

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

Health Equity Award Winner
for a Large County Practice

*A case study of health equity practice in one of
four award-winning California health departments*

by **Heather Gehlert**, Berkeley Media Studies Group
August 2015



Los Angeles
County

About this case study

This case study is part of a series developed by the Berkeley Media Studies Group and supported by The California Endowment (TCE) that highlights the innovative work local health departments in California are doing to advance health equity. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health was one of four health departments in the state honored by TCE for its equity-oriented efforts at an awards gala in December 2014. The winning departments received grants of \$25,000, with a grand prize of \$100,000 going to the Alameda County Public Health Department. The awards and case studies, along with a suite of companion videos, were created to inform and inspire other health departments looking to embark upon similar work.

To access the full series on BMSG's website, visit:

<http://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/health-equity-case-studies-california>

To access the full series on The California Endowment's website, visit:

<http://www.calendow.org/wp-content/uploads/Health-Equity-Case-Studies-V7-web-optimized.pdf>

To see the award-winning health departments in action, or to view highlights from the health equity practices of other California-based health departments, visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLwLn83VLbvwk1C0u1jca3yxqulq6MUd->



Special thanks to Cookie Carosella, Mimi Kent and La Tanya Squires for their invaluable reporting contributions and to Lori Dorfman for her guidance on the project. Thanks also to those who provided feedback on drafts of this case study: Kelly Fischer, Faith Parducho, Bob Prentice, Katherine Schaff, Rachel Tyree, Andrea Welsing and Sandra Witt.

Support for this project was provided by The California Endowment.

© 2015 Berkeley Media Studies Group, a project of the Public Health Institute, and The California Endowment.

Introduction

In the six years since Raquel Piñeda has been a volunteer for Franklin D. Roosevelt Park, she has seen it evolve from a crime-ridden, dangerous place to a family-friendly location filled with activities, health services and just plain fun. Piñeda, who came to the United States from Mexico 30 years ago, describes the park as an inclusive place and a positive environment for children.

Guadalupe Orihuela, another longtime local resident, comes to Roosevelt Park regularly even though she lives closer to another park. But, like Piñeda, she says it wasn't always that way. When she was a child, Orihuela felt so unsafe at Roosevelt Park that she was afraid to walk through it. Since then, she says, the park has done a 180. She, her husband and two children have regular play dates at the park, and Orihuela says it's helped her family to be more active, socialize more and have better health.

The transformation that Piñeda and Orihuela describe has happened thanks in large part to a program called Parks After Dark, which aims to advance health equity by reducing violence in the communities surrounding Roosevelt and five other Los Angeles County parks once heavily plagued by gang activity and drugs. Now, instead of seeing signs of crime, people who walk by are more likely to see community members gathered together for free outdoor movie screenings, outdoor concerts, baseball games, walking clubs or health fairs.

A collaboration between the county's Department of Parks and Recreation, Sheriff's Department, Department of Public Health, and other community and social services agencies, Parks After Dark focuses on areas in L.A. County where high rates of violence and obesity go hand-in-hand, and residents—mostly low-income and racial and ethnic populations—often forego physical activity out of fear for their safety.

Research shows that violence tends to breed social isolation, keeping people from being active participants in their communities. It also influences brain development, risk-taking behavior and long-term health, putting the populations that experience it at an increased risk for chronic disease. To address health inequities, then, you have to first address violence, says Andrea Welsing, director of the Injury & Violence Prevention Program for the Department of Public Health, noting that homicide is one of the leading causes of premature death in L.A. County.

Parks After Dark focuses on areas in L.A. County where high rates of violence and obesity go hand-in-hand, and residents—mostly low-income and racial and ethnic populations—often forego physical activity out of fear for their safety.

“It is really difficult to promote health—to ask people to engage in physical activity or to eat healthy when they are living in communities with high levels of violence, and the rational choice is to stay indoors,” Welsing says.

Although tackling the root causes of violence, such as poverty and inequality, is beyond the scope of Parks After Dark, the program could help lay the foundation for other work needed to bring about systems-level changes and address why rates of violence are so high in the first place. This case study explores how the local health department and other partners are leveraging Parks After Dark to improve local health outcomes, what results they are seeing so far, and where they envision the program heading in the future.

A PLACE-BASED APPROACH TO HEALTH



It became clear to partners early on that Parks After Dark could be used for more than just youth violence prevention; it opened up opportunities to achieve broad health and social outcomes for community members of all ages.

