



Capacity Building in Chicago Parks: Evaluation of Needs Assessment Interviews

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Public parks are a great resource for communities, providing cultural, educational, and physical activity opportunities. The city of Chicago has 600 parks and more than 8,800 acres of green space, making the Chicago Park District the largest municipal park manager in the country.¹ Due to the nature of the facilities and programs offered, parks may play a role in increasing physical activity, reducing the prevalence of obesity, and promoting better health overall.

Approximately 1 in 3 Illinois adults is obese. In Chicago, the prevalence of obesity differs drastically throughout the city; some of Chicago's most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have an adult obesity rate of nearly 40%.^{2,3} Similarly, 1 in 3 Illinois children are overweight or obese and in Chicago, the prevalence is even higher at 43.3%.^{2,4} Because of its association with serious and chronic health risks, considerations on how to reduce obesity, especially childhood obesity, is of significant public health concern. One opportunity for reducing the prevalence of obesity is increasing physical activity. In Illinois, only 25.4% of adolescents and 50% of adults meet weekly physical activity recommendations.⁵

Researchers are building the capacity of community coalitions to improve health outcomes. Enhancing and maintaining the skills, capabilities, and resources of coalitions helps communities address problems and facilitate change.⁶ To this end, the Chicago Park District promotes park advisory councils (PACs), which consist of volunteers from the community who facilitate the functioning of their park.⁷ PACs can serve as liaisons between the community and

the park district; promote programs and events in the park; and assist in fundraising for park improvements.⁷ Building the capacity of community coalitions or park advisory councils could increase park use and physical activity.

In an effort to leverage the large capital investment of recent playground renovations across the city of Chicago, in winter 2017 researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), in partnership with the Chicago Park District, developed the Park Advisory Council Capacity-Building Initiative (PAC CBI). The PAC CBI provides a learning environment that builds the skills, knowledge, and support vital to developing, expanding and sustaining PACs. UIC researchers are evaluating the impact of the PAC CBI on increasing park use and physical activity in 20 recently renovated parks. These parks will be compared to 20 renovated and 20 un-renovated parks that were not exposed to the PAC CBI.

This research brief presents results of the baseline needs assessment that will inform the evaluation of the PAC CBI.

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Data and Methods

In October 2017, researchers began contacting members of PACs, community coalitions, and individual community members to participate in semi-structured telephone needs assessment interviews, including both open and closed-ended questions. Researchers conducted online searches of community groups and visited parks to recruit community members involved in parks within the study's sample. For those parks where no PAC existed and no community member was identified, members of the research team worked with the Chicago Park District to interview park supervisors. The needs assessment interviews included questions on social cohesion, programming, safety, maintenance, marketing and communications, and leadership

After completion of the interviews, 15 park supervisors (representing 16 parks) and 26 individuals including leaders from local PACs, nonprofit organizations, and the community agreed to participate in the PAC CBI. Park supervisors received additional capacity building trainings to recruit community members to participate in their local PACs. The PAC CBI kick-off occurred in May 2018. The initiative was developed to fit the needs of

participants. The training includes four online modules and individual technical assistance, allowing participants to engage on their own schedule.

SKILLS TAUGHT IN PAC CBI TRAINING MODULES:

- Develop and execute programs and activities to increase park use.
- Build/sustain partnerships to increase PAC infrastructure.
- Expand PAC membership.
- Enhance participant leadership skills.
- Develop communication and conflict resolution skills.

PAC CBI OUTCOMES:

- Increased park programming and park use.
- Increased park safety and decreased violence concerns.
- Increased park maintenance and enhanced park facilities.
- Improved park connectivity to community interests and needs.

Results

Overview

- 55 (92% response rate) baseline needs assessment interviews were conducted.
- Interviewees included 26 (47%) PAC or coalition members, 13 (24%) individual community members, and 16 (29%) park supervisors (Figure 1).
- PAC/coalition members and park supervisors have been formally involved with their respective parks for an average of 5-6 years (Figure 2).
- Individual participants interviewed have various relationships with their parks including attending the park with their children, participating in park programming, or volunteering in the neighborhood/park.

