

SPARKING

CHANGE

Catalyzing the

Social Impacts of Parks

in Underserved Neighbourhoods

park
people



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We encourage you to be in touch to share your own story and strategies, offer suggestions, and let us know how you intend to use this report in your community or work.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sparking Change tells the story of communities that have taken action to become more engaged in their local parks through spearheading improvements, engaging diverse community members, and organizing events and activities that draw people into the park—a process we refer to as “park engagement.”

The report explores the social impacts that result when communities in underserved neighbourhoods spark change in their local park, but it also identifies common strategies taken by both community members and partner organizations to support this work.

Through Park People’s work over the last five years, we’ve seen how parks can be important sites for community development—the process by which residents take action to improve their neighbourhood. By providing an open, accessible venue that promotes social gathering, cultural exchange, and shared storytelling, parks are important in developing a sense of community, safety, and belonging.

In recognition of growing inequality and the prevalence of neighbourhood-based inequities, Sparking Change focuses on the work of community members, municipalities, and partner organizations in underserved neighbourhoods. These areas have historically seen less investment than other areas of a city, for example in park programming and transit, and often include newcomers and people living on lower incomes. We took our cues for underserved neighbourhoods from the City of Toronto’s Neighbourhood Improvement Areas, which were identified in 2014 by using a selection of equity-based criteria.

We want to shine a light on the important park engagement work done in these neighbourhoods to transform neighbourhood parks into dynamic people places, and the lessons we can learn to further it.

Through conversations with two dozen community members, non-profit staff, and City staff in seven different North American cities, including Toronto, we identified five different social impacts of park engagement: creating a sense of change and shared ownership, building confidence and inspiring civic leaders, reducing social isolation and creating more inclusive communities, providing a place for diverse people to gather, and supporting local economic development.

We want to draw attention to the important role parks play in creating platforms for community members to spark change in their neighbourhoods. But we also want this report to be used as a toolkit for action by community volunteers, government, and non-profit organizations. This is why we not only outline the social impacts of parks, but also include key strategies and tips for achieving and furthering these impacts.

These strategies include ensuring initiatives are community-led, designing engagement in an inclusive and intentional manner, understanding how to use programming and food to bring people together, leveraging the resources and energy of multiple partners, providing space for local economic development initiatives, and recognizing and addressing barriers to participation.

Parks are not simply green places of respite with grass and trees—they are critical pieces of the social infrastructure of our cities. And we believe they have a role to play in creating more inclusive, equitable places that are shaped by and for the people living there. We hope this report contributes to furthering that conversation.

INTRODUCTION

When communities get involved, parks get better

When Park People launched in 2011, there were 40 park friends groups animating and improving local parks in Toronto. These are volunteer-led community groups that form around a certain park, doing things like organizing events, gardening, and building natural ice rinks. We worked to support and connect these groups through shared learning and resources, putting our motto—when communities get involved, parks get better—into action. We believed then, as we do now, that stronger, more socially connected, and inclusive communities can be created through engaging people in parks.

But we noticed that park friends groups—like the Friends of Trinity Bellwoods Park—were mostly clustered in downtown Toronto and its surrounding neighbourhoods, which were generally more affluent and well-connected than other areas in the city. In response, we launched the Parks 44 program. Our goal was to work with communities and local partner organizations to start a park friends group in each of Toronto's 44 wards. We provided training sessions, start-up grants, and connections with partners, City staff, and City councillors.

After two years, dozens of new community-led groups had sprung up in all areas of the city, bringing the total to over 100 groups across all 44 wards. Some of these new groups were in Toronto's underserved neighbourhoods—areas that the City had then identified as Priority Neighbourhoods, where people were living on lower incomes and many newcomers had settled.

While Park People provides resources, networking, and online toolkits to park friends groups across the city, we focus our time and funds on working more directly with community-led groups in these underserved neighbourhoods, most of which are outside of the downtown core. We recognize that many community members in these neighbourhoods want to be more involved in their local parks, but often encounter barriers related to resources and time.

We administer funding programs to partly address these barriers. The Weston Family Parks Challenge, for example, provided more than \$5 million in funding to innovative park projects around the city between 2013 and 2016, including many in lower-income, newcomer communities. Meanwhile, our ongoing TD Park Builders Program focuses on underserved neighbourhoods by providing micro-grants of up to \$5,000 to support nascent park friends groups to host activities and make park improvements, like better community gardens. Many of the groups that were supported through this program, such as the Flemington Urban Fair Committee included in this report, have since dramatically expanded their activities and continue to grow. The work they do is inspiring.



Earl Bales Park clean-up

On the direct programming side, we've worked with partners like the Toronto International Film Festival and the Toronto Arts Council, in collaboration with local community groups, to bring movies and arts to parks outside of the downtown core, which don't often see this type of programming.

At the heart of all this work is always a group of local community volunteers dedicated to improving the environment in their park—both its social and physical one—and creating a place where people from the community can come together in a shared space. Park People is there to facilitate and support this work by local community members. We don't bring our own solutions to the community; we help people implement their own ideas.

At a time when increasing attention is being paid to the growing inequality of our cities and neighbourhood-based inequities, it's critical that we examine how engaging in our parks and public spaces can create cities that are more inclusive and socially connected, providing communities with the opportunity to create dynamic places that best serve them.



Sparkling Change is a call to action

Sparkling Change explores the social impacts of community members becoming involved in parks, and identifies common strategies to support work done by communities and partner organizations in underserved neighbourhoods. This report is not about examples where a park was redesigned or where residents came out to a public meeting, but about places where communities have taken an active, ongoing role in shaping their park through improvements and animation—what we call “park engagement”.

To identify underserved neighbourhoods, we looked to the City of Toronto's Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy¹, which replaced the 13 Priority Neighbourhoods in 2014 with 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas that were selected based on new, equity-based criteria.

These categories capture a more comprehensive vision of community well-being, including indicators related not only to income, but also municipal voting, mental health, walkability, and amount of green space. Residents of these neighbourhoods may include people living on lower incomes, newcomers and immigrants, and seniors who often face complex economic, health, and social challenges.

We hope this report draws attention to the important role parks play in creating platforms for community members to spark change within their own neighbourhoods. But more than simply drawing attention, we want this report to be a toolkit for action. Our goal is to see this report used by community members to start up and strengthen their activities, non-profit organizations to design better programs in public spaces, and government staff and elected officials to direct resources and refine policies. We want to maximize the community-building opportunities great parks can deliver, especially in underserved neighbourhoods where parks are often not used to their full advantage. This is why we not only outline the social benefits of parks, but also include key strategies and tips for achieving and furthering these benefits.