The idea for Parks After Dark, or “PAD,” as community members and partners call it, began in 2009 during the community planning process for the county’s Regional Gang Violence Reduction Initiative, when members of four demonstration site communities identified summer parks programming as a priority. With the support of the county’s Chief Executive Office, Mika Yamamoto, a regional operations manager for Parks and Recreation, met with a few of her colleagues from the L.A. County Human Relations Commission, the Sheriff’s Department, and other county and community agencies on the initiative’s planning committee to develop a strategy to address this need.

Knowing that crime and violence tend to be high during the summer when youth are out of school and have fewer opportunities for recreation, the group was initially focused on programming aimed at engaging teens. They explored L.A. City’s Summer Night Lights as a potential model because of its success in reducing gang-related crime by providing a range of activities for teens and young adults whose neighborhoods provide few social activities beyond gang involvement.

Parks After Dark kicked off in 2010 as the prevention strategy of the Gang Violence Reduction Initiative. However, it became clear to partners early on that PAD could be used for more than just youth violence prevention; it opened up opportunities to achieve broad health and social outcomes for community members of all ages. Community members and other partners expressed a desire for a broader range of programming and services at community planning meetings each summer and in response to annual participant satisfaction surveys.



“

Health equity doesn't just mean that people have equal access to resources. It means that they have what they need to be healthy in their communities.

”

What began as a program with extended summer evening hours and youth activities at just three unincorporated L.A. County parks has since grown into a robust, cross-sector, place-based approach to reducing health inequities. In 2012, after receiving a Community Transformation Grant through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, PAD was able to offer programming at six parks—three in South L.A., one in East L.A., one in Altadena, and one in Duarte—and has goals to expand even further. The Department of Public Health’s Injury & Violence Prevention Program has played a key role in this expansion by helping to develop the evidence base for PAD, engaging partners both within public health and across sectors, and coordinating with Parks and Recreation and other partners to develop a long-term strategic plan for PAD.

“Even though we initially thought of PAD as a violence prevention strategy, it really is about creating health equity in so many ways,” Welsing says, adding that violence impacts both mental and physical health: “It changes how people are going to move and live in their communities.”

PAD’s place-based approach takes into account all of the social factors that intersect and influence health for the communities surrounding the parks, rather than just analyzing physical activity or violence on its own. In other words, it’s a lot like looking at a body’s systems as they function together instead of looking only at the role of the heart or the lungs.

“Health equity doesn’t just mean that people have equal access to resources,” explains Kelly Fischer, staff analyst with the Injury & Violence Prevention Program. “It means that they have what they need to be healthy in their communities.”

And for the communities chosen for Parks After Dark programming, that means addressing violence first because it is an obstacle to so many other community needs, from healthy food access to jobs to physical activity.

“IT TAKES A VILLAGE”

To be effective, collaboration is a must. Each participating organization is instrumental in PAD’s operation. For example, Parks and Recreation, which leads PAD, brings programming expertise. Described by Fischer as the “heart and soul of this effort,” Parks and Recreation staff, working on the ground with community, develop and implement programming, engage local partners, and find creative ways to stretch funding.



The Sheriff’s Department patrols the area to ensure people’s safety but also engages with youth and adults to foster a sense of trust between community members and law enforcement—something that is often lacking in communities of color. Tensions between police and community have been ongoing for decades, with recent local and national events, such as the 2014 fatal police shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown and the demonstrations that followed, shining a spotlight on how the criminal justice system can greatly harm communities.

Though addressing the root causes of these historical tensions isn’t the job of parks

programming alone, local deputies are leveraging Parks After Dark as an opportunity to help create positive change from the bottom up and ease existing conflict, starting in the parks. To build relationships with local youth, deputies participate in sports like basketball and kickball games and bring out their patrol horses, which have been an effective icebreaker for interacting with kids and their parents.

“The relationships with the Sheriff’s Department and people who visit the parks has tremendously grown to be a really good friendship,” says Paul Schrader, deputy sheriff and public information officer. “I think what happens is the people that visit the parks a lot and bring their children—they see the deputies working parks less as enforcers and more as friends.”

The Department of Public Health, which Yamamoto says is a “natural fit” for PAD, uses the parks as a forum for health promotion. Department staff members bring resources for PAD health fairs, including cooking classes, HIV and STD screenings, bike safety and emergency preparedness. The department’s Community Health Services Division organizes public health outreach at the resource fairs and coordinates walking clubs that incorporate health education. Additionally, the department is working with Parks and Recreation to develop PAD youth councils to teach youth life skills and get them involved in community service and advocacy. Building on existing teen clubs at the parks, the councils will help young people identify health issues in their communities that are of concern to them, give them the tools they need to research those issues, and provide guidance on how to take action.

