

## **NRPA Statement on the Equitable Return to Youth Sports During Coronavirus (COVID-19) Recovery**

*Kristine Stratton, president and CEO of the [National Recreation and Park Association \(NRPA\)](#) issued the following statement in support of healthy youth development through equitable access to youth sports during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic recovery. This statement is supported by 23 community-based sports organizations.*

Throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, park and recreation professionals, in coordination with public health officials, worked tirelessly to keep parks, trails and green spaces open to support the physical and mental health of their communities, all while delivering expanded essential programs and services. Park and recreation professionals, and their agencies, consistently provide services that are critical to the healthy development of youth. NRPA also acknowledges the critical role that other youth-serving community-based organizations have played throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, parks and recreation and community-based organizations are some of the largest providers of youth sports programs across the nation, striving to provide equitable programming that benefits youth at scale. However, access to youth sports is still an unlevel playing field, a trend exacerbated by the pandemic.

As we continue to see grave health, educational and economic disparities growing among youth, we urge our colleagues in park and recreation agencies, public health and local government officials, schools, community-based organizations, and other youth sports stakeholders to significantly increase efforts to center equity in COVID-19 response and recovery. **Moreover, as we establish an equitable return to youth sports, it is imperative that restrictions and requirements imposed upon youth sports providers be applied equitably across all public and private organizations.** Private sport providers orchestrating club and travel leagues must be held to the same standards and return-to-play guidance applied to community-based providers. We cannot deny the inequities that stem from applying rules and regulations across sectors unfairly and nonuniformly – and the damage it causes to the health and well-being of youth.

Children and teenagers who participate in sports not only grow up more physically active, but also gain mental and social health benefits that follow them into adulthood. Research demonstrates that children engaged in youth sports are less likely to experience obesity, report lower levels of depression and perform better academically. According to [research conducted by the Aspen Institute's Project Play](#), participation in sports provides youth with increased opportunities to cultivate personal development and socioemotional skills such as self-esteem, goal setting, positive communication and leadership. Yet many youth, particularly Black, Indigenous, youth of color and youth living in low-income households, face additional barriers in accessing quality youth sports opportunities.

According to a [recent survey conducted by NRPA](#), COVID-19 significantly impacted park and recreation agencies' ability to deliver youth sports offerings and has contributed to greater disparities in accessing youth sports. Inequities in access to youth sports and physical activity opportunities are manifesting in communities that face additional socioeconomic barriers, a disparity that should motivate action to increase the capacity of community-based providers to deliver fair and just youth sports programming. According to research by the Aspen Institute and Utah State University, during the pandemic, children living in households with an annual income of more than \$100,000 spend two more hours per week participating in sports than children living in households with an annual income of \$50,000 or less – a gap that has doubled during the pandemic.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued [Guidance for Youth Sports Administrators](#) outlining how to safely resume youth sports programming based on rates of community transmission.

When local conditions allow for a safe return to play, park and recreation professionals, public health, local government and school officials, and other community-based and private youth sports providers should follow these guidelines to assess risk and make decisions that ensure an equitable return to sports. When reinstating opportunities for play, we urge all youth sports providers to meet the demand from parents working to support their families by offering free and low-cost sports opportunities that ensure participation for all youth. Consequently, we urge government officials to invest in fair and equitable park and recreation budgets as a critical investment in the health and well-being of all communities.

The global pandemic illuminated the harsh realities of injustice across the country. Parents and caregivers are working tirelessly, often in frontline jobs that are vital to our economy, to give their families the opportunity to thrive. It's time for our institutions and systems to reassess existing practices and policies with an equity lens. When we ensure equitable access to youth sports, all children win.

### **National Organizations**

Alliance for a Healthier Generation  
American College of Sports Medicine  
American Council on Exercise  
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)  
Girls on the Run International  
Move United  
National Ethnic Minority Society  
SHAPE America - Society of Health and Physical Educators  
Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools

### **Park and Recreation Organizations**

Arizona Parks and Recreation Association  
California Park & Recreation Society  
Colorado Parks & Recreation Association  
Florida Recreation and Park Association  
Georgia Recreation and Park Association  
Maine Recreation and Parks Association  
Maryland Recreation and Parks Association  
NC Recreation & Park Association  
New Hampshire Recreation & Park Association  
New Jersey Recreation and Park Association  
Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society  
South Carolina Recreation & Parks Association  
Utah Recreation and Parks Association  
Vermont Recreation & Park Association