Park Programming

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN IMPROVING PARK PROGRAMMING

- 65% of PAC/coalition members have made suggestions to the Chicago Park District on how to improve park programs compared to 23% of individual interviewees. Only 31% of park supervisors state that community members have offered feedback on improving park programs (Figure 3).
- 50% of PAC/coalition members have played a role in deciding which programs are offered at parks compared to 0% of individual interviewees. 50% of park supervisors have played a role in deciding which programs are offered at their park (Figure 3).

APPROPRIATENESS OF PARK PROGRAMS FOR THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

- While more than half (56%) of all park supervisors agreed that the programming currently offered at their park represents the interests and needs of the community, a much smaller percentage of PAC/coalition members and individual interviewees agreed with that sentiment (42% and 15%, respectively).
- Feedback from interview participants indicates that local parks need to provide more inclusive programming targeted to a variety of park users, including teenagers and younger adults. There is also a need to teach community members how to work with small play lots to host local events or programs.

“We’re one of the top 20 in the Park District [programming], but I would really like to see what other programs they want.”
– Park supervisor

“A lot of our classes seem to be geared towards either young kids or older adults.”
– PAC/coalition member

“There’s not enough room for programming. It’s literally a play lot.”
– Individual interviewee

FIGURE 1 Percentage of baseline needs assessment interviews completed, by respondent type

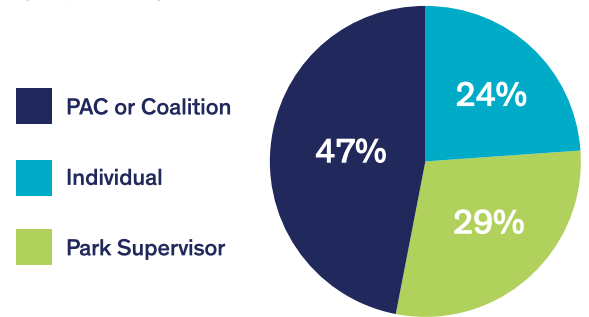


FIGURE 2 Average number of years the respondent has been involved with their park/community coalition by respondent type, Chicago, IL, 2017-2018

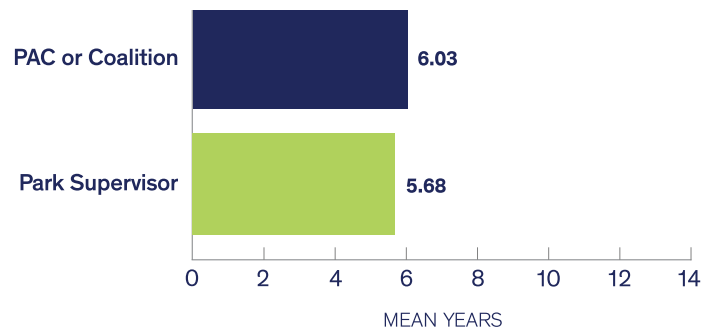
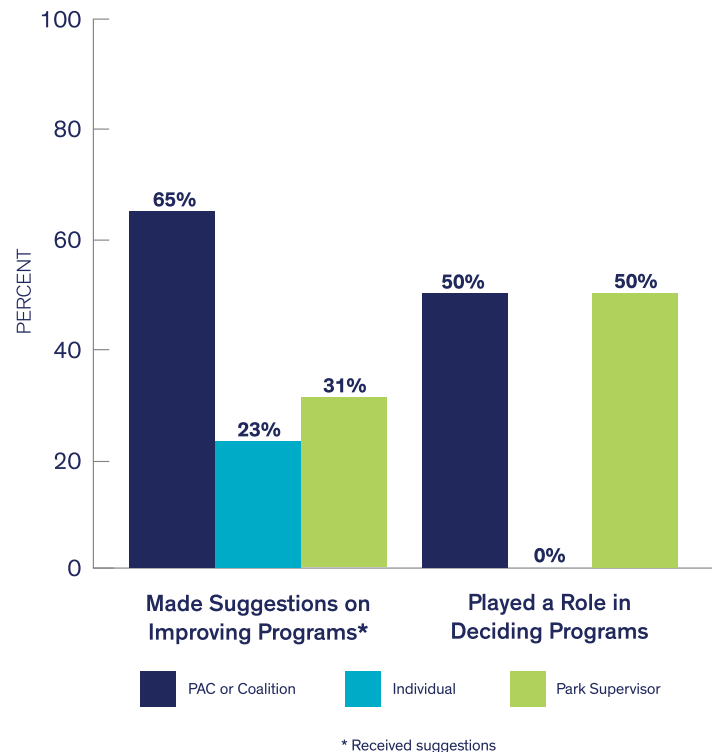


