B. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Name:
More Than a Pretty Place: Activating Urban Parks to Improve Community Health and Wellness

HWPP Project Number:
2011D-33

Without exceeding this one (1) page, briefly describe your project and partnership.

The discipline of public health increasingly recognizes the importance of neighborhood context in affecting health outcomes, above and beyond individual characteristics, offering support for interventions that focus on influencing neighborhood conditions to improve community health and wellness. The availability and quality of green spaces, such as parks, is an important component of neighborhood quality. A growing body of evidence illuminates the health benefits of access to green space. Research also shows that environment-based recreation and education is beneficial in many ways – intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically.

Given the positive influence of neighborhood green space on health outcomes and the relatively limited mobility of low socioeconomic status urban populations, urban parks have tremendous potential value for addressing health problems in urban neighborhoods. However, the mere existence of a park may not automatically relay benefits to the community. Parks must be properly leveraged to shift the health status of residents. The Urban Ecology Center (UEC) activates urban green spaces through neighborhood-wide participation in environmental education and recreational activities. They have partnered with Menomonee Valley Partners (MVP) to redevelop a brownfield and open a new UEC location on Milwaukee’s south side, to be introduced in the fall of 2012. In a partnership among UEC, MVP and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), we propose to take advantage of this unique opportunity to measure the impact of a new, activated urban green space on community health.

The overall goal of this project is to understand how this new urban park, with complementary outreach and education, affects knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, assets/supports and health outcomes among neighborhood residents. To achieve this goal, we focus on the following objectives: (1) Measure baseline information on children’s health behaviors, assets/supports and outcomes, to enable measurement of individual-level change in the long-term, (2) Measure change in children’s knowledge and attitudes about outdoor play in green spaces and health, and access to green spaces, and (3) Measure baseline information on geographical patterns of neighborhood quality to enable measurement of neighborhood-level change in the long-term.

Before the new UEC branch opens, we will hold a community forum to reach out to local residents. We will invite community members to participate as data collectors in our neighborhood mapping and assessment activity, to document indicators of neighborhood quality. We will work with local schools to identify 5th grade classrooms that will participate in the UEC Neighborhood Environmental Education Project (NEEP) and in our evaluation of health and wellness. NEEP brings groups of students into the park during the school day for hands-on, outdoor environmental education that engages them in both physical activity and scientific inquiry. We will develop and administer a brief survey to the students, using measures and technology appropriate for the age, reading level, and language of participants. In the fall of 2012, we will celebrate the opening of the new UEC branch. By October 2013 we will undertake a second survey of the participating classrooms. We will analyze our data, and co-author and disseminate results through publication, presentation, news media, and a final community forum. We will seek to both expand and deepen our partnership.

A paradigm shift is underway, changing the expectations for public health intervention. Increasingly, the most innovative ideas are those that engage communities directly, use cutting edge methods, and recognize the deeply complex nature of health determinants. This project responds to these trends. We operate within a partnership framework, directly engage the target community, use state-of-the-art technologies including touch technology and Geographic Information Systems, and seek to impact and measure the effect of a neighborhood-level process on community health and wellness. Our approach holds significant promise for systems change in Milwaukee, and beyond, while responding to the call for innovative approaches to public health research.