, recreation centers, trails, and sports fields are functions of public policy. A wide variety of policy alternatives can be applied to a) place location, design, and management, b) program design and implementation, c) partnerships and people, and d) consistent and sustainable funding of PRFS efforts to enhance sector-specific use and physical activity. Unfortunately, the evidence concerning the efficacy of policy implementation and uptake within the PRFS sector is limited. Emerging cross-sectional evidence from other sectors may, however, serve to direct policy change within the PRFS sector.

Sufficient evidence demonstrates a connection between a range of community-scale design and land use regulations, policies and practices with increased levels of walking and bicycling.⁴⁷ During the mid 20th century, Pennsylvania's State Park System pursued an agency guideline of developing a State Park within 25 miles of every Pennsylvanian. A national guideline of a PRFS facility within 1 mile of every American might be an ambitious target, but could encourage community design and build-out policies that promote population physical activity levels. Another policy guideline might be to ensure that PRFS facilities have safe pedestrian and bicycling routes that connect to nearby/adjacent neighborhoods. While these policy possibilities are promising, existing evidence documenting the impact of specific policies upon PRFS use and physical activity is quite limited.

Ensuring the uptake of environmental and programmatic policies across many communities over time will require fiscal and personnel resources, an ongoing challenge for PRFS public and nonprofit service providers. Support and expansion of existing park and recreation funding through federal, state, or local programs would allow states and local communities to create and modernize their park and recreation infrastructure, promote physical activity messages, and provide leisure education and programming alternatives across a broader population. Moreover, specific policies to include physical activity within existing programs could also be effective. For example, the Healthy Parks Initiative of the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation requires 20 minutes of physical activity in each program offered. Unfortunately, regardless of the policy foci, few studies have systematically examined the efficacy of PRFS policy outcomes.⁴⁷ Future research should address the impact of PRFS place, program, and partnership and funding policies on park use and physical activity across a wide range of target audiences.

Revitalizing the PRFS Sector to Increase Physical Activity: Existing Challenges and Emerging Opportunities

Wider implementation of physical activity interventions in the PRFS sector will pose significant opportunities and challenges. While this sector is widespread across the United States, decision-making regarding facilities, services, partnerships, and policies is decentralized and on-the-ground activities are conducted by local nonprofit and government service providers with little or no connection to commercial providers. This can be an advantage for ensuring that investments are tailored to specific community characteristics and needs. However, acquiring the funds to build or renovate existing PRFS facilities is challenging. Existing federal mechanisms (eg, Community Development Block Grants, Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, etc.) are available to support local PRFS efforts, but funding support for these sources has lagged in recent years. Moreover, empirical evaluation of these federally-funded investments as they relate to population-level utilization and physical activity levels is extremely limited. Acquiring the fiscal resources needed to maintain the condition of park facilities and provide physical activity programs is an even greater challenge than construction projects, because such expenditures often come from an organization's limited operating budget. Fully realizing the potential of this sector to encourage Americans to be physically active will require developing partnerships that leverage assets of other key sectors (eg, public health, education, transportation) as well as dedicated infrastructure and program training. Finally, although numerous studies have documented the role of parks in leisure behaviors, few have assessed the role of the PRFS sector in shaping

physical activity levels or the effectiveness of PRFS environmental, programmatic, and policy changes on population activity levels.³³ Thus, a need exists for prospective and quasi-experimental studies to evaluate the effects of PRFS policy, program, and environmental changes on use of PRFS services and physical activity levels. Such research would allow a range of sector resources to be allocated more effectively.

PRFS Sector Recommendations for the National Physical Activity Plan

Based upon emerging evidence and practice, a number of PRFS recommendations should be considered for potential inclusion into the National Physical Activity Plan. The following recommendations cover multiple levels of influence, including individuals, social environments, organizations, built environments, and policies. They were selected based on strength of evidence, potential to affect a large cross-section of the United States population, and sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and ability to target inactive populations.

