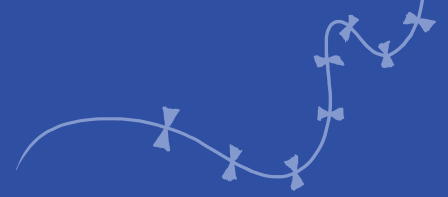
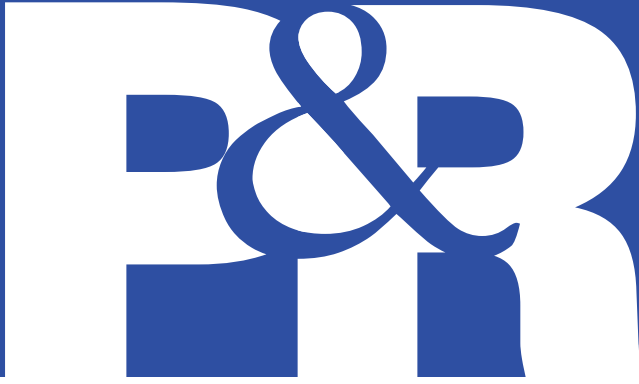


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PARKS AND RECREATION

The magazine of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association



fitness &
mental health



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FROM THE EDITOR

Mind and Body

As we step into this new year, mental health and wellness stand at the forefront in the eyes of many in the park and recreation field. Being of sound mind and body is the goal of all of us but it takes a focused and driven approach to make those goals a reality. While physical health often takes the spotlight, nurturing our mental well-being is equally imperative. That's why this issue of Illinois Parks and Recreation is tackling both subjects.



Our mission with this issue is to recognize the trends in fitness while expanding our idea of what mental health means. We understand that mental health isn't just a buzzword; it's the bedrock of our ability to thrive in an ever-changing world.

With technology reinventing how we approach physical health, we know it is important for your facilities, parks, forest preserves, and recreational areas to be meeting the needs of those who seek to improve their fitness. Trends are not always quick fads, and those that stick around tend to change the landscape of how we approach self-improvement.

This issue, we have some phenomenal articles from some incredible writers. Tackling mental health in the workplace, Lisa Santoria shares her thoughts in Nurturing Success: The Critical Importance of Mental Health and Wellness in the Workplace on page 14. Liz Antman examines how to stay ahead of the curve in fitness and wellness in Going Beyond Individual Fitness Goals on page 18. Finally, Jodie Diegel shares the benefits of animal-assisted activities on page 22 in Harnessing the Healing Powers of Animals.

This year, I encourage you to make sure to balance both your physical and mental health and nurture both. Philosopher John Locke once said "A sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in this world." So, go find your happiest state!

Thanks for reading!

— Wayne Utterback, Editor

Photo Credit: This issue's cover image is from JP McNamara of the Palatine Park District, which was submitted to the 2023 Give Us Your Best Shot photo contest.



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Peter M. Murphy, Esq., CAE, IOM
IAPD President and CEO

Chapters of a Successful 2023 Accelerate IAPD into the New Year

“The new year stands before us, like a chapter in a book, waiting to be written.”

As we embark upon a new year, this quote by American author Melody Beattie resonates throughout the Illinois Association of Park Districts and our family of park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies. When it comes to association services supporting excellent parks, programs, facilities, and services, you can say that we 'wrote the book'!

According to IAPD's database, commissioners currently serving our member park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies have served a total of **13,353 years**. Pair that tremendous amount of experience with a skilled staff of nine who have a combined **157 years** of working for IAPD - the oldest statewide association for park, recreation, and conservation agencies in the country - and it is bound to be a best seller!

The year 2024 marks IAPD's 96th of leading the charge for Illinois parks, recreation, and conservation. It is an honor to work with so many talented individuals in this outstanding field as Illinois continues to shine as a national leader.

Below is a sampling from our vast volume of success stories from 2023.

- Teamwork with our membership combined with our finely honed legislative advocacy efforts resulted in a total of **nearly \$60 million** in Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development program grants. I had the honor of being chosen as the only speaker from an advocacy organization to deliver remarks about this critical program at the governor's OSLAD press conference.
- We distributed **\$30,000 in PowerPlay! grants** to our member agencies in 2023, providing funding to create or enhance beyond-school programs promoting health, fitness, and nutrition. This program is funded by the *Park District Youth License Plate*, and throughout the past decade, we

have provided grants to **565 member agencies** totaling **\$827,450** and benefitting **more than 60,000 children** statewide.

- Our *2023 Legal Symposium* shattered attendance records with **422 in-person and virtual attendees** engaging with top legal experts who presented the hottest topics in park district law including ethics laws related to referendum and other political activity, gift bans, and legal conflicts; legal procedures for social media, imminent PTELL changes, and more.
- **Ninety-three percent of IAPD members** participated in our 2023 educational programs, including our complimentary webinars: *IAPD's Guidance on Efficiency Committee Reports* and *Leading with Influence*.
- IAPD's 45th *Annual Legislative Conference and Reception* enabled **327 attendees** to connect with legislators and learn effective strategies for identifying grant opportunities, submitting grant applications, building strong relationships with legislators, and using IAPD research to make the case for the funding of parks and recreation capital needs.
- IAPD also developed numerous new resources to assist member agencies with obligations under the Decennial Committees on Local Government Efficiency Act, including a model resolution to form the efficiency committee, a 19-page efficiency report template, a fact sheet, and more.
- IAPD presented five *Boot Camps* in convenient locations throughout the state along with one virtual session. This staple educational session for orienting new commissioners and refreshing seasoned commissioners and professionals benefited **230 attendees** and fulfilled the one-time Open Meetings Act training certification required for all newly elected officials.
- This past year, communication was a key attribute of IAPD as we sent **41 Legislative Updates and Legal News** to keep members up to date on news from the State Capitol,

grant information, new legal requirements, election information, and other legal/legislative developments. Brief videos were also provided to the membership during times of high legislative activity.