In researching this report, we drew on the knowledge of our own staff who have been working in communities across Toronto, including many Neighbourhood Improvement Areas, for the past five years. We identified case study sites, both within Toronto and elsewhere in North America, that met the criteria of being parks situated within underserved neighbourhoods with ongoing community engagement.



Flemington Park Community Garden

We also interviewed two dozen people working on the ground, including local residents, non-profit organization staff, and government staff to understand the opportunities and challenges they face in their work. We spoke to people in Toronto, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Los Angeles, New York, Austin, and Portland.

The impacts, strategies, and evaluation framework in this report are the direct result of those interviews and the stories that were shared with us. We recognize our position of privilege in writing this report and wherever possible we have used direct quotations to allow people to speak in their own words. Early themes and drafts were shared with a selection of reviewers that included many of those we interviewed. Everyone had a chance to review their stories, quotations, and attributions.

While the report centres itself in the Toronto experience—as that is where our deepest knowledge comes from—it is not meant just for Toronto. Through our conversations with people in Canada and the United States, we believe that the report’s strategies are useful for realizing the potential of parks in many other places.

Given the complexity and context-specific nature of this work, we know there are many more strategies and lessons that could be shared to further the social impact of parks. We encourage you to share your own stories, lessons, strategies, and challenges with us. With this report we hope to start a dialogue about this work, building upon a rich network of local knowledge to realize the full potential of parks as places fueling social connection and inclusive, equitable cities.

PARKS ARE POWERFUL PLACES OF SOCIAL CONNECTION

Today we can go online and connect with people anywhere in the world, but our local neighbourhood remains a critical place for creating a sense of belonging.

It's our day-to-day interactions on streets and in our local parks where we forge our social identity and community ties.² Public spaces are the beating hearts of our neighbourhoods.

We believe parks are important sites for community development—the process by which residents take action to “improve economic, social, cultural, and environmental conditions” in their neighbourhood.³ Parks provide an open, accessible place for social gathering and are strongly linked to memory, history, and culture⁴—all of which are important in developing a sense of community.⁵ Yet there has been less attention paid to the social and community impacts of ongoing engagement in local parks, with many studies focusing more on physical or mental health benefits of park use.

These benefits are important. The social connections we forge in our parks can make us happier and fitter. Some studies show that parks and trees can reduce stress, restore mental focus, and improve our mood.⁶ Other studies have shown that nearby parks with amenities such as playgrounds and walking trails are crucial components of better individual physical health.⁷

The social connections created in well-used parks have also been tied to positive well-being and are an “especially valuable asset” for the health of people living on lower incomes.⁸ Social connections can positively affect mental and physical health by creating supportive environments for activity and reducing stress,⁹ while social isolation can result in negative health outcomes, including depression.¹⁰ One study found that parks that were more social were also ones where people engaged in more physical activity,

leading them to conclude that targeting opportunities to create a better social environment in a park can be an important way to increase physical activity levels as well.¹¹

The social benefits of parks are particularly important for people who are living on lower incomes, newcomers, seniors, and other vulnerable populations.¹² One reason is that these populations are often more dependent on neighbourhood ties within their immediate community.¹³ For example, one study found that local parks are critical for under-housed people living in cramped conditions who have little or no private outdoor space, such as those living in high-rise towers.¹⁴ This point is especially salient for Toronto, considering its many tower neighbourhoods—areas in the city that were developed as high-rise tower communities, like Thorncliffe Park, that are now home to many newcomers and people living on lower incomes.

“It isn’t two- to three-person families living in the apartments, sometimes it’s five to six, sometimes it’s very overcrowded. A lot of people don’t have space. And so the park provides an opportunity for people to have space—space to play, space to be outside, space to congregate, and space to just be.”

*Tania Fernandes, health promoter,
Rexdale Community Health Centre, Toronto*

The casual interactions between people in parks—a simple hello, nod, or wave of the hand—are small but powerful.¹⁵ The results of these interactions—what some researchers call “weak ties”—have been shown to be “of particular importance for vulnerable and marginal groups”¹⁶ as they can lead to greater feelings of safety, social support,¹⁷ and reduced feelings of social isolation. The creation of these ties contributes to social capital—the social connections, trust, and support that are important not only for strong, healthy communities,¹⁸ but also for developing networks that can link people to opportunities, such as jobs.¹⁹

These interactions don’t just happen. People need a reason to come to the park and stay there in order to benefit from its social environment.²⁰ Park quality, amenities like playgrounds, and, critically, events and activities help create the conditions that draw people out to meet each other.²¹

But parks are not all created equal. Perceptions of safety, lack of programming, and poorly maintained or missing amenities can all detract from a park’s use, jeopardizing the mental and physical health benefits that result from social interaction. On top of that, the park amenities and activities that are necessary to encourage social interaction and physical activity can be different for people of varied ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds.²²

Community-led initiatives that improve the physical and social environments of parks are crucial, which is why we have chosen to focus our research on this subject. Much has been written about the benefits of signature park spaces in downtown or wealthy neighbourhoods like Chicago’s Millennium Park or New York’s High Line, but less attention has been paid to ongoing community-led park engagement in underserved communities. We want to shine a light on the important work done by the amazing people animating and improving their neighbourhoods and the lessons we can learn to further it.

Baking bread in Dufferin Grove Park – Park People



UNDERSTANDING AND CATALYZING THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF PARK ENGAGEMENT

Through interviews and on-the-ground work, we've identified five major social impacts of park engagement in underserved neighbourhoods:

1

Creating a sense of change and shared ownership

2

Building confidence and inspiring civic leaders

3

Reducing social isolation and creating inclusive communities

4

Providing a place for diverse people to gather

5

Supporting local economic development

We've also identified strategies that community members, non-profits, and municipal governments can take to achieve these impacts. While we've attempted to group each strategy with its most relevant impact, we do not intend to suggest that these categories are exclusive. In reality, each strategy could result in several impacts, so we advise that readers keep in mind these categories are often overlapping. In each strategy, we've highlighted a few key take-aways as well as case study examples and stories of where this strategy has worked.

CREATING A SENSE OF CHANGE AND SHARED OWNERSHIP

Becoming involved in a local park can foster a sense of possibility, creating momentum for change that can galvanize others.

