



**Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight – Recreation Centers**

December 12, 2018

Testimony By: Emily Chase, Assistant Commissioner for Public Programs

Good morning, Chair Grodenchik and members of the Parks & Recreation Committee. I am Emily Chase, Assistant Commissioner for Public Programs at the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. I'm joined by Adena Long, our Deputy Commissioner for Urban Park Service and Public Programs, and Matt Drury, Director of Government Relations. Thank you for inviting us to testify today regarding the Park's Department's recreation centers. We think it would be helpful to first provide some broader context about the recreational and programming aspects of our agency's mission.

The Recreation unit at NYC Parks falls under the umbrella of the Public Programs Division, which is also comprised of Aquatics, Media Education, Puppetry, and Education & Wildlife, including the Urban Park Rangers. Recreation's mission is to enable all New Yorkers to lead physically active and intellectually stimulating lives through sports, fitness, outdoor adventure, technology, education and the arts. The division's full-time headcount is approximately 500 staff, including managerial and programming staff as well as those that provide technical support and general maintenance.

Citywide, we have 36 recreation centers which are overseen by Recreation. This includes our newest building, the Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex, which is a 135,000-square foot indoor track facility that hosted over 175,000 athletes at 86 competitions in 2018. The remaining 35 centers are older facilities - the oldest having been built in 1900. Being that the average age of our centers is 66 years, our centers offer a diverse range in both form and function: 21 have gyms, 12 have indoor pools, and 12 feature outdoor pools. Our recreation centers far exceed neighboring commercial fitness facilities in terms of character, culture, and community. They boast pools, gyms, multipurpose rooms, fitness rooms, media labs, indoor tracks, cardio rooms, and classrooms, providing an inclusive atmosphere not often found at a typical fitness center.

At NYC Parks, we seek to provide lifelong holistic enrichment, nurturing New Yorkers of all ages and abilities. We offer a wide variety of programming, from instructional sports to competitive leagues, yoga to swimming, rooftop stargazing to painting, Pickle Ball to Double Dutch, chair aerobics to Zumba, concerts to lectures, roller skating to advanced Adobe design software certification training, and many more opportunities for engagement. Additionally, we provide youth of NYC an opportunity to learn, grow, and develop skills and interests through programs like swim teams, afterschool, summer camp, and adaptive recreation for people with disabilities. Creating these types of life-changing, soul-enriching opportunities is our focus, and it is what we do best.

We further expand our ability to make these opportunities available to all by working with partner organizations to provide specialty programming for New Yorkers, collaborating with groups such as The Art Students League of New York, The Public Theater, The Jazz Foundation of America, Jeter's Leaders, The New York Red Bulls, Madison Square Garden, and the New York Jets. As previously mentioned, we also offer opportunities for New Yorkers to enrich their interest and skills in media and technology, which is so important in this modern society and economy. The Media Education unit of Public Programs provides high quality digital resources and creative learning opportunities in 33 media labs within recreation centers, including certification programs for Microsoft Office, video editing and storytelling, photography, and STEAM-aligned classes offering 3D imaging and robotics.

Within the walls of our recreation centers so far this calendar year, we have offered over 3,250 individual programs, totaling over 500,000 hours of programming, to approximately 150,000 recreation center members. In addition to programs, our recreation center members have access to over 1,350 pieces of fitness equipment that provide exercise and wellness opportunities in countless combinations.



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But at NYC Parks, we don't let brick and mortar limit our ability to provide programming, and we have a plethora of offerings for all audiences throughout the City well beyond the confines of our recreation centers. Our mobile recreation programs, including the Play Mobile and Fitness Mobile, allow us the ability to visit various community events from April through October and bring these recreational opportunities directly to New Yorkers, reaching over 25,000 people each season. One of our most popular mobile programs is the Movies Under the Stars program. This annual summer movie series, hosted in partnership with the Mayor's Office of Media & Entertainment, grants us the opportunity to bring unique and colorful programming to over 50,000 New Yorkers, right in their local neighborhood park. By partnering with private organizations, we have been able to offer New Yorkers the chance to take part in our Arts, Culture & Fun program series throughout the five boroughs, including Tango classes in Washington Square Park, Jazz concerts in Harlem, and Taikoza drumming performances in Queens.