- Our updated statewide citizen satisfaction survey revealed key findings highlighted in our brochure *Parks Improve the Quality of Life to Illinois Communities*. This resource provides valuable information for members to promote the importance of parks.
- IAPD staff reviewed each of the **6,717 bills** that were introduced during the calendar year along with **1,589 amendments**. We are also tracking **900 bills** for their impact on member agencies.
- Our popular *Parks Day at the Capitol* **returned to** the Capitol Rotunda as an in-person event for the first time since 2019 after a pandemic-related hiatus. This **sold-out event** enabled IAPD member agencies to showcase their parks, programs, and services to members of the General Assembly.
- IAPD's 17th annual *Best of the Best Awards Gala* brought **more than 300 guests** together for an inspirational evening celebrating IAPD member agencies, commissioners, businesses, media, partners, and citizen volunteers who contribute their time, talents, and resources to supporting the park, recreation, and conservation mission. Highlights of the evening included a standing ovation for a commissioner serving his agency for 50 years.
- Our popular podcast, *Park Cast* - which shines the spotlight on the work that IAPD is doing in partnership with our members to advance parks, recreation, and conservation – now features a library of **52 episodes** and has accrued **more than 7,400 listens** on SoundCloud with thousands of additional listens on other platforms.
- Our money-saving programs and grants continued to help our members thrive in 2023 with **76%** of our members using services provided by at least one of our five affinity programs.
- IAPD's *Board Development and Self-Evaluation Program* provided boards with specialized guidance in defining roles and responsibilities, describing duties for oversight and governance, and determining leadership within their agencies. **Eighty-nine** board self-evaluations have been completed to date.
- IAPD identified and equipped **209 newly elected commissioners** with *New Commissioner Tool Kits* containing valuable resources to assist them in their new roles.

- We published an updated *Guide to Open Meetings Act and FOIA* including a convenient digital option.
- Thirteen new position papers were developed on topics impacting park and recreation agencies including capital funding, economic impact, inclusion and recreation access, and local government consolidation.
- **Nearly 100 commissioners** have been enrolled in IAPD's *Board Member Development Program* – with more than 50 earning Master Board Member status. This program inspires board members throughout the state to track accomplishments made during terms on their local board and rewards them with statewide recognition.
- Our esteemed *Director Search* program remained popular among agencies seeking to hire an executive. IAPD has placed **144** professionals at park districts throughout Illinois since the program's inception.
- IAPD staff quickly responded to **566 legal inquiries** from our members on a diverse array of issues.
- We published the *2023 Buyers' Guide*, a 34-page comprehensive directory of businesses that provide essential goods and services to member agencies.
- Our new, interactive Salsa photo booth provided event attendees the opportunity to memorialize their experiences with colleagues through digital photos and videos, and
- Our engaging website served as an excellent resource for members this year, with **15,100 unique visitors** and **97,298 pageviews**.

I encourage you to read your 2023 IAPD Annual Report in its entirety to discover the full scope of our continued dedication and service to you, our valued membership.

As we stand on the horizon of this new year and look back on our many accomplishments of 2023, I am confident that together, we will continue to write amazing stories of great success!

On behalf of the IAPD Board of Trustees and staff, I wish you and your families a wonderful new year brimming with health and happiness.

Thank you for all you do to improve the quality of life in your park district, forest preserve and conservation district. Your dedication to outstanding governance is a shining example for others to emulate.



Jason Anselment
IAPD General Counsel

Park and Recreation Agencies Provide Critical Opportunities to Improve Mental Health

At the beginning of the year, many individuals are rightly focused on their physical health. Indeed, the new year often brings resolutions, an increase in fitness center memberships, and renewed commitments to workout routines. While the time is always right to concentrate on physical health, now is also an ideal time to emphasize mental and emotional health and well-being. After all, the hustle and bustle of the holiday season while winding down a busy year can be particularly stressful. Fortunately, park and recreation agencies offer individuals a wide range of opportunities to improve their mental and emotional health regardless of the time of year.

1. Combatting Isolation and Loneliness

Feelings of isolation and solitude are perpetual challenges that can be exacerbated for people of all ages during the holiday season. Park and recreation agencies help confront loneliness and the depression that often ensues by providing chances to connect with others.

We remember all too well the isolation and loneliness wrought by the pandemic. Park and recreation agencies led the way in joining their communities through innovative programming because no other organization is more adept when it comes to bringing people together. Senior programs and services are a shining example. Educational workshops, day trips, travel programs, and arts and crafts classes are just a few of the many programs that park districts and other recreation agencies offer to seniors each year. These occasions can be meaningful, particularly to those without a close family network.

Likewise, the opportunities that park and recreation agencies offer youth should not be discounted. Many friendships are often fostered in recreational programming and at local parks and playgrounds. As those in the special recreation association world can attest, these relationships are also extremely valuable for youth and adults with special needs.

The yearning for personal connections seems likely to grow given the movement towards remote work. As a direct consequence of not seeing coworkers in person each day, those who work alone at home often need a chance to spend time with others. If this trend continues, it will only intensify the demand for local park and recreation programs that bring citizens together.

2. Supporting Families

While I certainly enjoy the extra family time the holidays offer, I know firsthand that any deviation in the normal routine of school and work can eventually place stress on families. While this may be particularly true for parents and guardians with younger children during the winter break, support for working families is needed throughout the year. Safe, convenient, and affordable summer and winter programming, before and after school care, and preschool programs provide much needed assistance for working families. This support can alleviate stress by providing relief and flexibility to parents and guardians, but these opportunities can be just as important to the mental health and well-being of youth, especially during critical times when school is not in session.

3. Providing Opportunities for All

In fact, when it comes to kids, I am not sure the benefits of recreational programming and social occasions can be overstated. For example, while competitive sports and athletics have many positive benefits, they can actually create stress for the youth who compete and negatively impact those who are left out altogether. Park districts and other local recreation agencies often fill that void by offering opportunities for everyone to participate regardless of their skill level, thereby providing a sense of belonging that can make all the difference to the mental and emotional health of youth who simply want to recreate. Here again, the crucial role of special recreation

associations to provide these same opportunities for individuals of all abilities should not be overlooked.

4. Peace and Tranquility through Nature

During the past decade, I have had a daily goal of walking 10,000 steps. While this target has primarily been for my physical health, I have discovered that it can be just as important to my mental health. The positive psychological impact is exponentially greater when I have access to nature and fresh air. For me, nothing compares to a walk in a park when it comes to clearing my mind, relieving stress, and staying positive.

I have no doubt the same is true for others that I see in parks: young parents pushing strollers, seniors taking a walk, professionals on their lunch break, young adults biking or throwing frisbees, and more. In fact, I have had several legislators tell me that during the most stressful parts of the legislative session, a walk in the park is the key to decompressing and keeping them focused.

Fortunately, park districts, forest preserves and other local park and recreation agencies provide Illinoisans with convenient access to more than 400 square miles of open space and more than 3,000 miles of multi-use trails. These assets provide valuable access to improve mental health.