“

The relationships with the Sheriff’s Department and people who visit the parks has tremendously grown to be a really good friendship.

”

PAD has encouraged community members to build bridges and strengthen ties between neighbors

- East Side Riders Bike Club conducts a peaceful bike ride between two PAD parks that cross gang territories, which has helped to create safe passages and forge relationships between neighborhoods.
- Community members have yearly potluck dinners, a tradition that began in 2012.
- In 2014, local ex-gang members gave free haircuts to youth during PAD.

Since PAD began, the Department of Public Health has also provided data and analysis to demonstrate that PAD objectives are being met, evaluate PAD participation and satisfaction through surveys, and work with the Sheriff's Department to analyze crime data. Before Parks After Dark, Parks and Recreation staff would often hear stories from families about what was working or needed improvement but didn't have the numbers to back up the success of their work. Now, with help from the Department of Public Health, Parks and Recreation is able to better describe the difference their place-based approach is making in community members' lives.

Since its inception, many other groups have begun partnering with PAD. For example, the L.A. County Public Library provides arts and recreation opportunities for kids and teens, and the Public Defender's office has organized an activity called "juvenile justice jeopardy." One of PAD's more popular programs, the game helps youth to better understand the criminal justice system and know their legal rights.

PAD has also encouraged community members to build bridges and strengthen ties between neighbors. A local community-based organization, East Side Riders Bike Club, conducts a peaceful bike ride between two PAD parks that cross gang territories, which has helped to create safe passages and forge relationships between neighborhoods. Community members have yearly potluck dinners, a tradition that began in 2012. And, in 2014, local ex-gang members gave free haircuts to youth during PAD.

To ensure PAD's ongoing success, each of its partners participates in planning meetings before the summer launch date. They also take part in debrief meetings to discuss community feedback, share lessons learned for future PAD programming, and explore opportunities to engage new partners.

"[Parks After Dark] really creates a community-based foundation," says Charlotte "Cici" Robinson-Perkins, a recreation service supervisor who has worked at Roosevelt Park for 17 years and wishes she would have had something like PAD when she was a kid. "It kind of falls into that philosophy of, 'It takes a village.'"

“

PAD really creates a community-based foundation. It kind of falls into that philosophy of, 'It takes a village.'

”



MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Besides having concerns for their safety, the populations that PAD serves also tend to have less green space than wealthier neighborhoods, and they often lack the financial means to pay for gym memberships, exercise classes or recreation programs. This makes parks an important asset for communities that need low-cost, easy-to-access opportunities for recreation.

Many parents in Parks After Dark communities can't afford to take their kids to the carnival or to Disneyland, says Robinson-Perkins. So the free programming at the park gives parents a chance to do something fun and active with their kids. And at Roosevelt Park, there is no shortage of activities to appeal to both adults and children. Programming happens each Thursday, Friday and Saturday, from 6 to 10 p.m., for about nine weeks out of every summer at the park.

Community members can swim in the pool, play board games, or create arts and crafts in a multipurpose room. They can attend free concerts on Thursdays or free movies on Saturdays, both of which include free healthy food options and often attract crowds of several hundred to a thousand. Through PAD, Roosevelt Park also offers talent shows, face painting for the kids, and a variety of classes from health education to cooking to adult literacy.

Additionally, the park boasts a variety of physical activity options from soccer to rock-climbing walls. On Fridays, for example, Roosevelt Park hosts baseball and softball games. In the summer, a youth baseball league calls the park home and draws young people by the hundreds: In 2013, 300 kids from age 5 to 17 enrolled. The park even has what they call a "Dreamfield," one of two fields that the Los Angeles Dodgers Foundation, in partnership with Parks and Recreation, the LA84 Foundation, and Security Benefit Life Insurance Company, donated after a Dodgers team representative visited one summer and saw firsthand the influence of the PAD summer youth baseball league. The LA84 Foundation has also provided funds for baseball, basketball, softball and volleyball equipment so that the park can offer its youth sports programs for free.

Then there's one of the park's biggest draws: the annual teens vs. deputies sports tournament. For four years now, community teens and deputies have taken to the basketball court in an intense but friendly competition. The teens beat the deputies all four years, so they have switched the tournament to kickball to level the playing field. Win or lose, the community and law enforcement now have a positive relationship, which doesn't end with the summer programming, says Deputy Schrader: "It actually opens up opportunities all year."