FIGURE 3 Percentage of respondents who have offered input on park programming by respondent type, Chicago, IL, 2017-2018



Park Safety and Crime Concerns

■ 65% of PAC/coalition members are concerned about safety in the park compared to 15% of individual interviewees and 63% of park supervisors (Figure 4).

■ 69% of PAC/coalition members have reported safety/crime concerns in the park to park district staff compared to 15% of individual interviewees. 56% of park supervisors state that members of the community have reported safety and crime concerns to park staff (Figure 4).

“There’s always safety concerns. Always. That’ll never change. It’s a shared public space in a major world city, so I think that’ll always be relevant.”

– PAC/coalition member

“Sometimes when the community feels unsafe around a particular area, that’s when they tend to not want to come around that particular location. I feel like [the] park is in a location that has high gang activity.”

– Park Supervisor

Marketing and Communication

■ 81% of PAC/coalition members, 38% of individual interviewees, and 100% of park supervisors have used flyers or word of mouth to share information about their park (Figure 5).

■ 85% of PAC/coalition members, 62% of individual interviewees, and 63% of park supervisors have used email/social media to share information about their park (Figure 5).

■ Although the majority of interview participants have marketed park programs and events to their communities, there is still a need to build marketing and communication skills.

“I think trying to get your message out to the people you want to reach can be difficult. We’re trying to learn how to do that and how to get people to come.”

– PAC/coalition member

“If we have the marketing tool to reach more than just the kids and an awesome community, I think that would be such an amazing accomplishment.”

– Park supervisor

FIGURE 4 Percentage of respondents concerned with local park safety or crime by respondent type, Chicago, IL, 2017-2018