We also offer outdoor programming in our parks that is specifically tailored to youth, through our Kids in Motion and Summer Sports Experience programs. Kids in Motion engages children in active, outdoor play at 101 sites citywide, and had over 473,000 visits this calendar year. Similarly, the Summer Sports Experience program teaches sports skills, capturing an audience of young athletic enthusiasts who are interested in further developing their skills; that program saw over 34,000 visits this year. Another successful program for children, the Puppeteers program, has a home stage in the Swedish Cottage in Central Park and offers free, mobile puppet performances and puppet making workshops citywide.

Though youth programming is a priority for NYC Parks, we know that recreational opportunities are just as important for adults and seniors. Our signature fitness and wellness program that targets adults and seniors is the Shape Up NYC program. Leveraging financial support from Empire BlueCross BlueShield and private donors, Shape Up NYC provides free fitness programming in our parks, recreation centers and beyond, in locations all throughout the City. Since the program began in 2003, it has received over 1 million visits, which is an incredible success. This program also features a train-the-trainer component; where members of the public have the ability to become trained fitness instructors.

As part of a larger, agency-wide effort to better activate our outdoor pools, this past summer, NYC Parks successfully implemented a new pilot initiative known as Cool Pools. Colorful design, art, furniture, and programming were used to reimagine and renovate five pilot outdoor pools citywide. By investing time and resources in these aging sites, we transformed traditional pool spaces into fun, vibrant, and energized spaces offering more than just swimming. Various aquatics and Shape Up NYC classes, wildlife and arts education, mobile movies and other pop-up programs were all part of the menu of activities available at these sites and we look forward to continuing to reactivate and reenergize our pools in years to come.

As you can hear, our Recreation unit prides itself on offering a wide variety of programming to people of all ages, abilities and interests. For that to be possible, we need to sustain our recreation facilities, ensuring that they are in the best condition possible. Therefore the agency monitors this with specific, regular processes and benchmarks.

To continually monitor the state of our recreation centers, Parks utilizes the agency's Asset Management Park System to store and analyze maintenance and operational information about routine upkeep and repairs. Our recreation centers are also inspected twice a year for safety, cleanliness, and structural condition via the Recreation Evaluation and Center Assessment Program, administered by the agency's Operations & Management Planning division. In addition to dedicated maintenance staff, our Playground Associates can both facilitate programming as well as perform light maintenance. Many Council Members are familiar with the great services provided by our Playground Associates, as we have been able to hire up to an additional 140 seasonal employees, thanks to discretionary Council Member funding. To help improve the physical condition of our centers, we routinely focus on "Quick Wins," small but impactful improvements implemented to improve the quality of our Recreation Centers and to enhance the experience of our members. Projects have included targeted facility improvements, improvements to a specific room in a center, or new equipment purchases. This approach allows agency leadership to prioritize our needs and inform decision making towards future investments.



Beyond the everyday maintenance conducted by our staff, many of our Recreation centers have received millions of dollars in capital investment during the current Administration to address structural and mechanical deficiencies, upgrade fire alarms, and bring buildings up to a "state of good repair." In order to properly assess all of our building's needs, a Capital team of engineers and technical staff is performing a thorough assessment of each center one-by-one, capturing and reporting their findings through a mobile application created specifically for this purpose. Hamilton Fish in Manhattan, our oldest Recreation Center, is the first one to be assessed. Though the needs of many of these centers are significant, we are putting the tools in place to properly prioritize and plan for the future, so they can remain robust and vital amenities for the communities they serve.

