



PRIORITY: Health and Wellness



Promoting Healthy Living through Outdoor Connections

Improving the health of Pennsylvania’s communities and residents is a complex challenge. Not only are biological factors at play, but our health also is influenced by the social, physical, and economic environments in which people live. Both the 2009 and 2014 outdoor recreation plans made health a priority, citing increases in obesity and chronic diseases, disconnect between people and nature, and the challenge of connecting health and recreation providers. Since then, our health concerns have only magnified, resulting in health and wellness once again being a priority for the outdoor recreation plan.

The clinical community of doctors and hospitals often bear the burden of solving health care concerns, but just as the influences on our health are holistic, so too are the solutions and the preventions. Better health outcomes therefore require collaboration across multiple sectors, including recreation and the built environment, to positively impact our collective health.



GREAT IDEA: Young Lungs at Play

The Young Lungs at Play program helps communities create tobacco-free parks, playgrounds, and recreational areas for children. Beginning in 2020, all Pennsylvania state park playground areas—about 135—will be smoke/vape-free zones under the Young Lungs at Play program. The state parks are joining the more than 1,100 municipalities that participate in the program. This is the second partnership with the PA Department of Health to help state parks promote healthful outdoor recreation. A free sunscreen dispenser program at state parks also was launched with DOH in 2018.

New research regularly draws connections between green spaces, outdoor exercise, and better physical and mental health. Green spaces, such as parks and public plazas with trees, enhance the beauty and environmental quality of neighborhoods. In addition to these benefits, living near greener spaces is often associated with higher levels of physical activity and lower levels of instances of chronic disease. Emerging evidence is showing

green recreational spaces also have a positive influence on mental, emotional, and behavioral health by preventing or mitigating the impact of stress, anxiety, and depression. Study after study reinforce why making it easy for people to spend time outdoors will only help our collective society and the individuals within it.

The challenge, given the complexities of health care, is how we ensure these benefits of outdoor recreation are gaining awareness and understanding by all. Increasingly, health care institutions are recognizing in their Community Health Needs Assessments that prevention and education programs that encourage healthy lifestyles can be part of their implementation strategies. Chronic illnesses such as heart disease and obesity are often identified in the assessments as the most pressing issues, both of which can be proactively addressed through more active lifestyles.

Successfully infusing recreation as a health care solution can start with the principle “Health in All Policies,” which suggests health and equity considerations be embedded into government decision-making processes at all levels and across multiple programs and policies. Engaging partners from a variety of sectors around collective health goals can help move the needle on today’s health challenges.

The Health in All Policies principle applies to recreation providers. However, providers see challenges in fulfilling this role and could use assistance in conveying public health messages to their constituents to break through the distractions for people’s time and attention (Local Provider Survey). Having both recreation and health care providers conveying



65% of Pennsylvanians agree that parks, trails, and open space are an essential part of the health care system.

(2018 Fall Lion Poll)

the same health and wellness messages in a community would make the message stronger and more impactful to Pennsylvanians. More tools and networks are needed to help providers make the health connection.

Preventative medicine

Chronic diseases are still the leading cause of death and disability in Pennsylvania. Certain areas of Pennsylvania have some of the highest rates of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity in the nation. Despite emphasis on better nutrition and exercise over the past decade, in 2018 almost two out of three Pennsylvania adults were considered overweight or obese.¹ One third of K-12 students were considered overweight or obese in the 2016-2017 school year.² In 10 years, Pennsylvania's population is predicted to be 50.2 percent obese and 24.8 percent severely obese.³

Added to the continual upward obesity trends is now the burgeoning opioid epidemic. Over 40 percent of responding recreation and park directors reported having to respond to drug paraphernalia found in parks (Local Provider Survey). Recreation providers are prepared to be a part of the solution to opioid addiction with programs and facilities to offer, but guidance is needed on how to connect providers with state and local prevention efforts.

In the face of these growing statistics, this plan suggests that outdoor recreation can and should be used as a preemptive approach to health care. Preventative medicine focuses on the health of individuals, communities, and defined populations with the goal to protect, promote, and maintain health and well-being in order to prevent disease, addiction, disability, and death. Rather than treating illnesses and diseases, health care practitioners can “prescribe” outdoor recreation practices that can lead to healthier lifestyles. The patient becomes more proactive in their own health decisions.