Local volunteers we interviewed spoke passionately about how building an intentional, positive vision for their park helped themselves and others in their neighbourhood transform parks that were perceived as boring or unsafe into beautiful and inviting places of neighbourhood pride.

When Lucy Aponte approached people in her neighbourhood about becoming more engaged in nearby Soundview Park in the Bronx, New York, they said they weren't interested in getting involved in a park that was "dangerous" and "dirty." For Lucy, the important thing was to transform ideas about the park and help people see past what it was to what it could be.

"You have to be able to see the [big] picture," she said. "But most people can't: they see what's there. All they see is the garbage, the dirt, the abandonment, and they cannot imagine anything better." Lucy worked with other volunteers and the organization Partnerships for Parks to organize events, such as music festivals, that have brought new life to the park and neighbourhood.

"When you have a good park and you have a lot of great programming going on, those are memories being built in the minds of children, in the hearts of children and families. They come back. And you never know which one of those people are going to do something."

*Lucy Aponte, community volunteer,
Friends of Soundview Park, New York*



Soundview Park – Partnerships for Parks

Just having a visible presence of community members volunteering in the park can help change perceptions. People see that something can happen—that things can change—and that encourages others to get involved, often those who wouldn't have without some initial person or group taking the lead. Lucy said, "I've heard people passing by say 'oh that's the Friends of Soundview Park. I know them. They do a lot in this place.' So people seeing that—that there is a group that is caring for the park, and that cares about the community... that brings a greater interest and a greater respect for the park."

Lucy noted, however, that this change in perception can take time. "Much of the community wanted nothing going on in Soundview Park as they worried about traffic, parking, and crime increasing," she said. "I had a difficult time trying to convince them this is going to be good for all. Then, one day, I'm watching television and I see an advertisement for the local co-op and they mention the beautiful Soundview Park, a waterfront park in their backyard. I laughed and thought, yes, Soundview Park is now a part of their marketing. We have arrived."

STRATEGY

Pair park improvements with conversations about ongoing community involvement

- If a new park amenity or design upgrade is planned, use public meetings for these improvements to start a conversation about the opportunity for community members to take an ongoing role in the park.
- Build on people's desire for new amenities in a park by organizing a group to advocate for those improvements.
- Plan activities that complement new improvements, such as painting new benches or celebrating the opening of a playground.

The desire for physical improvements to a park is often the impetus for community members to get involved in a park group, so it's not surprising that one of the best times to engage with people is when funding from the City or another source is available for improvements. Many resident volunteers we talked with related stories of how their own community park group started because they wanted simple items, like benches or flowers, and used this as a rallying point. Even small improvements can be the start of more engagement as people start to see real, tangible improvements. While improvements are often the necessary catalyst for bringing people together, it's important to capture that energy by having a dialogue about what people want to see happen in the park as well.

In order to support this process, municipal governments should clearly communicate upcoming park improvements and connect with local community groups and organizations, giving them enough lead time to organize an effort to support capital investments with programming and engagement. Otherwise, while the park may receive new amenities or physical upgrades, the opportunity to use these improvements to catalyze a deeper level of community involvement in the park is missed. Taking advantage of

this opportunity is crucial as community involvement often results in parks that are better maintained and cared for over time—community members feel a sense of ownership and pride for a place they helped meaningfully create.

CATALYST, NEW YORK

Partnerships for Parks—a joint effort between the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the City Parks Foundation—uses this strategy in its Catalyst program, which focuses on low-income neighbourhoods where the City is investing money in upgrading parks. “One of the unique elements of Catalyst,” said Sabina Saragoussi, director of Partnerships for Parks, “is supporting community-driven visioning work not just around what people envision for their park, but also visioning around organizational development. So how do people see themselves showing up as part of a group or part of an ongoing effort?”

Carlos Martinez, a former Partnerships for Parks community organizer, argued it's important to build social connections and leadership at the same time as the City is building new park infrastructure. “Some planners or architects think ‘if you build it, they will come’ and that's not the case,” he said. Fostering a group of dedicated residents who want to take a stewardship role in the park is important so that people take ownership of that space and make it come alive.



Community Art at Soundview Park – Carlos Martinez

STRATEGY

Make small, strategic investments that will have an outsize impact

- Do not underestimate the ability of small, simple events like park clean-ups, tree plantings, and community BBQs to build interest.
- Celebrate small wins and milestones in larger projects to keep volunteers motivated and engaged.
- Develop easily accessible, simple micro-grants that can build capacity to take on larger projects.

While people we spoke with stressed the importance of having a big vision for the park to energize people, they spoke equally about the importance of small projects. It's often simple, low-cost projects—yoga, a community mural, children's outdoor art classes—that build confidence for something larger. These smaller investments of time and energy can go a long way towards galvanizing renewed interest in the park, as they create a visible presence in the park that draws in others.

On the organizational side, providing micro-grant opportunities to local park groups for small improvements or activities is critical. Often volunteers have never applied for funding or managed an event or project in a public space, so smaller grants that come with fewer restrictions offer the flexibility for these groups to start something.

CHESTER LE PARK, TORONTO

Friends of Chester Le Park volunteer Baohua Liu said that more people have become engaged in the park because of the events that now take place, but also from simple projects like planting new flowers in a pollinator garden. "People's awareness of environmental protection has increased. They will pick up garbage in the park voluntarily. The park was very dirty and ugly before, but now it is very nice and tidy," she said. "We can always see those flowers blooming... It brings the community members joy."



Friends of Chester Le Park Garden Mulching – Ginny Chen

TD PARK BUILDERS PROGRAM, TORONTO

The TD Parks Builders Program, administered by Park People, targets its small grants towards low-income communities. Park People works with residents who can apply for grants of up to \$5,000 to cover the cost of a first event or a series of small activities, offering continued support throughout the application and implementation process. Often these initial activities are the first programming that people have seen happen in these parks. Some of these park groups have built up their capacity from these micro-grants to later apply for larger, more complex grants. For example, the Flemingdon Urban Fair Committee used TD Park Builders' funding to put on a series of events including a multicultural festival, ravine walk, park cleanup, and a day of physical activity in the park. Other groups, such as the Panorama Community Garden Group in Rexdale, built their capacity to apply for larger grants using an initial investment from the TD Park Builders Program.