These are just a few examples. While they and many other mental health benefits may be intuitive for park and recreation leaders, it is vital to promote them as part of your advocacy efforts. As we know, these critical services do not come without cost, so as you advocate for funding or articulate the return on investment be sure to remind legislators and citizens of the vital role your agency plays in improving the mental health and wellness of your entire community.

The Legislative Breakfast program will provide a platform for these discussions, to share stories about the benefits of parks, recreation, and conservation, and to hear from legislators. Information on the dates of these events follows, so please commit to attending an event near you.

2024 SPRING SESSION IAPD LEGISLATIVE AWARENESS SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

The second year of the 103rd General Assembly is now underway. Key legislative deadlines and other important dates are available on the IAPD website at ILparks.org as well as the General Assembly's website at ilga.gov.

There will be numerous opportunities throughout the Spring Session to meet with legislators to discuss important legislative issues and deliver positive messages about the benefits of parks, recreation, and conservation. Please mark your calendar to attend these events and invite your legislators to join you.

January 26	Soaring to New Heights All-Conference Awards Luncheon
February 15	Legislative Breakfast Geneseo Park District
February 16	Legislative Breakfast Tinley Park-Park District
February 23	Legislative Breakfast Vernon Hills Park District
	Legislative Breakfast West Suburban Special Recreation Association / Park District of Forest Park
February 24	Legislative Breakfast Schaumburg Park District
February 26	Legislative Breakfast Washington Park District
February 29	Legislative Breakfast Northbrook Park District
March 1	Legislative Breakfast Carol Stream Park District
	Legislative Breakfast Fox Valley SRA / Fox Valley Park District
March 4	Legislative Breakfast Champaign Park District
March 5	Legislative Breakfast Springfield Park District
March 11	Legislative Breakfast Southern Illinois (Virtual)
May 7	Parks Day at the Capitol State Capitol, Springfield
May 7	Legislative Reception Illini Country Club, Springfield
May 8	Legislative Conference Crowne Plaza, Springfield



By Suzi Wirtz, IOM
IPRA Executive Director

A Page From our New Executive Director's Book

When I asked Lisa Sheppard, IPRA Board Chair, and Andy Thurman, Chair-Elect, to provide me with some insight and suggestions to start me off on the right foot as the new executive director at the association, they both said without hesitation, "You've got to get to know the members. Our members are the best!" This sentiment was echoed by IPRA staff when I met them during the interview process and, again, in the office for lunch one day in December. Margaret Resnick, interim executive director, read me a note she had received from an IPRA member when she stepped in to help out, in order to further illustrate the type of people who join and are proud to be members of IPRA. Committed. Dedicated. Helpful. Invested. Kind. Smart. Passionate about the profession. As a lifelong association professional, I have seen firsthand the enthusiasm members bring to their respective organizations and the absolutely critical role they play in achieving success—most often through their selfless volunteering and giving of their time. Without the members, without the volunteers - where are we? The answer is nowhere. The book remains unwritten. Starting out my first month with IPRA, I'm beyond excited about all the possibilities and opportunities in front of us, together.

Throughout my career, I've worked with just about every industry you can name: from real estate to healthcare to financial to ski instructors to businesses that make and sell popcorn! When I read the recently adopted strategic plan for IPRA and its future, I knew I wanted to be part of this exciting and vibrant profession, and bring my experience in the hopes of helping to make it even better. The way to do this is through collaboration, active listening, inclusivity, transparency, and good old-fashioned hard work.

Chapters Read Along the Way

One of my favorite and most rewarding roles was as executive director for the Celtics Soccer Foundation, a local youth sports organization. It was here that I mixed and

mingled with a variety of park districts in the western suburbs of Chicago. I was wildly impressed with the professionalism and knowledge that I experienced as I reserved and discussed the conditions of soccer fields. It was here that I got to know residents, families and athletes who placed a high value on exercise and knew the importance of fun. Now, as I imagine we all have seen, youth sports can be at times a little ... ummm, intense? So, it was here that I learned how to put things into perspective, to watch mistakes be made and corrected compassionately and to navigate through all of that with end goals in mind (pun intended). With three children, I've seen how incredible and integral the parks are—when we first thought about moving to La Grange, our first stop was Waiola Park to swing on the swings and get a good look at who our neighbors might be. Since then, we've been to just about every park in the area for many reasons depending on the day and the age of my kids: splash pads, soccer, football, baseball games; from walking trails to indoor programs and activities. We've rented rooms for parties and volunteered at holiday events. It was never lost on me that the people working in parks and recreation are experts in planning and delivering memorable experiences.

As I read IPRA's mission statement, "to provide and promote exceptional standards of education, networking, and resources for all professionals in the Illinois park, recreation, and conservation communities," I realized this executive director position combines what I have already done with a profession that I have some experience with and have appreciated and admired along the way. I'm excited to learn more from all of you, to meet stakeholders and partners at both the association and foundation, and to immerse myself in the nuances of your world.

Making it Happen

If there's one thing I've realized and, if I'm honest, been jaw-drop-surprised-by it's the willingness of association members to give freely of their time and talent to better their profession. It's nothing short of amazing when you really stop to think about the fact that this is in addition to doing your day jobs exceptionally well and with great pride. In fact, I think it directly correlates—the more you believe in your profession and field, the more you want to give back and be part of the greater good. With all that IPRA has to offer, through sections and committees, education and networking, I know there is something for everyone and it's all of the highest quality and produced by a staff that is just as amazing, with their dedication to the profession.

This month, we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and one of my all-time favorite quotes is, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" I remind myself of this almost daily, as it relates to the association profession, my family and, as you all know better than me, to the field of parks, recreation and conservation. What are we doing for the community? How are we helping the people who live in our neighborhoods? Why does it matter? Where can we collectively and individually make a difference? I think the answer is, again, together and with a common mission in mind. Talking and listening, we can write the chapters together.

I am so excited to meet all the members and to get to know you, your park, recreation, and conservation agencies, your far-reaching corners of Illinois. Thank you for this opportunity and for taking the time to read a little about me and my philosophy. I hope you will reach out to me personally with your thoughts and history with IPRA and share with me a little about you, your career journey and your stories.