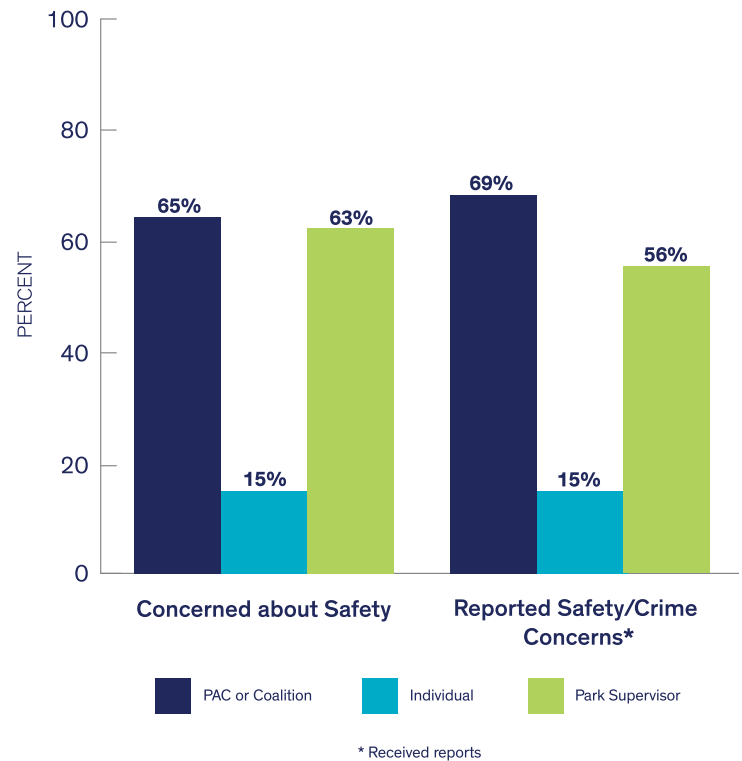
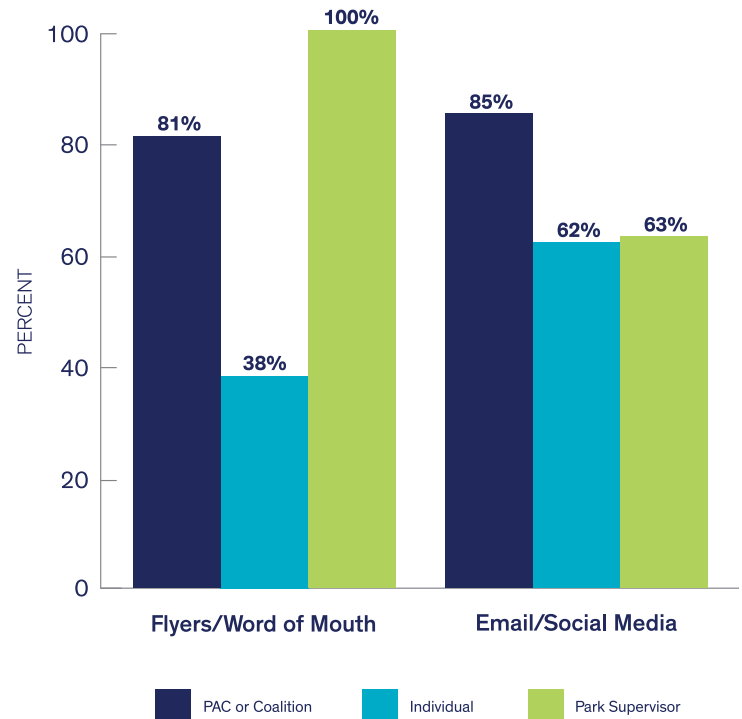


FIGURE 5 Percentage of respondents employing park marketing/communication methods by respondent type, Chicago, IL 2017-2018



Results Summary

Baseline needs assessment interviews were conducted with 55 participants, including 13 individual community members, 26 park advisory council or other community coalition members, and 16 park supervisors. Two park supervisors declined to participate in the interview and three park supervisors initially agreed but missed each scheduled interview. 65% of PAC/coalition members have made suggestions to the park district on improving park programs. 69% of PAC/coalition members have reported safety or crime concerns to park supervisors. 63% of park supervisors use email or social media to share information about their park compared to 85% of PAC/coalition members.

Discussion

In general, community members and park staff engaged with their parks for several years, on average 5–6 years prior to this study. Initial baseline needs assessment results show that PAC CBI participants do have training needs related to park programming, maintenance, safety, and marketing and communication activities. We found that training needs vary across participant types (PAC members, individual community members, and park supervisors) with park supervisors and PAC members having more experience using marketing and communication tools and bringing programs to their parks than individual community members. Many park supervisors discussed the importance of building sustainable engagement that allows all age groups to use parks and their programs. All of the park supervisors interviewed use “word of mouth” techniques and paper flyers. Therefore, there is an opportunity to increase use of online communications platforms to promote park programs and events. By increasing social media use, they may reach a wider audience and bring in more park users.

We also found that although PAC leaders were aware of park-related safety concerns and maintenance issues, there is a need to learn the process for reporting these concerns to the Chicago Park District to ensure that they are addressed within the park. The PAC CBI modules provide the tools needed by community members to bridge the gap between knowledge and actual implementation of strategies to address these important park-specific issues.

Definitions

Park Advisory Council (PAC): Voluntary, organized group of individuals who meet on a regular basis to support the effective functioning of their local park. Leaders are elected by vote, and all new PAC members must complete application forms to join.

Park Advisory Council Capacity Building Initiative (PAC CBI): Targeted training tailored for PAC members to improve their knowledge on sustaining success and improvements in their local park.

Coalitions: Structured organizations, such as block clubs, non-profit organizations, or community groups that are involved with the local parks.

Individuals: Members of the community who use the park but have no affiliation to groups related to the park or community.

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