Friends of Chester Le Park Tai Chi Day

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND INSPIRING CIVIC LEADERS

Building skills and confidence through volunteering in the park—often people’s first foray into community organizing and advocacy—can ripple outwards, leading to greater involvement in civic issues.²³

For many of the people we spoke with, volunteering with a park group was a first step to becoming more civically engaged overall. Many described how they or their peers had taken initiative to get involved with a community board, connect with residents in other parts of the city, or create a relationship with City staff.

Volunteering in a park introduces people to city hall, often through obtaining an event permit or speaking to their local elected representative. These interactions, though oftentimes challenging at first (and later on, even for experienced park volunteers), are helpful in building confidence and understanding how to work within the system, but also how to push the boundaries of that system.

For the volunteer members of the Friends of Regent Park in Toronto, for example, this civic involvement was visiting City Hall to speak to councillors about the City’s poverty reduction strategy. Regent Park is situated at the heart of a dramatically changing neighbourhood of the same name, which is transitioning from public to mixed-income housing.

“Community organizing is key because you begin to tap into people who would never imagine themselves, like myself, to be a leader and someone who could bring something to the table. And also it really helped us understand what it is to be a neighbour, what it is to be a citizen.”

Ofelia Zapata, park volunteer and Dove Springs District Park Chair, Austin, Texas



Celebrating a new playground – Austin Parks Foundation

The volunteers wore Regent Park t-shirts and spoke to City councillors about the challenges they faced in trying to animate and improve their new park. “Getting the Friends of Regent Park to participate on a political level was kind of empowering for us because we were able to use all the experiences that we had and our frustrations and voice it in a positive way,” said Zahrah Munas, a former community organizer working with the volunteer group.

Some organizations are looking to expand the civic reach of community park groups through special training. For example, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, which works exclusively in low-income, park-poor neighbourhoods, is working on a new initiative called the Park Equity Leadership Academy. “We’re working with neighbourhood activists to develop cohorts of park leaders that are advancing an urban park equity agenda in the city,” said Mark Glasscock, director of special projects at the Trust. “That are advocating for more parks funding, for more equitable parks funding, for more programming, for more culturally appropriate and targeted communication, and developing a system of accountability that enforces the necessity of an equitable park system.”



Friends of Regent Park – CRC Regent Park

Getting involved in a park group can be especially helpful for newcomers, who may not be as well versed in the machinations of local government and find the system daunting, especially if there are language barriers. “They don’t know the system here,” said Mandana Attarzadeh, a community engagement worker in Earl Bales Park in Toronto, which is situated within a very diverse neighbourhood. “They don’t feel entitled to ask for many things.”

Sabina Ali formed the Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee to improve and animate R.V. Burgess Park, which sits within the centre of a high-rise community in Toronto that is home to many newcomers. By organizing members in her community, mainly women from the neighbourhood, she was able to put on a

series of events and advocate for simple improvements like garbage cans.²⁴ “When we started this, I was really, really hesitant because I myself was a newcomer—I didn’t know a lot of things,” Sabina said. “I never shared with anybody that I was a newcomer because I didn’t know how the response would be.”

She worked hard with the City of Toronto to create a community market in the park where neighbourhood women could sell locally made products, even though there wasn’t a standard permitting process to allow this to happen. While working through the permits was challenging, because of her dedication and her willingness to find solutions with the City, she was able to push the project forward.



STRATEGY

Focus on capacity building and ensure groups are community-led

- Play a supportive, not leading, role as partner organizations and non-profits, by providing resources, tools, and contacts. However, hiring a community organizer from within the local neighbourhood can be a critical support pillar for a group of volunteers.
- Provide multiple ways to engage—from simple one-time volunteering, to helping to organize events, to forming a community park group—ensures people can participate in a way that feels meaningful and feasible for them.

Many community organizers and volunteers stressed the importance of projects being community-led. “We can never empower people ourselves,” said one community organizer in Toronto. “We can provide tools that people can choose to use to empower themselves and to execute whatever they want to do.”

Capacity building is the practice of ensuring partner organizations are not dictating what happens, but providing assistance and resources to community members who are leading their own projects and efforts. However, it’s important to recognize that involvement will look different for everyone as people have different comfort and time commitment levels.

Ofelia Zapata, who organized a park group in Austin, argued that investing in community organizing and working to identify local leaders is crucial. “It’s a different kind of investment, but it is worth an investment because then whatever we create is going to sustain itself,” she said. “Because the people will own it, people will create it, they have pride in it.” She said that Austin Interfaith, an organization she works with, taught her the iron rule: never do for others what they can do for themselves. If you act for someone else, “then you lose the opportunity of them seeing that they are able to make something happen,” she said.

In capacity building, there is a strong focus on community-led projects but also a recognition—from both partner organizations and residents—that a critical piece is having a paid staff person, usually called a community animator or organizer, to support activities and perform the “grunt work,” as one community organizer put it. These roles can be funded through a municipality itself, such as with the City of Edmonton’s Community Recreation Coordinators, or through a community-focused non-profit organization, such as United Way in Toronto. This role offers a stable pillar of support to volunteers, helping to reduce the burden on volunteers and guide projects through the inevitable turnover that occurs in a neighbourhood-based group.

LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD LAND TRUST

This organization uses a “leadership committee” model that includes community members during the planning and development of a park. For example, with their Avalon and Gage Park project the group included members from the local neighbourhood council, church groups, and anyone else willing to contribute time and energy to the project. When the park is completed, the leadership committee transitions into a “stewardship committee” that helps manage park programming and operations.

FRIENDS OF REGENT PARK, TORONTO

In Regent Park, a local charity, CRC Regent Park, received funding through the Weston Family Parks Challenge (WFPC), a granting program administered by Park People, to hire a park animator to support community engagement in a newly opened park. Indeed, one of the strengths of the WFPC was its recognition that hiring staff members to work with community volunteers to steward projects was key. CRC Regent Park hired Zahrah Munas as community organizer, who then led the creation of the Friends of Regent Park. Katelyn Palmer, a volunteer member of the group, talked about how important it was to have Zahrah help organize meetings, set agendas, and plan

events. The two-year park animator funding ended in 2016, however, and focus is now shifting onto the Friends of Regent Park to figure out how they are going to structure themselves to continue on without this dedicated staff person. “Most of us have full-time positions, or are actively looking for work,” Katelyn said, adding that without staff support Friends of Regent Park may look “radically different.”