Many parents in Parks After Dark communities can't afford to take their kids to the carnival or to Disneyland, so the free programming at the park gives parents a chance to do something fun and active with their kids.

Now that the park is a real attraction and hub for the community, county departments and community agencies are able to leverage PAD to reach out and connect residents to other resources and services they may need. Whether people flock there to participate in a sporting event or to watch a free film, it provides public health staff and other providers a way to “meet residents where they are, rather than having them go somewhere else for services,” Welsing says.

Many of the people in communities that PAD serves work during the day and don’t have the time—or, for some, the language skills—to go out and seek the public services that are available to them. They face many challenges, from a lack of affordable, healthy food to quality education, health and mental health services. Co-locating

resources in a park setting allows community groups and government agencies to offer a wider range of services all in one place.

Additionally, Fischer notes that people actually want to come to the park, which is more welcoming than county buildings that may seem intimidating. Perhaps even more important, park staff are trusted. According to Yamamoto, park staff become more than just staff; they become neighbors and friends of community members. That relationship allows them to learn about the community and find out more about what they need.

“I think that building a community has to start with grassroots efforts,” Yamamoto says. “And the park really is a centerpiece—in many communities, the heart.”



“ I think that building a community has to start with grassroots efforts. And the park really is a centerpiece—in many communities, the heart. ”

OUTCOMES

Parks programming is a fairly simple concept but one that is nevertheless capable of bringing about more complex, systemic changes. A Health Impact Assessment of Parks After Dark,¹ developed by the Department of Public Health, shows that the communities surrounding the parks participating in PAD have seen large reductions in crime since the program's inception. Between the summer of 2009—the year before PAD began—to the summer of 2013, PAD's three original parks experienced a 32% decrease in violent crime, compared to an 18% increase in nearby communities without PAD.

Parks After Dark: A Vital Community Program

Since implementation in the summer of 2010, Parks After Dark has provided significant community benefits including increased physical activity, improved social cohesion, and decreased violent crime:

Serious and Violent Crimes

Serious and violent crimes in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32% during the summer months between 2009 (the summer before program start) and 2013...

32%

Parks with
PARKS AFTER DARK program

VS

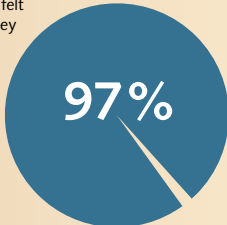
18%

... compared to an 18% increase in serious and violent crime during this same time period in nearby communities with parks that did not have the Parks After Dark program.

Parks without
PARKS AFTER DARK program

Safety

The perception of safety among community members was also very high. 2013 participant survey results showed that 97% of the respondents felt safe while they attended Parks After Dark.



Satisfaction

More than 97% of participants surveyed each year indicated they would participate again in the Parks After Dark program.

Visits

From summer 2010 to summer 2013, during the months of June, July and August, more than 187,000 visits were made to the six participating parks.

187,000



16,000

Physical Activity Participation

In summer 2013, more than 16,000 community residents participated in physical activities, including many people who indicated that they have a sedentary lifestyle or low levels of regular physical activity.

This reduction in violence comes not just from an increased law enforcement presence but also from a greater number of people engaging in park activities and building relationships. From 2010 to 2013, there were more than 187,000 visits to the six PAD locations. This has led to a greater sense of community, social cohesion, trust and improved perceptions of safety. In fact, according to the Department of Public Health, 97% of PAD participants have reported feeling safe attending the programs offered.

PAD has also helped boost physical activity among local residents. In 2013, 78% of PAD participants, many of whom had previously been sedentary, reported through surveys that they engaged in physical activity. The department estimates that if PAD participants continue weekly physical activity throughout the year, it could translate into a “5% annual decrease in the burden of diabetes, dementia, and heart disease.”

Besides improving health, PAD also saves money. The Health Impact Assessment calculated the cost to implement PAD and incorporate recommendations for core infrastructure improvements, including funding for full-time staff to coordinate PAD year-round, community intervention workers, administrative

support, and outside evaluation, and found that the criminal justice and health care cost savings outweigh the costs to run PAD. Based on these figures, PAD cost an estimated \$891,000 for six parks in 2013. The criminal justice cost savings from reduced violence was an estimated \$1.38 million, and PAD has the potential to save another \$510,000 each year in health care costs if participants continue the physical activity routines they adopt during PAD year-round. This resulted in a total estimated cost savings of nearly \$1 million in 2013.