Upcoming Events



SAVE THE DATE



2024

FEB MAR
29 - 1

AQUATIC FACILITY
OPERATORS COURSE (AFO)
↳ Woodridge Park District

APR
11-12

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY
CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
↳ Bolingbrook Park District

APR
12

SUPERVISOR SYMPOSIUM
↳ Schaumburg Park District

MAY
2

PARK PURSUIT
↳ Downers Grove

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By Duane Smith, CPRP
IPRA Education Director

Superheroes Need Self-Care Too

In the bustling world of parks, recreation, and conservation, superheroes (a.k.a., professionals) take much pride in enhancing public spaces, fostering community engagement, and preserving the surrounding natural environments. Yet, amidst these fulfilling and rewarding responsibilities, it's essential for superheroes not to overlook a crucial aspect, and that's their own health and well-being. It's no secret this industry's demands can easily lead to stress, burnout, and challenges. Even with special powers and abilities, it can still be hard for superheroes to maintain a healthy work-life balance because taking care of people is no easy task. Before we get too far into 2024, I'd like to take a moment to pause and recognize that park, recreation, and conservation professionals are human too. It's important for them to have a self-care plan to help assess, address, and focus on well-being so they can continue making the world a better place for us all.

I like to think of a self-care plan as a simple yet complex task because it has benefits that make it an obvious must-have for everyone, but it can be challenging too because it doesn't fit neatly with everything else happening in life. Modern work environments, especially parks, recreation, and conservation, can be quite demanding. Stress, long hours, and high expectations from elected officials, regulating bodies, and community members can significantly impact physical and mental health, and even job satisfaction. A simple self-care plan can help prioritize personal health in this challenging environment, ensuring there is an outlet for physical, emotional, and mental needs. By taking time for self-care activities, professionals can effectively manage stress levels, improve resilience, and even boost immune systems. This leads to increased energy and focus, ultimately enhancing daily service delivery to communities.

Everyone's self-care plan is going to look a little different because we have different interests, originate from different backgrounds, and work in different environments, but generally speaking, the components are going to be somewhat universal. *Regular physical activity*, however

that looks for you, is a cornerstone because it includes exercises and activities that promote fitness and alleviate stress. That could be a simple walk around the park listening to a podcast, regular visits to the gym before or after work, or taking part in your favorite activities. *Prioritizing mental health* through mindfulness practices such as meditation and deep-breathing exercises in an office can foster emotional resilience and clarity. *Healthy lifestyle habits* such as balanced nutrition, hydration, and sufficient sleep can help optimize cognitive function. *Effective time management* and *setting boundaries* ensures a balance between work responsibilities and personal rejuvenation, safeguards against burnout, and promotes a fulfilling professional life.

Sounds simple, right? As I mentioned earlier, this is easier said than done. Working professionals encounter various challenges when executing a self-care plan. Work commitments and responsibilities, which can vary between the seasons, leave limited room for personal activities, thus making it quite overwhelming trying to satisfy personal needs. Moreover, the pressure to constantly perform at high levels may lead to guilt or a sense of neglect when taking time for oneself. After all, we are in the business of serving others, and if we're thinking of ourselves, even momentarily, we're left to ponder about the how and when "the work" will get done. External factors, such as workplace culture or societal expectations, may not always prioritize self-care. Whether it's the workplace, community, or even family life, if you don't find yourself in a supportive environment, it will be forever difficult to implement and sustain a self-care routine.

Prioritizing health is not an option but a necessity. Assessing and addressing facets such as work-life balance, stress management, self-care practices, support systems, and boundaries can significantly enhance one's overall well-being and lead to a more fulfilling and sustainable career. Remember, taking care of yourself is the foundation of being an effective and impactful professional (a.k.a., superhero) creating vibrant and thriving communities that make the world a better place to live.



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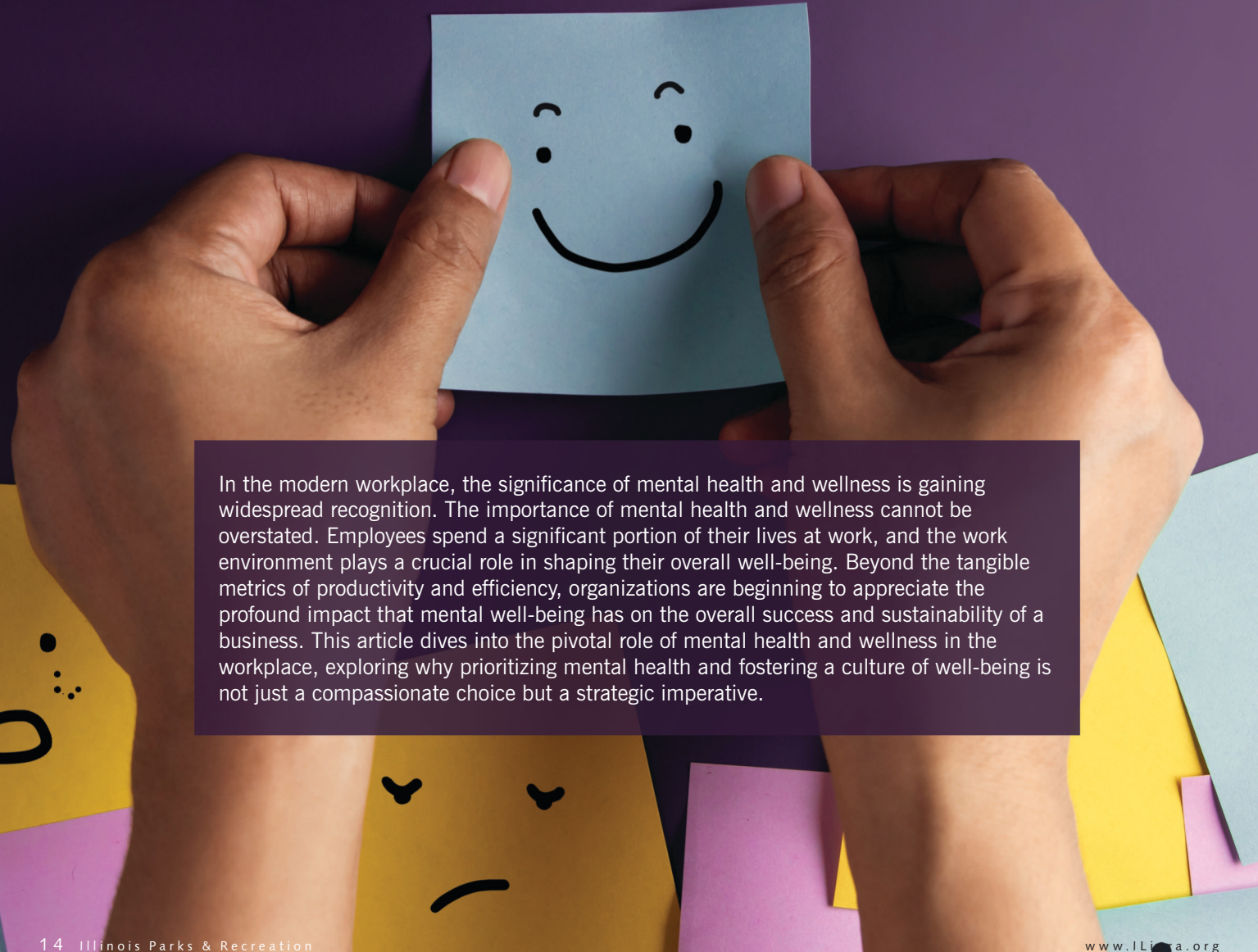
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NURTURING SUCCESS:

THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE

BY LISA SANTORIA, CPRP, SHRM-CP, HR MANAGER, WESTERN DUPAGE SPECIAL RECREATION ASSOCIATION



In the modern workplace, the significance of mental health and wellness is gaining widespread recognition. The importance of mental health and wellness cannot be overstated. Employees spend a significant portion of their lives at work, and the work environment plays a crucial role in shaping their overall well-being. Beyond the tangible metrics of productivity and efficiency, organizations are beginning to appreciate the profound impact that mental well-being has on the overall success and sustainability of a business. This article dives into the pivotal role of mental health and wellness in the workplace, exploring why prioritizing mental health and fostering a culture of well-being is not just a compassionate choice but a strategic imperative.



CONTRARY TO TRADITIONAL BELIEFS, PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH DOESN'T COME AT THE EXPENSE OF PRODUCTIVITY; RATHER, IT ENHANCES IT.

THE COST OF IGNORING MENTAL HEALTH

The cost of neglecting an employee's mental health and well-being is profound, extending far beyond immediate financial implications. Ignoring the mental health of employees can lead to poor productivity and performance; increased absenteeism and presenteeism, high turnover rates, and moreover, a workplace culture that dismisses mental health concerns risks damaging its reputation. The cost of overlooking employee mental health isn't just financial—it encompasses a broader spectrum of organizational well-being and success.

Productivity and Performance:

Contrary to traditional beliefs, prioritizing mental health doesn't come at the expense of productivity; rather, it enhances it. Employees facing mental health challenges are more likely to experience decreased concentration, reduced problem-solving abilities, and lower overall performance. By fostering a mentally healthy workplace, organizations can unlock the full potential of their workforce.

Absenteeism and Presenteeism:

Mental health issues contribute significantly to absenteeism and presenteeism. Employees grappling with mental health concerns may take more sick days or, conversely, show up to work while not functioning at their best. This not only affects individual well-being but has a cascading impact on team dynamics and organizational performance.

Employee Retention:

A workplace that prioritizes mental health is more likely to retain its talent. Employees who feel supported in their mental well-being are more engaged, satisfied, and committed to their jobs. High turnover rates not only disrupt workflow but also entail significant financial and time investments in recruiting and training new staff.

Company Culture and Reputation:

A workplace that neglects mental health risks cultivating a toxic culture. This not only demoralizes existing employees but also tarnishes the company's reputation, making it less attractive to potential talent. In today's socially connected world, a company's commitment to mental health can significantly influence its public image.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING

Building a robust foundation of employee well-being requires a multifaceted and proactive approach from organizations. It begins with fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes open communication, provides educational initiatives, offers workplace flexibility, and establishes clear mental health policies, along with providing resources. Through these combined efforts, organizations can lay a solid foundation that nurtures the well-being of their employees, fostering a work environment where individuals can thrive both personally and professionally.

PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES WITHIN THE WORKPLACE HELPS DISPEL MYTHS, INCREASE AWARENESS, REDUCE STIGMA, AND EQUIP EMPLOYEES WITH THE TOOLS TO RECOGNIZE AND ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS—EITHER IN THEMSELVES OR THEIR COLLEAGUES.



Open Conversations:

The first step in fostering mental health in the workplace is breaking the silence. Establishing a culture that not only encourages open conversations about mental health but promotes the conversations. Open communication will help reduce the stigma of mental health and empower employees to seek help when needed. Leadership should set the tone by sharing their commitment to mental well-being and by creating that safe, judgement free work environment. One way to do this is to hold regular check-ins with staff to discuss workload, challenges, and well-being.

Educational Initiatives:

Many individuals lack a basic understanding of mental health. Providing educational resources within the workplace helps dispel myths, increase awareness, reduce stigma, and equip employees with the tools to recognize and address mental health concerns—either in themselves or their colleagues. Providing these workshops, quick mini luncheon lessons, and training sessions, can supply employees with the necessary tools to help deal with stress, learn about emotional intelligence, become more resilient, and develop some coping mechanisms.

Workplace Flexibility:

Recognizing the diverse needs and challenges faced by employees, offering flexible work arrangements can significantly contribute to mental well-being. Whether it's adjusting work hours, allowing remote work, or providing compressed workweeks, flexibility fosters an environment where individuals can better balance work and life demands.

Mental Health Policies and Resources:

Establish clear policies that address mental health in the workplace. This includes guidelines for reasonable accommodation, leaves of absence for mental health reasons, and access to confidential counseling services. Ensure that employees are aware of available mental health resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs). Employee assistance programs are a cornerstone of mental health support. Make sure your organization's health benefits include comprehensive mental health

coverage, including access to counseling, therapy, and psychiatric services. Communicate the confidentiality of mental health services within EAPs. Employees should feel secure in seeking help without fear of judgment or reprisal. Additionally, make sure that these services are easily accessible, whether in-person or through virtual platforms. Promote awareness of EAPs through targeted campaigns. This can include informational sessions, email communications, and the integration of mental health resources into employee onboarding materials. The more employees know about available resources, the more likely they are to utilize them. Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of your EAP. Seek feedback from employees on their experiences and use this information to make improvements. An EAP is most valuable when it evolves to meet the changing needs of the workforce. By investing in an EAP and making sure you have comprehensive mental health coverage you show your employees you care about their well-being and the well-being of their family. Invest in your people, there is no greater return on investment.

Stress Reduction Programs:

Chronic stress is a significant contributor to mental health issues. Introducing stress reduction programs, such as mindfulness sessions, mental health apps, yoga classes, or even access to quiet spaces for reflection, can provide employees with valuable tools to manage stress and maintain mental well-being.

STRATEGIES FOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Implementing effective strategies for leadership and management is essential in cultivating a workplace culture that prioritizes employee well-being. Leaders should undergo training to recognize and address signs of mental health issues, set realistic expectations, recognize and appreciate employees, and promote work-life balance. By integrating these strategies into their management approach, leaders can create a workplace culture that not only enhances productivity but also prioritizes the mental health and overall well-being of the entire team.