STRATEGY

Plan for group sustainability by focusing on structure and leadership

- Identify a core volunteer group, but provide opportunities for others to join in ways that are meaningful and realistic for them.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities, decision-making, and membership processes to avoid conflicts and confusion between group members, but also between group members and partner organizations.
- Engage in open group conversations that explore what members realistically think they can take on themselves.

Volunteer groups face many challenges, such as burnout and high turnover as people move into and out of neighbourhoods. These stresses can strain volunteers, especially if partner organizations pull support, or a staff position that was helping out is eliminated or reduced. Partner organizations offering support to volunteer groups should transparently discuss long-term plans with the group and be open regarding setting expectations.

The exit or reduction of a partner’s role often means a community park group has to recalibrate itself. Sometimes this restructuring means taking on fewer projects or events. Many community organizers spoke about the importance of “succession planning,” which means working with volunteers to ensure that if and when a partner organization moves on, residents will



Winter fire pit at Regent Park

have the skills and resources they need to continue. Succession planning can include outlining roles and responsibilities of different partners, building on the skills and interests of individual volunteer members, and creating a governance structure that ensures decision-making is a shared responsibility.

CATALYST, NEW YORK

Through Partnerships for Parks’ Catalyst program, a community organizer is dedicated to a single park for approximately four to five years, helping to organize the volunteer group. After this time, the group is transitioned to an outreach coordinator who is responsible for supporting many parks and park groups. “It is a change for a [volunteer] group to go from having a dedicated staff member that’s really working only with your group and your park, to working with our outreach coordinator who could potentially be working with thirty groups on an ongoing basis,” said Sabina Saragoussi, the director. To address this transition, the program works to identify opportunities for volunteers to step into leadership roles and build on their personal skills. “I think a big part of it is encouraging people to stay involved in a way that speaks to their interests and availability, so that it continues to be meaningful and feasible given their own capacity.”

REDUCING SOCIAL ISOLATION AND CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

While improving the physical infrastructure in a park—more benches, better maintained flower gardens, improved pathways—can invite more people to use it, it's activities and events that encourage people to stick around and meet others. Given the right conditions, parks can become, as Mark Glasscock from the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust said, a "civic hub" and "community living room."



Henna in Flemingdon Park

Providing opportunities for casual social encounters is an important element in cultivating people's attachment to a place, which can be limited by lack of programming and amenities.²⁵ Sometimes people don't even need to participate to derive a benefit—simply observing or being close to social interactions in a public space is enough for some to report feeling a greater sense of happiness, safety, and comfort about their neighbourhood.²⁶

For Nawal Ateeq, creating more animated, welcoming parks helps address a number of challenges in her community around social isolation. Working with others in her neighbourhood, she formed the volunteer-run Flemingdon Urban Fair Committee in Flemingdon Park, which aims to animate and improve parks in this high-rise, newcomer community.

"This is a tower neighbourhood," Nawal said. "It has a lot of people from different cultural backgrounds. They have different life experiences. Also, this is an underserved priority neighbourhood. We have a lot of people who are

living below the poverty line, a lot of people who are not working. We have a lot of young people and a lot of seniors. Men are breadwinners, women are at home—they're caregivers for their senior parents or for their children. And then there's the language barrier, too, and lack of Canadian work experience." She added that people often lead "isolated lives," living in apartments that are small and overcrowded.

For Nawal, the local green space was an important place to address these challenges. "We were overwhelmed by all of these needs that we saw around us, so we thought 'we are going to try and come together'," she said. "Try to animate the parks, which are underused."

Nawal and her group have worked with a number of partners, including Park People through our TD Park Builders Program, to put on programming that draw out youth and seniors from the apartment buildings and into the park. These have included activities as diverse as tai chi, movies in the park, and food events including a pop-up café. "We're trying to build that ambience in that park," she said. "People just wanted to come and sit and just drink a cup of tea, eat something, and just talk."

"When people get together they feel a sense of community—they realize they are part of the community."

*Hanbo Jia, former community organizer
with Friends of Chester Le Park, Toronto*

STRATEGY

Design fun, meaningful, and targeted programming

- Pair programming, or piggyback on events that are already happening, such as including children's activities at a farmers' market.
- Target programming to those who may not normally come out, such as seniors, youth, and newcomers.
- Ensure programming is representative of the community by involving local residents to lead and plan activities.

Programming comes in all shapes and sizes. Events and activities such as yoga, tai chi, food festivals, concerts, nature walks, tree planting, movies, and children's programming contribute to a park that feels lively, safe, and inviting. Art, performance, and food are particularly popular, allowing people of diverse backgrounds to share each other's cultures, but also see themselves represented. However, park programming is all about balance. It's important not to over-program a space with events—sometimes people just need a quiet place to hang out.

Some groups looked to more established programs in other parks and wondered how they could bring similar programming to their own park. Others surveyed local residents to find out what they wanted to do in their park, getting people to write out their ideas as they passed by. It's also important to understand who programs are serving, and who may be left out. The key is understanding what activities are meaningful and needed in your particular community and then tapping into the surrounding culture and talent to lead them.

CORONA PLAZA, NEW YORK

This public space in Queens was created in partnership with Queens Museum as part of the New York City Department of Transportation's Plaza Program with the goal to provide a "dignified public space for immigrants."²⁷ Engagement strategies focused on creating a space where "local communities were not only reflected but actively involved," by finding out what was already happening in the neighbourhood and using the plaza as a space to showcase local talent. Programming, too, focuses on this vision, by integrating bilingual and multigenerational events.

LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD LAND TRUST

The Los Angeles Neighbourhood Land Trust ensures park programming—like women's empowerment classes, arts and crafts, Zumba, and tae kwon do—comes from the community and is often led by community members. "It's not just what we're able to provide, but what they really need," said Mark at the Trust. "And nine times out of ten, the vendor who is operating that programming is a neighbour, park user, a member of that community—which really helps to make the programming ultra-specific and targeted."



Testing the playground at Avalon – Gage Park

STRATEGY

Create opportunities for people to connect over food

- Organize community dinners or BBQs, which are one of the most reliable ways to provide a comfortable, inviting space for people to meet each other.
- Share tips on growing or preparing different vegetables or fruits to provide people an opportunity to learn and connect with people from different backgrounds.
- Grow, cook, and sell food to create opportunities for skill-building and local employment.