Source: Los Angeles County Department of Public Health



TOTAL ESTIMATED COST SAVINGS IN 2013 nearly **\$1 million**

Estimated cost of 6 PAD parks

\$891,000

Estimated criminal justice cost savings from reduced violence

\$1.38 million

Estimated health care cost savings with year-round physical activity

\$510,000

Both Parks and Recreation and the Department of Public Health have received a lot of positive feedback about PAD. The program provides an opportunity for people to alleviate physical and mental stress by being active and socializing. PAD also gives people a chance to get to know their neighbors and portrays communities in a positive light.

“Communities in South L.A. are well known for news coverage of shootings and violence, but here at Parks After Dark, you see people of all ages in the community enjoying the parks and getting to know each other,” Fischer says.

“You see seniors sitting down and engaging with teenagers—that’s the most exciting thing,” says Robinson-Perkins, adding that this kind of camaraderie is something that people don’t want to let go of when the summer ends. In fact, Parks and Recreation has received many requests to offer PAD year-round.

Additionally, the interactions that youth have with adults in the community besides their own parents or guardians help them to develop confidence and better social skills, says Schrader: “You’re empowering children that might not feel so empowered.”

Take Byron Mayhan, for example. The teenager says his life was “very bland” before he became involved with Parks After Dark in December 2013. A participant in PAD’s teen club, Mayhan says he now has more friends and opportunities for his future. He’s gotten more comfortable speaking in front of people and knows that if he ever needs future career guidance or help with a résumé, he has people to turn to.

As beneficial as PAD is to residents, it’s also beneficial to the organizations that work to make it happen. Andrea Welsing describes the group of people involved in strategic planning as “like a family”—one with strong bonds both internally and with the broader community. Connections made during PAD have built relationships across county departments and in each local community that partners can leverage year-round.

“The process that we’ve gone through in the Department of Public Health has been really transformative,” she says. “It’s changed the way we look at violence and chronic disease prevention. It has changed the way we operate and how we collaborate with partners.”

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The immediate goal that the Department of Public Health and its partners have for Parks After Dark is to sustain funding for the six current parks. PAD's Community Transformation Grant funding ended in 2014, and although the County CEO has agreed to backfill this funding annually, it remains underfunded from 2016 on. The department, whose role in PAD has grown from that of supporter to institutionally committed partner, is now leveraging PAD's strategic plan to show the program's impact and seek additional funding. The department has also dedicated ongoing staff support for Parks After Dark, which it has included as a priority in its strategic plan.

Once the funding hurdle is cleared, the goal is to expand PAD to additional parks to serve as a model for other communities. Los Angeles County has about 10 million residents—that's 17 times the entire population of Wyoming—and a little over a third of residents are under age 24, a prime demographic for PAD.

"When you think of how big L.A. County is, six parks is not a lot," Fischer says. "This is a huge county, and there's so much more impact we could have." Still, Fischer notes that Parks After Dark is "small but mighty."

Data collected by the Department of Public Health have been critical to raising the profile of PAD, pursuing funding, gaining support of local leadership, and engaging partners. To that end, the department has presented PAD at public health and parks and recreation conferences, demonstrating its effectiveness in reducing violence and improving physical activity. The department has also produced several publications, including the Health Impact Assessment report² and an invited discussion paper for the Institute of Medicine, highlighting the potential of the PAD model.³

Additionally, the Department of Public Health is actively engaging other county departments, as well as divisions and programs within its own department, to explore opportunities to align PAD with other place-based initiatives, policies and services. For example, the Department of Mental Health may be able to provide support groups and other services; doing so in a park setting could help to ease some of the stigma around mental health. PAD also could be a springboard for other types of partnerships, such as shared use agreements between schools and the park system, to further increase people's sense of community and opportunities for physical activity.

"Every kid deserves a safe place to play," Welsing says. "In order to achieve true health equity, every child should have a safe place to play and engage in physical activity and have recreational opportunities."

View video highlights from Parks After Dark at <https://youtu.be/7u1wN8Fbg48>.



References

1. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. (2014, September). *Potential costs and health benefits of Parks After Dark (A Rapid Health Impact Assessment)*. Health Impact Evaluation Center. Available at http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ivpp/pdf_reports/Final%20Parks%20After%20Dark%20Rapid%20HIA%20September%202014.pdf. Last accessed August 6, 2015.
2. Ibid.
3. Fischer K.N., & Teutsch S.M. (2014, April 10). *Safe summer parks programs reduce violence and improve health in Los Angeles County*. National Academy of Medicine. Available at <http://nam.edu/perspectives-2014-safe-summer-parks-programs-reduce-violence-and-improve-health-in-los-angeles-county/>. Last accessed August 6, 2015.