BY PRIORITIZING MENTAL WELL-BEING, BUSINESSES CAN CREATE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE EMPLOYEES NOT ONLY SURVIVE BUT THRIVE.



Training for Managers:

Managers play a pivotal role in shaping the work environment. Providing training for managers on recognizing signs of mental health issues, effective communication, and creating a supportive atmosphere is essential. Equip managers with the skills to handle conversations about mental health with empathy and competence.

Setting Realistic Expectations:

Unrealistic workloads and expectations can contribute to stress and burnout. Leaders should ensure that workloads are manageable, deadlines are realistic, and employees feel comfortable communicating when they are overwhelmed. This requires a shift in mindset from valuing "busyness" to valuing effectiveness and well-being.

Recognition and Appreciation:

Acknowledging and appreciating employees for their contributions is a powerful tool for promoting mental well-being. Recognition fosters a positive work environment, boosts morale, and reinforces the idea that employees are valued not just for their output but as individuals.

Promoting Work-Life Balance:

Encouraging a healthy work-life balance is crucial for mental health. This involves setting clear boundaries, discouraging excessive overtime, and promoting the use of vacation time. When employees feel supported in their personal lives, they are more likely to bring their best selves to work.

In conclusion, the importance of mental health and wellness in the workplace extends far beyond the realm of employee satisfaction—it is intrinsically linked to the success and longevity of an organization. By prioritizing mental well-being, businesses can create environments where employees not only survive but thrive. From open

conversations to educational initiatives, from flexible work arrangements to robust employee assistance programs, the strategies available to support mental health in the workplace are diverse and adaptable. As we navigate the complexities of the modern working world, let us recognize that a mentally healthy workforce is an empowered and resilient one, capable of achieving remarkable feats and sustaining success over the long term.

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Going Beyond Individual Fitness Goals

By **Liz Antman**, Fitness Manager, Center Fitness Club, Wilmette Park District

In the evolving landscape of fitness and wellness, staying ahead of the curve is not just an option; it is a necessity. As we stride into 2024, our focus extends beyond individual fitness goals – it encompasses our entire community. From specialized programs to employee well-being initiatives, we are immersing ourselves in the currents of trends shaping the health and wellness landscape, transforming it into not just a personal journey but a communal experience.



Employees that are in good health are more likely to deliver optimal performance in the workplace. Healthy employees not only have better quality of life, they also benefit from having a lower risk of disease, illness, and injury, as well as increased work productivity and a greater likelihood of contributing to their communities.

Wellness of Your Community:

Crafting Community through Fitness

Within all of our fitness offerings, we want to create a sense of community. Think about your marketing materials and messaging; focus on the elements of your offerings that create a sense of community and social connection. Fitness centers can foster this by organizing events or meetups, offering group workout classes or creating online forums or social media groups where users can connect and share tips. We focus on specialized programming that brings people together. Some programs include; a 4-week Pelvic Floor & Core program, Spring Reset for Gut Health workshops, Strong and Mobile Golfer programs, and free community classes in our parks during the summer months.

Wellness of Your Employees:

Nurturing Employee Well-being

Well-being is the ability of individuals to address normal stresses, work productively, and realize one's highest potential. Employees that are in good health are more likely to deliver optimal performance in the workplace. Healthy employees not only have better quality of life, they also benefit from having a lower risk of disease, illness, and injury, as well as increased work productivity and a greater likelihood of contributing to their communities. So how do we implement a wellness program for staff? Try sending a needs and interest survey to employees, creating a wellness committee and ensuring you have leadership support. Next, work with employees to create programs that are accessible, communicate the program offerings through many channels (staff meetings, emails, calendar



By sharing experiences, knowledge, and encouragement, we amplify the positive impact on each other's lives, creating a ripple effect that extends far beyond the gym.

invites, etc.). Here are a few ideas that we have seen success with; monthly 20 minute Movement & Meditation breaks, conducted on Zoom so that everyone can participate no matter where they are working. Our wellness committee created “Get Rec'd,” a monthly social event for all employees to attend. These events range from bowling on ice, SUP Yoga at the lakefront, a mixology class, cardio tennis, and more!

We also offer exclusive employee fitness classes for coworkers to work out together and take a break from their workday.

Current Trends in Fitness:

The Informed Fitness Consumer

In this age of technology, individuals search for a more active role in their health journeys. Remaining attuned to emerging fitness trends becomes imperative to cater to this informed audience.

1. Biohacking & Wearables

Step into the era of biohacking, where individuals have the power to optimize their health through a combination of lifestyle choices and cutting-edge technology. Biohacking describes do-it-yourself biology. People are now making incremental changes to their bodies through diet, exercise, lifestyle, and supplementation to improve their health, well-being, and cognitive performance. Biohacking is about eating better, sleeping, hydration and supplementation primarily. However, advancements have made it about augmentation with technology also. In 2023, biohacking exploded into the mainstream. Now regular people are concerned with optimizing both cognitive and physical performance through exercise, nutrition, supplementation, and recovery.

Devices like the Oura Ring and the Apple Watch allow you to monitor your blood oxygen levels, stress hormone response, and detailed sleep reports. For example, the Oura Ring analyzes sleeping data points to answer the question “How did I sleep last night” and then provides suggestions for improvement.

2. Holistic Health

The holistic paradigm of wellness shines a spotlight on emotional and mental health. Fitness programs are no longer confined to sets and reps; they now include stress management, mindfulness, and nutrition coaching – acknowledging the connection between physical and mental well-being. As a result, we will likely see more fitness programs that focus on stress management, mindfulness, and nutrition coaching in addition to traditional workouts. Adding meditation to current classes/programming is a great place to start and slowly introduce it to your community.

3. Recovery and Wellness

Recent years have witnessed a surge in research spotlighting the benefits of fitness recovery, sparking widespread interest in activities beyond the typical rest periods between workouts. Active recovery tools such as foam rollers and massage guns have become fixtures in the fitness industry, a trend expected to climb in the current year. Fitness professionals should consider providing recovery tools for their clients in a dedicated recovery zone. That could mean having massage guns and foam rollers available in the warm-up/cool-down area. You should also provide guidance and information about the benefits of active recovery as well as how to utilize it.

Furthermore, emerging tools like cryotherapy, cold plunges, and infrared saunas are gaining prominence, offering many benefits ranging from sports and fitness to mental health, beauty, and longevity. The reason for their growth extends beyond trends – the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified health consciousness, prompting individuals to seek alternative avenues for boosting immunity and managing stress.