Proximity and Place Priorities:

- Create better access and connections to existing PRFS settings, particularly for low-income populations. These efforts should overlap with on-going community planning and transportation initiatives.
- Create, maintain, and/or modernize PRFS facilities to provide a wider range of physical activity alternatives for a variety of populations (eg, indoor facilities, parks, playgrounds, sport courts, swimming pools, or trails).
- Provide activity and support amenities, such as paved trails, well-lit facilities, public restrooms, public drinking fountains, and bike racks, at PRFS settings.
- Provide the personnel and fiscal resources to ensure that PRFS settings are safe, well-maintained, interesting, and supervised.

Program, Partnership, and Promotion Priorities:

- Ensure that PRFS program offerings include low/no-cost and appropriate physical activity opportunities, particular for those who are more at-risk of being inactive (eg, children, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, minority citizens, low-income families).
- Continue to integrate lifetime physical activity education as a component of current school-based PE curricula and ensure that students and families are aware of their nearby facilities and programs for leisure-time physical activity
- Develop, fund, and support national and local social marketing campaigns that promote parks, recreation and sport facilities/programs as venues in which to be physically active.

- Ensure that such campaigns include a wide variety of community partners who bring different strengths and target audiences to these campaigns.
- Facilitate partnerships between the PRFS sector, public health, education, and the transportation sector to enable joint planning and the sharing of facility, programmatic, and personnel resources.

People Priorities:

- Train PRFS staff in understanding, developing, evaluating, and promoting physical activity opportunities in their communities for different populations.
- Ensure that PRFS physical activity programs include a social support system from participants and instructors/leaders.

Policy Priorities:

- Develop land use and zoning policies that promote the protection and reclamation of green space (eg, parks, trails) for physical activity, such as zoning ordinances that require (or reward) public green space as part of new housing development and green redesign (or in-fill) projects.
- Develop community planning guidelines and ordinances that foster the development of PRFS facilities and programs within walking distance of (or close proximity to) targeted populations.
- Identify and increase funding support for maintaining, rehabilitating, and developing parks and sport/recreation facilities across all neighborhoods.
- Identify and increase funding support for community-wide PRFS campaigns that specifically promote physical activity.

Performance Indicator Priorities:

- Evaluate the reach, uptake, and impact of community-wide PRFS campaign activities in terms of physical activity outcomes.
- Evaluate the role of specific PRFS programs in promoting population levels of physical activity using consistent measurements and/or evaluation tools to create a national database.
- Evaluate PRFS facility construction, redesign, and upgrades in terms of their impact upon public use of these amenities and the physical activity levels that occur there.

Conclusion

The PRFS sector is an essential partner in the promotion of physical activity across broad segments of the population. Numerous public, nonprofit, and commercial PRFS facilities, programs, and services exist across rural, suburban, and urban communities. Existing evidence from systematic reviews and recent empirical

research confirms that proximity to these settings increases their use and is associated with higher physical activity levels across a number of different populations. Nevertheless, the availability of and access to PRFS services is not consistent with lower income and minority populations having poorer access to these resources. Such disparities, in turn, result in decreased physical activity and health status.²⁴ Having more close-to-home PRFS services increases the likelihood of being physically active each and every day. Moreover, PRFS settings that include specific activity-supporting features such as trails, playgrounds, and sport facilities may stimulate higher levels of park-based physical activity.

Emerging research and anecdotal evidence also suggests that PRFS programs, partnerships, promotions, people, and policies can promote increased utilization of PRFS services. However, the effectiveness of these PRFS strategies in increasing physical activity levels is still unclear. Few studies have documented the efficacy of PRFS interventions on community uptake and physical activity levels across a wide range of PRFS facilities and programs. Evaluating these interventions using consistent performance indicators is needed to understand which strategies work and do not work to increase population levels of physical activity. The recommendations provided in this white paper are intended to stimulate further discussion and debate concerning key PRFS action steps for the National Physical Activity Plan. The authors also hope that this white paper will encourage evidence-based research and collaborations to make the United States a more physically active nation.

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