Food is one of the most effective ways to bring people together in public space.²⁸ Whether growing food in a community garden, cooking at a bake oven or outdoor kitchen, or eating together at a community dinner, food provides a common focal point. One study of community gardens in New York found that 90 percent of gardens were home to social activities such as BBQs and birthday parties. The study found that “gardeners and garden members view gardens more as social and cultural gathering places than as agricultural production sites.”²⁹

Community gardens are places where community members including, in particular, newcomers can bring their own backgrounds to public space³⁰—for example by growing fruits and vegetables that act as symbols of their cultural identity.³¹ Since they are often designed and managed by community members, community gardens can be key places for developing a sense of attachment to, or ownership over, their neighbourhood.³² They also provide opportunities for people to pass along cultural knowledge to their children and other youth.



Celebration at Rainbow Community Garden – Paul Mutch

RAINBOW COMMUNITY GARDEN, WINNIPEG

This garden provides space for newcomers to grow fruits and vegetables. Amy Henderson, program coordinator for Food Matters Manitoba, an organization that provides support to the gardeners, said the garden is important because many times newcomers stay inside, unsure of where to go. “[The garden] gives them a place to go and reconnect with the land and make friends, and practice their English because there’s people from all over the world.” Gardeners come from over 30 different countries. “They exchange recipes, plants, and seeds,” she said, adding that when she speaks to people about the benefits of the garden, the social connection part “even trumps healthy food for a lot of people.”



Sabina Ali from the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee

THORNCLIFFE PARK WOMEN'S COMMITTEE, TORONTO

New park amenities can help celebrate cultural practices around food. One project in Toronto spearheaded by the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee saw a tandoor installed in R.V. Burgess Park—a first in North America—so local residents could make naan. “As women gathered, we were talking about making bread in the park,” said Sabina Ali, founder of the group. “We had the idea: why don’t we have something different in the park, that represents the community itself. Thorncliffe being a South Asian community predominantly, tandoor would represent the South Asian culture and heritage. We had been organizing a variety of cooking fires like bread-making on tawa [a flat pan] in a temporary brick oven and the idea of tandoor came along.”

PROVIDING A PLACE FOR DIVERSE PEOPLE TO GATHER

Parks have a long history as democratic spaces open to all in a city, acting as catalysts for interactions between people of different backgrounds and reducing intolerance.³³

Gathering in parks “can be a platform for breaking up social segregation, and therefore public spaces are indispensable for meeting and establishing contacts.”³⁴ Parks can be powerful places of healing, exchange, and dialogue—but only if we create the conditions for everyone to participate.

Both park design and programming create opportunities to highlight different cultures. For many newcomers, parks can help “expand and strengthen their identity” by providing a site for interaction between people of different backgrounds, but also a space for local cultural expression.³⁵

“Canada is an immigrant country,” noted Hanbo Jia, who previously worked as a Chinese community animator and engagement worker in Chester Le Park—a community in north Toronto that includes a large Chinese-speaking population. “Our events provide an opportunity for people to be exposed to different cultures and to learn something different.” Some of the events that have taken place in the park include a powwow that brought local Indigenous culture to the park and a Chinese movie with both Mandarin and English subtitles.



Multicultural Celebration at Earl Bales Park Amphitheatre – Raymond Frias

“Although local residents with diverse backgrounds have language barriers, they can communicate with each other in other ways, such as with body language,” Hanbo said. “It’s good to see that people are willing to know more people. And it is good to see that people learn to respect each other, to respect their differences, and to love and take care of each other.”

Parks can also be places for people of different socioeconomic backgrounds to meet. For example, the Friends of Regent Park involves volunteer members from both the market housing and the social housing units that surround the newly developed park.

“I think the mixed-income representation in Friends of Regent Park is really amazing,” said Katelyn Palmer, a volunteer with the group. “I think we all have our internal biases regardless of if we’re in social housing or private market, and we have pre-existing ideas about who the ‘other’ might be. And this really gives the opportunity to challenge those and to reflect and think broader.”

“It doesn’t matter what your income level is, it doesn’t matter what your housing status is,” she added. “We’re all here with a common purpose which is to make Regent Park the best place it can be.”

“In spite of our difference in our origin, our ethnicity, all of us are one people... Enjoy the park. Enjoy each other. And just make friends.”

*Angie Buado, volunteer coordinator
with Friends of Earl Bales Park, Toronto*

STRATEGY

Recognize multiple histories through active engagement

- Meet people where they are. This might mean going door to door, meeting in libraries and community centres, and standing in the park and talking to people as they pass by.
- Involve people actively and early in decision-making and planning processes, rather than simply informing them about changes.
- Seek out groups and individuals who are often left out, such as seniors, youth, newcomers, and people living on lower incomes. Ask yourself who's here and who's not, and then question why.

Whether you're a local resident or a community organizer with a non-profit, the key to successful park groups starts with community engagement. It's important to involve people with different backgrounds and abilities in parks, because "if all community and cultural groups are included, then we are also empowering citizen-leaders and participants who will continue to contribute to the area."³⁶

Often you have to be creative in how you engage people. For example, Leah Houston, artistic director of MABELLEarts, said that her community arts organization regards itself as "an antidote to the traditional community consultation." Through art and performance in the park and by involving people in that process, "we uncover what the place needs," she said. "Doing things in full public view is such a smart way to get people involved, because there you are as they walk by, and their curiosity is piqued. That, I have found to be an incredible way to get people involved in things, and especially when you're trying to involve people who aren't necessarily joiners by nature."

It's also important to remember that parks are never blank slates, but contain multiple histories and narratives about a place, including those whose stories and presence have been systematically erased, like Indigenous peoples. This storytelling can be used to guide discussions about improvements, programming, partnerships, and ways to stay involved.



Performance in the park with MABELLEarts – Katherine Fleitas

NEILSON PARK, TORONTO

Alex Dow, a community organizer formerly working in Toronto's Malvern neighbourhood, helped local youth to develop skateboarding and BMX opportunities in the community through the development of a seasonal indoor park. They simultaneously engaged local youth in visioning an outdoor space through facilitated community walks or tours with youth, gathering feedback about potential improvements. "Our ultimate goal with that project was to build the capacity of the young people to engage City staff in a youth-informed design process," Alex said. "So it was great to have them thinking and visioning about what that space could look like."

CULLY PARK, PORTLAND

Created in a community that needed green space, this new park contains an intertribal gathering garden that has morphed into one of its central features. The garden was envisioned as a space "where native plants can be planted and harvested in such a way that would create educational opportunities for non-native folks in the community," said Tony DeFalco, coordinator of Living Cully. An agreement with the City's parks department allows the co-management of the space with local Indigenous people.