4. Low Impact Workouts & Gamification

The allure of low-impact workouts is not just in their physical benefits but also in their inclusivity, especially for newcomers to the fitness scene. Yoga and Pilates have been trending over the last few years and we expect to see another increase in popularity in 2024 as not just exercises but community-building group fitness formats.

Enter the realm of gamification, where fitness challenges take on a playful twist. Workout gamification injects an element of fun into exercise routines, motivating individuals to stay active and engaged. Think 4-8 week small group fitness challenges where teams compete for check-ins and challenge points or a holiday challenge motivating members to stay active and healthy during the holidays. Our holiday challenge, Holiday Hustle, has members conquering triathlon distances and logging 1,000 minutes of exercise, exemplifying the fusion of fitness and fun.

5. Free Weight Strength Training & Functional Fitness

As education about the many benefits of strength training spreads, an increasing number of individuals are embracing the idea of building strength with free weights. The paradigm shift is evident – it is not about aspiring to resemble bodybuilders or powerlifters; rather, it is about harnessing the benefits of strength training for overall well-being. Gyms that offer welcoming spaces for novice free weight enthusiasts hold a distinct advantage.

Functional Fitness, spurred by viral content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, transcends conventional workout routines. Instead, it involves movements that simulate real-

world activities, offering both variety and challenge. The emphasis is on functional fitness free weight strength training. Picture pushing a weight sled, wielding battle ropes, executing burpees, and engaging in plyometrics – all designed to mirror activities outside the confines of a gym. Carving out dedicated spaces in your facility for functional fitness will draw in new clientele and retain current members.

Our commitment to fostering well-being goes beyond the traditional fitness routines. Understanding that the pursuit of well-being is a personal and unique journey for each individual, and striving to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels supported and inspired.


Together, we are not just chasing after trends; we are building a sustainable culture of health and happiness. The interconnectedness of our community, employees, and fitness members forms the foundation of this wellness movement. By sharing experiences, knowledge, and encouragement, we amplify the positive impact on each other's lives, creating a ripple effect that extends far beyond the gym.

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Its benefits extend far beyond conventional treatments, tapping into the innate healing power of the animal-human relationship, creating moments of respite and empowerment for individuals facing diverse challenges.

Harnessing the Healing Powers of Animals

By Jodie Diegel, RN, MBA, President/Founder SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program

Animal-assisted therapy, a beacon of empathy and healing, harnesses the remarkable bond between humans and animals to foster emotional, physical, and mental well-being. In this transformative approach, trained animals—ranging from dogs and cats to horses, and more—become invaluable partners in therapeutic sessions, offering comfort, support, and a unique form of connection. Through gentle interactions and unconditional companionship, animal-assisted therapy transcends words, alleviating stress, anxiety, and loneliness while promoting social engagement, confidence, and a profound sense of joy. Its benefits extend far beyond conventional treatments, tapping into the innate healing power of the animal-human relationship, creating moments of respite and empowerment for individuals facing diverse challenges.

Park districts, embracing the inclusive power of nature, can seamlessly integrate animal-assisted therapy into their programs. By intertwining the tranquility of the park with the healing embrace of animal companions, park districts can create inclusive, nurturing spaces that cater to the holistic well-being of individuals and families.

Who We Are

The SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program, located in Barrington, Illinois, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to enrich lives by promoting the unconditional love and healing of the human-animal bond, while advocating for animal therapy standards of excellence.



We are the Chicagoland's most experienced comprehensive animal-assisted therapy program, which includes registered therapy dogs, registered miniature therapy horses and a registered therapy cat. Our volunteer handlers and our therapy animals have gone through extensive training and must pass Pet Partners therapy testing exams, the national "gold standard" for animal therapy.

Our Animal Assisted Therapy Program uses miniature therapy horses, therapy dogs, and a therapy cat who visit and share their unconditional love with those in need, at hospitals, nursing homes and retirement communities, schools, libraries, veteran facilities, homes for the disabled, and more.

We love mentoring new therapy animal teams, and we love educating others about what we do, what our animals do, the benefits and how to build a successful program. With 50 registered Pet Partners volunteer handlers and close to 100 registered therapy teams, our experience and professionalism, by aligning with a national therapy animal organization such as Pet Partners, conveys competency and professionalism.

The Difference between Animal-Assisted Activities and Animal-Assisted Therapy

AAA (Animal-Assisted Activities) are basically the casual "meet and greet" activities that involve pets visiting people. The same activity can be repeated with many people, unlike a therapy program that is tailored to a particular person or medical condition.

AAT (Animal-Assisted Therapy) is a goal-directed intervention directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. AAT is designed

to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning.

EAA and EAT (Equine-Assisted Therapy) used interchangeably when equines/horses are used for activity or therapy visits, like the SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program! Because Pet Partners is not animal-specific or equine exclusive, we use their broader terms of AAA/AAT.

Our SOUL Harbour Ranch Animal Therapy Program volunteers have gone through extensive training and testing to become registered Pet Partners animal therapy teams. What do we do and why? According to Pet Partners, there are many benefits to implementing animal-assisted interventions.

Benefits Of The Human Animal Bond And Animal-Assisted Interventions (Activities/Therapies)

Human animal bond and Human-animal interactions may provide the following benefits to adults and children in a variety of human care facilities:

EMPATHY: Studies report that children who live in homes in which a pet is considered a member of the family are more empathetic than children in homes without pets. It is easier to teach children to be empathetic with an animal than with a human.

OUTWARD FOCUS: Individuals who have mental illness or low self-esteem focus on themselves; animals can help them focus on their environment. Rather than thinking and talking about themselves and their problems, they watch and talk to and about the animals.

NURTURING: Nurturing skills are learned. Many at-risk children have not learned nurturing skills through the traditional channel – their parents. By being taught to take care of an animal, the children can develop these skills.

RAPPORT: Therapy animals can open a channel of emotionally safe, non-threatening communication between client and therapist. Children are especially likely to project their feelings and experiences onto an animal.

ACCEPTANCE: Animals have a way of accepting without qualification. They don't care how a person looks or what they say. An animal's acceptance is nonjudgmental, forgiving, and uncomplicated by the psychological games people often play.

ENTERTAINMENT: At a minimum, the presence of an animal can be entertaining. Even people who don't like animals often enjoy watching their antics and reactions. Especially in long-term care facilities, it seems everyone is entertained by animal visits in some way.

SOCIALIZATION: Studies have shown that when therapy dogs and therapy cats come to visit a care facility, there is more laughter and interaction among residents than during any other “therapy” or entertainment time.

