



**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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For over 100 years, [New Yorkers for Parks \(NY4P\)](http://www.ny4p.org) has built, protected, and promoted parks and open spaces in New York City. Today, NY4P is the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods. [www.ny4p.org](http://www.ny4p.org)