

Performance Audit of Equity in Recreation Programming

Why OCA Did This Study

Recreation is a core public service that provides numerous health and social benefits to individuals and communities. We conducted this audit to determine whether the Parks and Recreation Department (Parks & Rec) (1) effectively identifies recreation programming equity needs in each community; (2) meets identified programming needs equitably via resource allocations; and (3) provides residents with equitable access to recreation programs.

What OCA Found

As shown in the graphic below, providing equitable recreation programming requires a comprehensive, strategic approach.



Source: OCA generated based on audit findings.

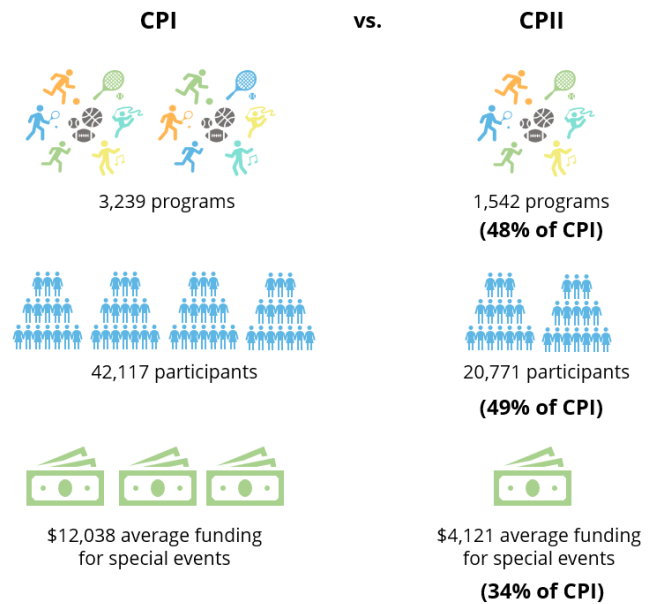
Parks & Rec has made notable progress in several of these areas. However, we found that significant inequities in recreation programming remain, and the City will likely need to invest substantial resources and effort to successfully address them.

Finding 1: Understanding community needs is essential to making recreation programming more equitable. Parks & Rec and the City solicit participant and resident feedback about recreation programs, but Parks & Rec’s current feedback mechanism excludes individuals not actively engaged in programs. This means their needs—and any barriers they may face in accessing recreation programs—are

unknown. In addition, we found that Parks & Rec does not have a strategic plan or performance measures that address recreation programming equity.

Finally, Parks & Rec needs to analyze the extent of the resources needed to comprehensively improve equity so that it can support any future funding requests.

Finding 2: After identifying each community’s recreation programming needs, efforts to address those needs should be funded equitably. We found large funding disparities between recreation centers in the northern part of the City, Community Parks I Division (CPI), and those in the southern part of the City, Community Parks II Division (CPII). Current program spending per recreation center is 47 percent higher in CPI than in CPII, and recreation centers in CPI offer twice as many programs and have twice as many participants as those in CPII, as shown in the graphic below.



Source: OCA generated based on 2019 Parks and Recreation Equity Report and RCF Budgets.

Funding and programming disparities are even more significant when broken down by Council District and are primarily based on the occurrence of contracted programs, which participants pay for. In 2019, almost all contracted programs took place in CPI. Recreation

centers without a history of contracted programs—such as those in CPII—may find it challenging to establish these programs without additional General Fund investments.

Parks & Rec also lacks a comprehensive process for assessing program quality to ensure quality is comparable across recreation programs Citywide.

Finding 3: Informing the community of available programming is another important step toward improving equity in recreation programming. We found that Parks & Rec’s approach to community engagement and marketing is decentralized and inconsistent, which results in diminished awareness of, and access to, programming. For example, 55 percent of City residents indicated they did not attend more Parks & Rec programs because they were not aware of program offerings, which is over twice as high as the national average of 24 percent. Parks & Rec can improve efforts to increase awareness of its recreation programs by analyzing demographic data, standardizing marketing efforts, and centralizing aspects of the marketing process.

Finding 4: For recreation programs to be equitable, they should be accessible to all groups. We found that Parks & Rec makes efforts to ensure certain communities can participate in programs, but significant barriers remain for others. We found that Parks & Rec limits fee waiver availability to a small subset of recreation programs and that the fee waiver application process is burdensome for the customer. These issues limit low-income households’ access to recreational programming and result in assisting relatively few participants.

In addition, we found that recreation program information is not equally accessible to people with limited English proficiency. While Parks & Rec employs a variety of tools to make recreation programming inclusive of those who have limited English proficiency, those tools are not consistent across recreation centers. For example, only 17 percent of recreation centers that serve significant populations with limited English proficiency provide program guides in other languages.

Finding 5: Taking a more comprehensive approach to improving equity in recreation programming requires collecting and analyzing data to monitor, evaluate, and report on progress. We found that errors and inconsistencies in Parks & Rec’s data limit its ability to pursue a data-driven approach to improving equity through systematic efforts such as strategic planning and resource allocation.

What OCA Recommends

We made 16 recommendations to improve recreation programming equity, and management agreed to implement all 16. Key recommendations include to:

- Conduct a community needs assessment to identify recreational needs and access barriers;
- Develop a strategic plan for addressing recreational equity that includes goals and performance measures and identifies resources needed to address current inequities;
- Develop a resource allocation model to evaluate funding equity between recreation facilities based on community-specific and site-specific criteria, and direct resources toward specific steps to eliminate identified disparities;
- Create a strategic marketing plan and hire a marketing professional to manage online and physical content, coordinate the department’s marketing efforts, and lead strategic marketing initiatives;
- Revise fee waiver procedures to make them customer-friendly, and consider expanding fee waiver eligibility to additional recreation programs, including contracted programs;
- Create a department-wide language access plan that includes policies and procedures for translation services; and
- Implement internal controls to ensure data from its recreation program management software can be used for strategic planning and resource allocation efforts.

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