STRATEGY

Create partnerships that leverage unique strengths

- Seek out partners that bring different strengths, like community outreach, event planning, or funding. Be sure to approach even “unlikely” partners, which could be groups organizing around safety, food, or housing.
- Look to established organizations nearby, such as local health centres, libraries, community centres, faith groups, and social service agencies for support and space.
- Connect with other park groups in your city to share knowledge and build networks.

The best partnerships are ones in which each partner brings a different skill or resource to the table, resulting in an outcome no single partner could have achieved on their own. Partnerships are also critical for park groups that are just starting up and are relying solely on the resources of their own volunteer time and energy, allowing them to link up with more established organizations in their neighbourhood. Partnerships can provide resources, including staff time and sometimes money, but they can also help by using established networks to get the word out about events and volunteer opportunities and offering space for meetings.

Community members can also encourage organizations to view the park as a site for programming and engagement where they may not have otherwise. Carlos Martinez, former community organizer with Partnerships for Parks, found partnerships to be an important part of his work in Soundview Park in the Bronx.

“We had people addressing health issues or gun violence, but not doing that type of work in the park,” Carlos said. “So as part of my role, it was trying to explain to them that anything is possible in the park, anything goes in the park. You can bring your stage to the park, you can bring your classroom to the park, you can bring your art and healthy activities to the park.”

Many also pointed out the importance of having a good working relationship with City staff, which involves building trust and communicating regularly. A visible, consistent City staff presence in the park is extremely helpful to build rapport and familiarity with community members, giving the City a real, personal face.

FLEMINGDON URBAN FAIR COMMITTEE, TORONTO

Nawal Ateeq said that partnerships were the “backbone” of their work in Flemingdon Park, especially in the beginning when they did not have experience writing grant applications and managing funds. Specifically, they linked up with a local faith-based organization and a community health centre. “We were very new and had to build our credibility,” she said. “Instead of trying to do things on your own, you should always do things in partnership. It’s so rewarding because you cannot have all the expertise or experience that is required to do these events, but if you are working with other people or other organizations then it becomes so much easier.”

ARTS IN THE PARKS, TORONTO

With the goal of animating Toronto’s parks outside of the downtown core using arts and culture, the Arts in the Parks program was launched in summer 2016. The program is a unique partnership between the City of Toronto, the arms-length City agency Toronto Arts Council, the non-profit charitable organization Toronto Arts Foundation, Park People, and community groups. Each partner brought its strengths to the table. The City provided permits and advice on park locations; the Toronto Arts Council selected, organized, and curated artists; Toronto Arts Foundation led a city-wide marketing/promotional campaign, as well as provided community engagement and volunteer activities leading up to and for the events; and Park People selected the parks and worked with park groups to pair up with artists and spread the word. The program was so successful that it’s being expanded for 2017.



STRATEGY

Recognize and address barriers to participation

- Respect and acknowledge people's ability to participate by offering honoraria when possible.
- Address potential barriers, such as physical accessibility, language, transit, and childcare to ensure everyone can be included.
- Municipal governments should review park permit and insurance policies from an equity lens to ensure they are not creating barriers to participation.

For non-profits and municipal governments working in underserved neighbourhoods, barriers to participation need to be both recognized and addressed. People are often asked to volunteer their time to join various planning workshops or sit on resident advisory committees, "but they're not often well-resourced to be part of things," said Tony DeFalco, coordinator of Living Cully in Portland. "Being able to compensate, provide a hot meal for somebody, provide childcare so they can bring their kids—those things are just really important." There is a risk that certain voices in the community will be left out unless these barriers are addressed.

Additionally, many of the community volunteers we spoke with raised the issue of park permits and insurance fees as a challenge. Often these groups have little or no financial resources to organize activities, let alone pay a permit fee and engage in a lengthy and often confusing process to obtain it. Even experienced park volunteers and non-profit organization staff spoke about the need to simplify park permits and work more collaboratively with established volunteer groups.

FRIENDS OF CHESTER LE PARK, TORONTO

The translation and community engagement work that Hanbo Jia undertook in Chester Le Park was critical in connecting Chinese-speaking seniors in the neighbourhood to the park and community garden. Hanbo said that many in her community cannot speak English, mentioning one senior who was not very active in the community before translation services were offered. "Most of the staff in the community centre cannot understand Chinese, so she was afraid to have access to the community," Hanbo said. "She shared with me before I worked here she felt a kind of loneliness, she felt isolated from society." Hanbo said that now the woman is involved in the garden and has made new friends. "I feel that my work is meaningful because we did make a change to people's lives through park engagement," she said.

LITTLE ITALY COMMUNITY GARDEN, EDMONTON

Built in an inner city neighbourhood, the Little Italy Community Garden has transformed what was for a long time a large, forlorn-looking empty corner into a beautiful gardening, social, and art space. Skills Society, a non-profit that supports people with disabilities, was awarded a three-year matching grant by the City of Edmonton to complete the garden. "We wanted to make it accessible," said Debbie Reid, Skills Society senior manager of community supports. The garden features 33 large raised garden beds that allow neighbours, with or without disabilities, to easily experience the joy of planting and tending their vegetables and flowers.

SUPPORTING LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The economic effect of parks is often spoken about in terms of increasing nearby property values through high-profile design upgrades, sometimes sparking concerns around gentrification, but parks can offer many economic benefits on a smaller scale to people living in the community.

Park animation and improvement projects can be leveraged to create opportunities for local economic development, skill-building, education, and professional networking. Sometimes park engagement has led to jobs with local community agencies or politicians' offices.

In Portland's Cully Park, for example, 10 percent of wages for the development of this new park have gone to people who live in the surrounding neighbourhoods and 70 percent of contracts have gone to minority and women-owned business, said Tony DeFalco, Living Cully coordinator. Community members were also paid to participate in the process of environmental assessment for the park, which is a former landfill.

"We paid community members to participate over nine months. We had a group of about 15 folks, all low income, different cultures. Basically had them learn about how landfill assessment was done, and then they actually guided the process along with the agency staff," he said.

Economic benefits can also revolve around food, whether growing, cooking, or selling food in the park. In Winnipeg at the Rainbow Community Garden, which provides plots to newcomers, gardeners can save up to \$150 per month on their grocery bill. Some gardeners even pool extra produce and sell it at local farmers' markets. In Toronto's McCormick Park, a shipping container café is staffed by a local social service agency, resulting in employment opportunities.