Getting a start over a decade ago, “prescribing” time in the outdoors is a growing trend nationally, and Pennsylvania is hoping to cultivate relationships with doctors and medical professionals who are willing

FOREST BATHING

With its roots in Japan, the term “forest bathing” refers to the practice of taking an undirected, meditative walk in a forested setting to evoke all five senses. Studies have shown connecting with nature through a slow walk in the woods, even for a short period, has a positive wellness impact, like reducing blood pressure, lowering stress hormones, improving concentration and memory, and lifting depression. Several Pennsylvania state parks have hosted forest bathing opportunities with a certified forest therapy guide. www.natureandforesttherapy.org



If your doctor prescribed a walk rather than a pill, would you take it?

to provide the science and expertise behind these programs. As the result of the 2014 outdoor recreation plan, DCNR supported three park prescriptions programs in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Centre County. All three took different approaches to engagement, from a clinical tracking program involving “coaches” in Philadelphia’s Nature PHL, to scheduled hikes with a conservation focus in Centred Outdoors.

Learning from existing programs with varying approaches, there is a considerable opportunity to implement more park prescription programs. Advancing these programs will need successful models,

Pennsylvania’s population is predicted to be **50.2%** obese; **24.8%** severely obese by 2030.³

clinical champions, and clear pathways to communicate the best practices with health care professionals. While no one size fits all, a peer assistance and learning network can help to share ideas and practices.

Overcoming barriers

People list countless reasons why they don’t recreate outdoors. Aside from not having enough time, the top reason for preventing people from outdoor recreation is their health (2019 Spring Lion Poll). Ironically, some of the same health problems keeping people indoors probably can be tackled by going outdoors.



GREAT IDEA: Centred Outdoors

Centred Outdoors, a nature-based prescription program led by the ClearWater Conservancy, has engaged more than 2,300 participants and 26 prescribing physicians since 2017. The program’s ethos: “getting outside is not only good for your mind, body, and spirit but also good for conservation, helping build a love of place that occurs when you know and explore these places.” The program features organized social hikes, scheduled well in advance to help people plan and develop routine into their fitness. Partially funded by Mount Nittany Health and DCNR, the program helps participants become more confident in being outdoors and want to return on their own. The program saw a large increase in participants who said they participate to socialize with friends, especially in those over the age of 50. Through surveys, the Conservancy is learning that people understand the value of being outside to improving health, but it’s not the primary factor for them to participate in the program. They are getting the benefit, but they see their participation as fun, not work.





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A growing aging population in Pennsylvania also experiences limitations to remaining healthy with additional barriers that come with getting older, such as mobility, access, social isolation, and transportation.

And a growing reliance on electronic leisure, such as gaming and streaming, can lead to staying indoors and a sedentary lifestyle, particularly for youth.

Overcoming these challenges will require strong partnerships and a commitment to Health in All Policies. Recreation providers will need to communicate the benefits of outdoor recreation and

support recreation programs that address physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral health. Having an interagency health-based team to share resources can help better connect health and outdoor recreation.

Since the 2014 outdoor recreation plan, environmental threats to being outdoors have grown. In 2018, nearly 8,000 confirmed cases of Lyme disease were reported in Pennsylvania, putting the state as the nation's leader in diagnosed cases of the tick-borne illness.⁴ In addition, a rise in mosquito-borne illnesses, increasing temperatures, and unhealthy air quality are adding to the list of reasons people are staying inside.

Threats such as mosquitoes and ticks keep **36%** of Pennsylvanians from enjoying outdoor recreation. *(2018 Fall Lion Poll)*



Educational materials and guided programming can help those who are reluctant to venture outdoors to feel and be safe. Knowing the growing concern about Lyme disease was keeping some people indoors, the Get Outdoors PA program teamed up with the PA Lyme Resource Network in 2016 to create an awareness rack





card in both Spanish and English to convey tick identification and prevention information.

More consistent efforts to communicate ways to overcome barriers could be achieved through online channels and creating and sharing advocacy materials to help turn non-participants into active participants with little investment.

Active transportation

Promoting active transportation by increasing the walkability and bikeability of communities is one way to promote the use of outdoor spaces to improve health. However, communities often face challenges when attempting to implement close-to-home recreational opportunities.

