

# Legislative Position Paper

## Healthy Living

### HEALTHY LIVING—THE ROLE OF RECREATION AND PARK AGENCIES

#### *The Issue*

Healthy living is fundamental in improving one's physical and emotional health and social well being. Recreation and Park services play a vital role in encouraging people to develop and maintain healthy lifestyles by providing the programs, the facilities and the protected environment that allow people to be physically and socially active.



#### *Background*

Research shows that one way to increase the population's level of activity is to provide easy access to nearby parks, playgrounds, greenways or trails.<sup>1</sup> A study by the National Recreation and Park Association found that, in terms of overall health, local park and recreation users reported fewer visits to a physician for purposes other than check-ups than did non-park users, even when controlling for the effects of age, income, education level, health status and other possible influences.<sup>2</sup>



#### *Physical benefits*

Active people have longer life spans and are at less risk of developing diseases. Active lifestyles decrease the risk of obesity and heart attacks.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining a healthy body weight is easier on the heart and joints, which enables a more agile lifestyle as one ages. Physical activity also helps lower blood pressure and cholesterol, which can decrease the chance of heart attack and stroke.



Inactive people have a greater risk of developing some cancers, have more chance of developing diabetes, have higher risk for osteoporosis and are more prone to injuries and accidents than physically active people.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Emotional benefits*

Physical activity has been shown to help people become more emotionally and mentally fit. Researchers at Duke University studied people suffering from depression for four months found that 60 percent of the participants who exercised for 30 minutes three times a week overcame their depression without using antidepressant medication.<sup>5</sup>



In a study that explored the leisure behavior of 695 adults, half reported that they were in a better mood after visiting a park. Participants' negative moods decreased after leaving a park, and the park users reported lower levels of anxiety and sadness. The longer the participants stayed, the less stressed they became. Overall, results indicated that, in park, people begin their recreation experiences in better moods and remain in better moods.<sup>6</sup>



#### *Social benefits*

According to the Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, people who are physically active are viewed as harder workers, as more confident and more self-controlled.<sup>7</sup>

Participating in sports and exercise programs at parks and recreation agencies can increase social opportunities. Friendship and companionship generated through participating in shared activities is an important need that motivates people to participate in opportunities offered at state parks, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies.<sup>8</sup> Community based physical activity programs offered at these agencies provide social interaction with peers and peer-led activities that are especially good for the elderly and children.

Massachusetts Recreation and Park Associations' member agencies provide programs that families can enjoy together. These shared activities reduce family stress and allow families to share time together in constructive and healthy ways that are conducive to strengthening family bonds. In this way, agencies foster the positive emotional and social impacts that strong families engender.



### Conclusion

The Massachusetts Recreation and Park Associations' members encourages people of all ages to be physically active in order to maintain healthy lifestyles.

Massachusetts Recreation and Park Associations' members offer outstanding programs and services for people of all ages seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Agencies promote healthy lifestyles through fitness and recreation programs, cultural celebrations, museums, zoos and performing arts venues that improve the physical, emotional and social well being of all Massachusetts citizens.

### ACTIONS

**The Massachusetts Recreation and Park Association will:**

- **Promote our members' efforts to provide the resources that encourage people to maintain active, healthy lifestyles.**
- **Coordinate statewide public awareness campaigns on how to maintain healthy lifestyles through educational workshops and the Association's publications.**

Information for this policy statement was taken from the Illinois Association of Park Districts Position Papers, January 2007.

<sup>1</sup> Parks for People, *A Healthier America? It's a Walk in the Park*, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Ho, Chinghua, Laura Payne, Elizabeth Orsega-Smith and Geoffrey Godbey, "Parks, recreation and public health: parks and recreation improve the physical and mental health of our nation—research update." *Parks & Recreation*, April 2003

<sup>3</sup> Overweight and Obesity: What You Can Do, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ([www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact\\_whatcanyoudo.htm](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_whatcanyoudo.htm))

<sup>4</sup> NHS Health Scotland and the Scottish Executive, <http://www.healthyliving.gov.uk/physicactivity.2005>

<sup>5</sup> Mental Health Journal, *Mental Health Benefits of Exercise*, 2000

<sup>6</sup> *Parks, recreation and public health: parks and recreation improve the physical and mental health of our nation—research update.*

"[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1145/is\\_4\\_38/ai\\_100960607](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1145/is_4_38/ai_100960607)" copyright 2003 NRPA

<sup>7</sup> American Council of Exercise, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2000

<sup>8</sup> Ho, Chinghua, Laura Payne, Elizabeth Orsega-Smith and Geoffrey Godbey, "Parks, recreation and public health: parks recreation improve the physical and mental health of our nation—research update." *Parks & Recreation*, April 2003

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