MENTAL STIMULATION: In situations that are depressing

or institutional, the presence of the animals serves to brighten the atmosphere, increasing amusement, laughter, and play. These positive distractions may help to decrease people's feelings of isolation or alienation.

PHYSICAL CONTACT/TOUCH: Having a therapy animal to hold, hug, and touch can make a world of difference to people who would otherwise have no positive, appropriate physical contact.

PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS: Many people are able to relax when therapy animals are present. Tests have shown that the decrease in heart rate and blood pressure can be dramatic. Even watching fish swim in an aquarium can be very calming.

SOMETHING MORE: When they are with the therapy animals, some people feel spiritual fulfillment or a sense of oneness with life and nature.

Because of the incredible benefits listed above, the needs and requests for animal-assisted activity and therapy visits far exceeds the number of available teams. At SOUL Harbour Ranch, we have to turn down many requests simply because we do not have enough teams to meet the needs of those who would like us to visit



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How to Incorporate Animal-Assisted Activities in Your Agency

So, how can a park district develop a successful animal-assisted activity or therapy program?

First, they might look to an outside therapy nonprofit or look for individual registered/certified therapy teams who can provide visits. They can put out a request through Pet Partners, Alliance of Therapy Dogs, or any one of the number of therapy animal organizations that are either local or national.

Second, they might choose to offer their own therapy animal training with a certified animal trainer onsite. This will help to recruit local teams who may be interested in providing therapy but don't know how to start. The animal trainer should have knowledge of the different therapy animal organizations that may be available and it would be best practice if that animal trainer as an evaluator for therapy animal teams to ensure appropriate and proper skill sets are taught.

What are proper skill sets for therapy animals and how do you know if your pet will be a good therapy animal? We always suggest working with a great trainer. Additionally, ensure appropriate socialization of your animal. Your trainer will help you achieve basic obedience skills with your animal partner, and make sure that your animal is good around people and other animals. Those are key basics! Many trainers are also familiar with the AKC's Canine Good Citizen testing, a great 10-skill test for dogs which demonstrates a dog's good manners and responsible dog ownership.

Pet Partners, the pioneer of animal-assisted activity and therapy visits, requires a handler course. The key to safe,

effective visits is the training for the "human end of the leash"—the person. The Handler Training provides a wonderful foundation for the history and essentials of AAA and AAT. It is not an animal training course but rather teaches responsibilities and expectations for successfully volunteering as a Pet Partners handler.

Pet Partners also requires the evaluation or "testing" with your animal that you must pass in order to become a registered team. The skills exercises and aptitude exercises evaluate both handlers and animals. Skills exercises include basic obedience skills such as sit, down, stay and come, as well as accepting petting, walking through a crowd, reactions to distractions. Aptitude exercises include overall handling, exuberant and clumsy petting, restraining hug, being crowded and petted by several people, and leave it. You can test with one of 9 different breeds of animals to become a registered therapy team through Pet Partners including rats, guinea pigs, birds, rabbits, cats, dogs, pigs, equine (horses/donkeys), and llamas/alpacas.

Once teams have completed the above requirements, as well as a background check and payment of fees, they are covered by a Pet Partners liability policy.

Learn more about the work we do and don't hesitate to reach out if you want to learn how you can incorporate animal-assisted activities into your agency. Visit www.soulharbourranch.org to learn more.



Learn how the **Rockford Park District** is using animal-assisted therapy to help its residents in a special episode of IAPD's **Park Cast**. Scan the QR code to watch!

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PEOPLE & PLACES



Pilmer retires as executive director of the Fox Valley Park District

After eight years calling the shots as executive director at the Fox Valley Park District, Jim Pilmer announced his retirement.

Hired as FVPD's sixth executive director in 2015, Pilmer pledged to remain visible, accessible, approachable and accountable throughout his tenure.

Many of the accomplishments under his leadership include construction of two new facilities and six parks, creation and rollout of the Fox Fitness brand, acquisition of key riverfront property, and expansion of territory served by the district through annexations, construction of 10 outdoor pickleball courts at parks. Revitalization of the Orchard Valley property, significant trail connectivity improvements, including the widening and paving of the Illinois Prairie Path, and development of the rolling "Five-Year Financial Forecast" to ensure stability, safeguard district assets, and provide consistent, quality programming, events and services to district residents and visitors.

Pilmer spent a total of 27 years in public service, including two stints as department head (parks and recreation, and neighborhood standards) for the City of Aurora. Throughout his career, Pilmer has championed inclusion and equality for underserved populations in the community. Under Pilmer's watch at the park district, the Golf For Kids Benefit Outing – the signature event of the Fox Valley Park Foundation – raised nearly \$540,000 to support programs such as free swim lessons for underprivileged youth, veteran's luncheons and events, and programs for seniors.



Randall stepping down from Forest Preserves of Cook County

Arnold Randall is stepping down as the general superintendent of the Forest Preserves of Cook County in January, after 13 years in the position. Deputy General Superintendent Eileen Figel will serve as the interim general superintendent.

During Randall's tenure, the forest preserves became a more transparent and accountable government agency, with increased commitments to ecological restoration, sustainability, and racial equity, diversity and inclusion. Key accomplishments include an ambitious Next Century Conservation Plan; creating a department dedicated to programs and outreach; and opening five new campgrounds that re-establish the legacy of camping in the Preserves.

The forest preserves remained open during the COVID pandemic shut-down, and annual visits rose from approximately 62 million annually to 100 million in 2020. Most recently, voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum to raise the property tax levy for the forest preserves, adding more than \$40 million annually in funding and putting the organization on a sustainable fiscal path.



Paprocki named Fox Valley Park District Executive Director

The Fox Valley Park District announced the appointment of Jennifer Paprocki as executive director, which began Jan. 1.

A 12-year veteran of FVPD's administrative team, including the last three years as director of finance – a position that also manages the district's human resources division, Paprocki becomes the agency's seventh executive director in its 76-year history. Paprocki succeeds Jim Pilmer who in June announced his decision to retire following an eight-year run as FVPD's leader.

Hired as assistant director of finance in 2010, Paprocki was promoted to director in November 2020, during the height of the pandemic. At the board's direction and in her first major initiative as department head, Paprocki developed and implemented an economic relief plan for all employees in response to financial hardships resulting from the pandemic.

Additionally, Paprocki was directly involved in constructing the district's five-year, \$40-million capital budgeting plan, while considering additional financial impacts on operational costs, funding availability, and the offsetting benefits projects may provide to the district and the 236,000 residents it serves across three municipalities. She also expedited the district's minimum-wage increase to \$15/hour – two years ahead of the state's required implementation date – to remain viable in a competitive market.



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