Surveys show Pennsylvanians want more trails. In the public survey, more than 2,700 comments—nearly 40 percent—were trail-related. How and where to put these trails will require community planners and recreation providers to work together for common purposes. Linking trail networks, closing major trail gaps, and creating safe routes from neighborhoods to parks all require close coordination among municipal and state agencies and a commitment to investing in these resources.

Pennsylvania's first Active Transportation Plan, completed by PennDOT in 2020, is working in conjunction with the outdoor recreation plan as well as the Department of Health's Pennsylvania State Health Improvement Plan 2015-2020 to develop a safe, connected multimodal transportation network

that supports community health, equity, and economic opportunity for all Pennsylvanians.

One opportunity to address this priority is to create educational resources that promote the substantial impact of trails and engage community stakeholders around the importance of providing alternative modes of transportation to increase physical activity. Engaged residents and community champions for more trails can increase the likelihood that active transportation will become a priority for future investment.

Active transportation

is any self-propelled, human-powered mode of transportation, such as walking or bicycling.

As a form of human-powered transportation, active transportation engages people in healthy physical activity while they travel from place to place. People walking, bicycling, using wheelchairs, skate boarding, scootering and rollerblading are engaged in active transportation.

—from Pennsylvania's Active Transportation Plan





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“Bring trails closer to my home. I would use a trail daily if it didn’t require me to drive 20 minutes, park, take snacks and water, etc., because it’s such a production. If I could drive 5 minutes, or walk 10 minutes, I’d be at a trail several times a week.” *—public survey respondent*



GREAT IDEA: PA Walkable Communities Collaborative

To encourage more walking, the 2014 outdoor recreation plan recommended that local communities examine their built environments and promote healthful transportation alternatives. As an implementing strategy, state agencies teamed up with America Walks to conduct Pennsylvania’s first Collaborative Workshop on Walkable Communities in 2016. Today, the PA Walkable Communities Collaborative consists of nine state and nonprofit agencies that meet regularly to increase walking and expand walkable communities across Pennsylvania. The collaborative has created training and educational materials and supported funding of 24 active transportation plans and policies.

Sources:

- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity: Data, Trends and Maps (2018). https://nccd.cdc.gov/dnpao_dtm/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DNPAO_DTM.ExploreByLocation&rdRequestForwarding=Form
- ² Pennsylvania Department of Health, School Health Statistics, 2017-18 Body Mass Index. <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/school/Pages/Statistics.aspx>
- ³ Ward, Z., Bleich, S., Craddock, A., Barrett, J., Giles, C., Flax, C., Long, M., & Gortmaker, S. (2019). “Projected U.S. State-Level Prevalence of Adult Obesity and Severe Obesity,” *New England Journal of Medicine*. https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1909301?query=featured_home
- ⁴ CDC. Reported cases of Lyme disease by state or locality, 2009-2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/lyme/stats/tables.html>



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RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

- 1. Educate on the connection between health and outdoor recreation.**
 - a. Compile and promote resources describing the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor recreation.
 - b. Deploy education campaigns on preventative measures to minimize health and safety risks like Lyme disease and skin cancer.
 - c. Create an interagency health-based team to coordinate relevant state grant programs and implement a program that recognizes communities for demonstrating the connection between health and outdoor recreation.
- 2. Support programs that connect health and outdoor recreation.**
 - a. Fund community-based programs that advance health and wellness and connect with outdoor recreation programming.
 - b. Conduct peer-to-peer exchanges among recreation and conservation providers to share best practices for connecting health care providers and outdoor recreation opportunities.
- 3. Equip health care providers with the tools needed to promote the health benefits of outdoor recreation.**
 - a. Define the benefits and best management practices of park/trail prescription programs and share with health care institutions to expand into new regions.
 - b. Create a statewide learning network to share research and best practices online and at health summits.
- 4. Create walking and biking networks that provide safe, close-to-home access to recreation and encourage healthy behavior in communities.**
 - a. Fund and support at least 30 active transportation plans.
 - b. Close priority trail gaps to achieve the overall goal of having a trail within 10 minutes of every Pennsylvanian.
 - c. Create a Pennsylvania Safe Routes to Parks Program to achieve a goal of having a park within a 10-minute walk of every Pennsylvanian.
 - d. Improve connections between mass transit and public outdoor recreation opportunities.

