



Flint, MI

▲ Community Example from Chapter 4 of "Lessons for Leaders:"
Lessons in Advancing Policy/Systems Change

Community Background

A former auto-industry boomtown, Flint, MI, is now an economically distressed community in transition working to address population loss, high crime rates, and an overall negative perception. Residents struggle from high unemployment, acute poverty and vacant, blighted properties. These conditions also mean diminished resources for the city, making it difficult to care for the 63 city-owned parks covering 1,800 acres. Even though public green space is within walking distance of most households, 57 percent of residents surveyed stated that their neighborhood park was in poor or fair condition. The *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* partnership, led by the Flint-based Crim Fitness Foundation and the Michigan Fitness Foundation, knew Flint children needed safe places to play and that improving parks was imperative.

Community Action

To lay the groundwork for change and to prioritize improvements, the partnership integrated evaluation components into the project from the beginning, starting with the selection of their focus parks where they would pilot model approaches. Selection was determined using results from a community-wide survey and youth focus groups along with an equity assessment of parks, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis of population demographics near parks, and the neighborhood environments in which parks are located.

In time, the partnership tested the effectiveness of its work in focus parks using a park observation study (a modified System for Observing Play and Leisure Activity instrument) to better understand how residents were using the parks for physical activity. Results

showed that parks with investment (focus parks) had more youth and adults participating in moderate and vigorous physical activity overall and fewer sedentary people than parks with no investment. Furthermore, to examine impact, the partnership implemented two community surveys three years apart to learn how attitudes and behaviors related to parks changed over time. Results showed that more than 50 percent of respondents were familiar with local efforts to improve parks and had seen positive changes in their neighborhood parks over three years, while 40 percent reported feeling safer in neighborhood parks because of better maintenance and increased use.

In addition, to affect change at the city level, the partnership completed the first-ever amenity assessment to inventory and document the facilities in, and condition of, all 63 parks. This was of great value to the city, whose current records did not provide this level of information. A park policy analysis determined the status of Flint parks compared with the Trust for Public Land's Seven Measures of an Excellent City Park System. Based on the outcome of this analysis, as well as stakeholder engagement and key informant interviews with city officials, a clear set of park policy recommendations for policy, systems and environment-based strategies were created and shared with local stakeholders and decision makers to inform the update of the five-year Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Results from all of the assessments helped guide project implementation, and provided much needed information to enhance local planning processes. These included two plans adopted in 2013: the city of Flint's parks plan and the new city master plan, which was based on a two-year process with intensive community involvement and was Flint's first master plan in more than 50 years.