Though there is much more work needed to be done, the agency has consistently invested in its recreation centers. In Fiscal Year 2015, Parks received \$39.5 million in Mayoral funding to address priority recreation center reconstruction and renovations. Utilizing these funds, seven capital projects are now underway at six facilities, including two large scale (over \$20 million) renovations to Brownsville and Hansborough Recreation Centers. As recently as the last fiscal year (FY18), Parks received an additional \$78 million to address priority concerns within the recreation centers, of which \$34 million has been committed to facility projects citywide, including \$7.1 million to upgrade or reconstruct safety measures, such as fire alarm systems. These investments to our facilities are important to ensure safe and welcoming facilities for our members.

NYC Parks Recreation Centers are membership-based facilities. Anyone can become a member by submitting a complete membership registration form, the appropriate membership payment, and a government-issued I.D. at any one of our thirty-six recreation centers citywide. Annual membership fees for adults ages 25 through 61 is \$150 for access to centers with indoor pools, or \$100, for access to centers without pools. Annual memberships for Seniors ages 62 and up, Veterans, People with Disabilities, and Young Adults are discounted and only cost \$25, and annual memberships for youth under age 18 are free. Additionally, New Yorkers ages 25-61 can receive a 10% discount for all adult memberships if they have an IDNYC card.

The latest Mayor's Management Report noted a drop in both attendance and memberships for our recreation centers. We believe there are a few contributing factors for these changes.

Firstly, attendance tracking includes all visitors to our facilities, including those who are simply seeking access to bathrooms or other amenities, without a membership. The agency has now begun enforcing our membership policy, which allows for only members to make use of the facility, more strictly at our recreation centers, for the safety of all of our patrons. Implementing this policy helped make our centers more secure and enjoyable for our members, by helping us to better control access and allowing us to more accurately record usage in our facilities, but it clearly had an effect on attendance figures relative to past years.

Second, as we strive towards upgrading our buildings and services, we are phasing out the use of our near 20 year old membership tracking system, RecWare. While it has been useful for much of its time, it has limitations that have led to discrepancies in attendance counts in recent years. We are working to identify a new software vendor through the City's procurement process and look forward to being able to implement new membership software in the near future. This new system will have much more flexibility and functionality with regard to data capture, storage, and analysis, and will be fully integrated with the Parks website. Additionally, many of our Recreation Centers gain access to the Internet through the city's wireless network, NYCWiN. We do occasionally encounter connectivity outages and gaps, which can impact our ability to process memberships or track member and visitor data. We are currently assessing our connectivity needs at each site, and tailoring specific data solutions where possible in each site.

Lastly, success sometimes breeds new challenges. While everyone can appreciate the upgrades to our recreation facilities being delivered through Quick Wins and major Capital projects, these projects are disruptive and inevitably lead to restricted access or closures for a given amount of time. We always seek to redirect members and programming to alternative sites when a planned closure takes place, but at times, we cannot predict service disruptions. For example, emergency repair work to Roy Wilkins Pool in



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2017 required several months to address, but given the sudden nature of the work required, the Center unfortunately lost one of its main attractions and center attendance suffered as a result. Though they do result in a short-term loss in attendance, these closures for repairs are obviously necessary and helpful in the long-term, to keep these facilities in working order.

In closing, we would like to reiterate the positive impact that, not only our recreation centers, but our entire Recreation unit has made across the five boroughs. We strive to bring free and low-cost, accessible programming to all New Yorkers. While these photos have given you a taste of some of our offerings, you each have a standing offer to join us at any of our Recreation Centers or outdoor programs. Thank you for this opportunity to share our work with you, as we serve New Yorkers, focusing on fun, health and happiness. We appreciate your continued advocacy and support. We will now be happy to answer any questions you might have.



**New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight Hearing: The State of the City's Recreation Centers
December 12, 2018
Emily Walker, Director of Outreach & Programs**

Good afternoon, my name is Emily Walker, and I am the Director of Outreach and Programs at New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I would like to thank the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting us to speak on the importance of our City's recreation centers today.

The City's 36 recreation centers are a critical resource for New Yorkers, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where obesity and asthma rates are high, and residents have limited options for recreation and fitness. In addition to the bricks and mortar facilities managed by NYC Parks, recreation programming run through the agency provides a wealth of opportunities for New Yorkers of all ages and abilities to improve health outcomes and build community. Although the agency may no longer highlight "recreation" in its name, we believe this component of the agency's mandate is an incredibly important service provided to New Yorkers, and is one worth investing in.