"Our main focus is to try to get people to come out, meet their neighbours, to engage in some physical activity. But also to encourage people within the community to try to find ways of becoming economically self-reliant and offer trainings to help them achieve their goals."

Nawal Ateeq, park volunteer with Flemingdon Urban Fair Committee, Toronto

But often the economic impacts are less direct, coming more in the form of building skills and networking opportunities. The connections people make in parks are important for growing professional and social contacts, which can help people access resources and opportunities.³⁷

For example, the Friends of Regent Park uses food programming to showcase local cooking talent. "We put a call out to different community members who have great cooking skills, but don't have the business skills to cater for a large group," said former Friends of Regent Park community organizer Zahrah Munas. "We offer them the space, we give them a bit of training, and then they prepare a meal. And this year [2016] we decided to create little business cards for them, so that if people try their food and they're like 'this is really great' then they can maybe order from them next time."

STRATEGY

Use the park as a “start-up” space for local entrepreneurs

- Provide support and opportunities through programming or pop-ups, like markets, where people can develop and showcase their skills.
- Pair pop-up cafes or market stalls with other programming, like food markets or sports.
- Understand the regulations around commercial activity in parks in your city and work with City staff to create guidelines that allow pilot projects for local economic activity.

A surprising but key element in some of the case studies was how parks and public spaces were used as a start-up space for community members who wanted to engage in local economic activity. This development often centred around pop-ups, like cafés or markets that appeared at events or at certain times of the day, rather than permanent facilities in the park.

Parks are already the sites of weekly farmers’ markets where local produce and food items are sold, but some parks, such as Toronto’s Flemingdon and R.V. Burgess Parks, are testing new models where locally made products, such as jewellery and clothing, are sold alongside food. These markets provide space for local residents, often newcomer women, to engage in small-scale economic activity and build their clientele.



Flemingdon Park Market



Park Pride

For example, in 2016, the Flemingdon Urban Fair Committee launched an urban park café to create economic opportunities for people who want to build their catering experience. The café, which pops up during events that the group hosts, provides opportunities for people to sell their food, learn about best practices for packaging, and discover what kinds of items are most popular.

THORNCLIFFE COMMUNITY MARKET, TORONTO

Sabina Ali said that the Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee was thinking about and researching what could be done in the park. She knew many women were “quiet operators” out of their homes, and so she had the idea of a public market in the park where people could sell locally made products. “Just to bring the women out of isolation in a common place where they feel confident and they build their self-esteem,” she said. “And also build a clientele for them. So like a storefront.” The group borrowed tables and chairs from a nearby neighbourhood centre. The market, which takes place on Fridays in the summer, has quickly become a beloved feature of the community. “Once the weather gets better,” Sabina said, “the women in the community start asking us: when is the program starting? When is the market starting?”

NEXT STEPS

Park People didn't write this report so it could sit on a shelf. Our intention was to better understand the social benefits of park engagement and share stories of how local community members and partners are transforming their parks and neighbourhoods.

We also wanted to understand how we could expand and enhance Park People's programs and partnerships with local community members to help realize these benefits. We want to continue to build a movement towards supporting and furthering this work, both in Toronto and across Canada as we expand our scope. We want to inspire even more cooperation and support from partners, especially government, to encourage the work of these communities. We want this report to be used.

If you're a community member, survey your neighbours about what they want to see in the park and reach out to already established organizations and groups in your neighbourhood to see how they could get involved. Organize a small activity to get people interested like a BBQ or a park clean-up—something visible in the park that people walking by can see. Build on the skills and interest in your local neighbourhood. Maybe someone likes to plan events, or has a really good green thumb, or plays in a band, or teaches yoga. Get people involved in a way that's meaningful to them.

If you're non-profit staff, reach out and find those community leaders and offer assistance. If you don't have the means to provide funding, offer organizational support, help with networking and community outreach, or free meeting space. Be upfront and open about your capacity as a partner. Build on the skills and ideas of community members and offer guidance in maneuvering through city policy. If you have funding, create a micro-grant stream that provides small start-up funds to groups to do simple improvements and activities that can go a long way.

If you're City staff or an elected representative, ensure that your parks are being planned with social activity in mind, as well as with an environmental and health lens. Re-examine policies that may create barriers, such as confusing and costly park permits and rules that stifle local economic development activity in public spaces, like markets. Connect with community leaders and non-profit organizations to ensure the City is pairing its capital investments with investments in people and programming so that parks can continue to be loved long after a ribbon is cut. Be open-minded and willing to test new ideas as pilot projects.

A critical part of this work is evaluating our impacts so we can continually learn and evolve. This report outlines some of the powerful social impacts of creating dynamic, community-led public spaces, but we need to develop models and templates for measuring and understanding these impacts. This is why you'll find an evaluation framework and tool provided as part of this report, available as a downloadable PDF at:

www.parkpeople.ca/sparkingchange.

The creation of this framework is just the beginning. Park People hopes to refine and build on this framework through learnings from our own work, but also through learnings from others that have used it. Please let us know what worked, what didn't, and how it could be improved.



Music in the park with MABELLEarts

We hope this report sparks a dialogue about the social benefits of parks. We invite you to contact us with your thoughts and suggestions, whether you're a local community volunteer, City staff, or staff at a non-profit organization. We want to know about the work you do in your local community, what your successes and challenges have been, and how some of the strategies in this report could help. You can visit www.parkpeople.ca/sparkingchange to share copies of the report, read an expanded literature review, and find contacts and sources to learn more.

It's clear that parks play an important role in the social health of communities. From providing places to gather and meet neighbours, to engaging people in civic life, to creating a space to celebrate cultural diversity, parks are more than green places of respite—they are crucial pieces of the social infrastructure of our city.

Parks can be important engines of social change and opportunity in underserved neighbourhoods by providing space for community leaders to bring partners together, transforming local parks into thriving community hubs.

Maybe this is by spearheading a market in the park where people sell locally made products. Or maybe it's through using arts and culture programming to transform a park from a place people avoided to a place they want to be. Or maybe it's by simply planting new flowers that bring joy.

Whatever the action, the important point is that it comes from within the community. As Helena-Rose Houldcroft, executive director of the Flemingdon Park Ministry, told us: framing your work as being about empowering people is the wrong way to think about it. "People empower themselves," she said. "If you set up the dynamics for that to happen, then you've got real change."

We believe that by providing a platform to come together, parks have the potential to be the spark for that change.

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