More and more, public health experts are acknowledging the key role that our parks play in improving public health outcomes. This idea has even caught on in the form of "park prescriptions" from healthcare professionals to encourage patients to engage in healthy outdoor recreation as a means for treating physical and mental health issues. In a city where we experience inclement weather throughout the year, the indoor recreation centers offered by our Parks Department will play a critical role long-term in improving public health throughout New York City.

In 2013, we testified before this Committee to share our concerns that the new membership pricing structure would preclude many of New York's lower income residents from being able to take advantage of our public recreation centers. The agency's response at that time – to implement lower-cost membership levels for young adults and seniors – was a meaningful way to address some of the inequities raised by the increased membership rate. Additional reduced-rate memberships for New Yorkers with disabilities and veterans have also been a positive change in reaching more New Yorkers, as is the discount offered to IDNYC holders. We do still have concerns that the current membership rate for adults is cost prohibitive for many low income New Yorkers, however, and may have the unintended effect of contributing to a drop in overall attendance and membership at our public recreation centers. For the nearly 2 million New Yorkers living below the poverty line, the ability to pay \$150 for a year membership, or even \$75 for a half year membership, may be completely out of reach.

A look back at recent Mayor's Management Reports (MMR) from the past four fiscal years shows a troubling downward trend in membership and attendance at recreation centers. From a recent high point in

FY16, there has been a steady decline in both membership and attendance. The MMR for FY16 states that the increase in both membership and recreation center attendance for that year could be attributed to the opening of the Ocean Breeze facility in Staten Island. We are concerned that the momentum from that year has been lost, and is an indicator that the City needs to take a more comprehensive look at the factors that impact New Yorkers' ability and willingness to become members and regular users of this critical open space amenity.

Recent MMR's point out that drops in attendance and membership can be in part attributed to temporary closures of recreation centers undergoing major capital renovations. With recreation centers relatively few and far between in this city of 8.5 million New Yorkers, that is an understandable outcome. We believe capital renovations for our recreation centers, over half of which were built prior to 1950, are essential to the long-term usability of these spaces, and encourage the City to proactively take on these renovations as funding allows. We do caution, however, that this work be done in a thoughtful and pragmatic way.

Using the neighborhood of Brownsville, Brooklyn, as an example, illustrates why the City should be incredibly prudent about the renovation process for recreation centers, especially as it coincides with other major park renovation projects. In our recently published *Brownsville Open Space Index*, we found that neighborhood residents disproportionately suffer from poor health outcomes, and that young residents in particular are in need of safe spaces to engage in healthy recreation and activity. We view our parks and recreation centers as key to improving such outcomes, but in Brownsville two of these critical recreation resources are about to be temporarily unavailable for a period of time, as both the Brownsville Recreation Center and Betsy Head Park are slated for major capital renovations. Temporarily losing these two critical park amenities will mean the residents and youth of Brownsville will have even fewer opportunities for free, safe, low- or no-cost recreation and programming. It is when these assets are not available that we believe their public benefit is most magnified.

Finally, we want to note that in order for our recreation centers to be a realistic option for active recreation, they must be kept clean and in a good state of repair. The FY19 MMR found that 83% of City recreation centers rated "acceptable" for overall condition – while this was a slight increase over the FY18 findings, it still falls short of the City's stated goal of 85% of centers being rated "acceptable". NY4P believes that our public parks and recreation centers must be clean and well-maintained to convey maximum public benefit, and we encourage the Administration and the Council to ensure that critical maintenance and operations resources are being allocated in the expense budget for parks to ensure that our centers are kept to the highest standard of condition possible.

The ability for all New Yorkers to take advantage of our public recreation centers and programming is an equity issue that we believe warrants closer attention, and we hope today's hearing is one way to help address this issue. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak and I welcome any questions you may have.

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