



WIC/SNAP Office Partnerships: Opportunities to Help Your Community Increase Access to Nutritious Foods

Across the United States, park and recreation professionals have been adding a new focus to their mission: helping people increase their access to nutritious foods. Park and recreation agencies have historically done this by offering child and adult meal programs through federal child nutrition programs, hosting farmers markets or community supported agriculture programs (CSAs) at their sites, and providing gardening lessons and space for community members to plant edible gardens. You can read about these initiatives and access some resources about how to lead these food access activities at nrpa.org/CommitToHealth.

Another way that park and recreation professionals are helping families they serve gain more access to nutritious foods is through partnerships with government agencies that operate food assistance programs — particularly those that offer the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (formerly called Food Stamps). Annually, these food assistance programs help more than 48 million people buy food for their families — and park and recreation agencies can be great partners in these efforts.

Some may ask, what about park and recreation sites makes them good partners for local WIC/SNAP offices?

- “Park and recreation agencies reach such a wide variety of patrons providing for their recreational needs. We often run summer and afterschool programs for youth and reach a lot of families. We tend to form strong bonds with our families and provide support that goes beyond just recreational and childcare needs.” – **City of Asheville (North Carolina) Parks and Recreation**
- Park and recreation sites are “accessible, hours of operation are more conducive to supporting families...[and are] hubs of resources and service oriented.” – **West Allis-West Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Recreation and Community Services**
- “People often feel comfortable talking with us as opposed to other offices they are not familiar with.” – **New London (Connecticut) Recreation Department**

Indeed, the number of families park and recreation professionals are able to reach with information and tools to help them increase their access to nutritious foods is quite large, and thus partnering with local food assistance programs has the potential for exponential impact on this important issue.

- The WIC program helps approximately 6.3 million people across the United States receive food assistance, nutrition education, education about breastfeeding, support for nursing mothers, and healthcare and social-service referrals.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture SNAP food assistance program helps approximately 42 million people across the United States receive financial help in buying food, and the SNAP Education program provides nutrition education to help SNAP recipients use their food assistance in a nutrition-wise manner.



An older adult shops for produce at a market.



What Can Park and Recreation Agencies do for WIC/SNAP Offices?

Park and recreation agencies can be great partners for local WIC/SNAP offices, playing many roles in areas such as leading outreach, conducting prescreening for eligibility, providing referrals, offering feedback on programs, assisting in program delivery and advocating for food security.

Outreach. One of the most important roles park and recreation agencies can play in support of WIC/SNAP programming is assisting with outreach. Based on hearing from park and recreation sites that have partnerships with their local WIC/SNAP offices, some outreach activities to consider include:

- Distribute WIC/SNAP information in paper form, including brochures, fact sheets, screening checklists, etc. Also consider hanging posters about the programs at your park and recreation site, especially in places where caregivers wait for their children. Consider creating some fliers that are unique to your site, such as outreach created by the City of Little Rock (Arkansas) and Central Arkansas Library System as part of their community health and well-being programming.
- Include WIC/SNAP promotional materials in packets going home to families, in farmers market bags, in CSA boxes, in backpacks, or with other regularly distributed materials from your site.
- During in-person sign up for programs at your site, have fliers about the programs available, including contact information for someone at your site for families to follow-up with about the WIC/SNAP programs.
- Promote local WIC/SNAP programs through your website, e-newsletters, social media and publications. If possible, include direct links to online applications for programs administered in your state.
 - o New London Recreation Department includes “advertisements” about SNAP/WIC in their brochure.
- Put together a list of food assistance resources in your community to use in multiple formats — post them on the wall as a poster, have them available as handouts, include them in email blasts, and insert them into newsletters. The box to the right has a list of links that Asheville Parks and Recreation provides to their families.
- Write and place an op-ed in your local newspaper explaining how your park and recreation site supports your local WIC/SNAP office.



A sampling of outreach materials for food assistance programs created by local park and recreation agencies.

NRPA PHOTO

Asheville Parks and Recreation provides these links for food assistance:

- Buncombe County, North Carolina (buncombecounty.org) [Economic Services / Public Assistance – Food Assistance](#)
- MANNA FoodBank (mannafoodbank.org) [Food Helpline](#)
- Council on Aging of Buncombe County (coabc.org) [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#)
- WIC Clinic Office Locations (wicprograms.org) – [Buncombe County Department of Health WIC Clinic](#)



- Designate one staff member as the point of contact for food assistance at your site, who can connect families with available resources (WIC, SNAP, food pantries, etc.).
- Invite WIC/SNAP office staff to provide nutrition education to your children and caregivers as part of an event and ask them to do a question and answer session afterwards for families to learn more about the food assistance programs. Or ask them to host a booth at farmers markets or on CSA days at your site.
- As you work on your overall outreach strategy, seek out information from your local and/or state office. Some administrative offices have targeted resources to help with food assistance efforts, such as the Massachusetts SNAP program, which has a website for those interested in partnering with them on SNAP outreach and includes an informative set of resources as well as a video about the program (check out the [Massachusetts SNAP Outreach for Partners](#)¹). See if your state has a similar site and include it in your outreach planning activities.
- Every state has a [SNAP Education \(SNAP-Ed\)](#)² program that can provide education and assistance with policy, systems and environmental changes to improve health outcomes for SNAP eligible communities. [Contact your state and/or local implementing agency](#)³ to learn how SNAP-Ed can partner with your park and recreation agency.

Prescreening for eligibility and help with applications. Park and recreation sites are great locations for WIC/SNAP pre-eligibility screenings and can provide assistance to families in their applications for food assistance. Many park and recreation agencies and their partners, including the City of Little Rock and Central Arkansas Library System, Integral Youth Services (Oregon), and City of Ozark (Alabama) – Ozark Leisure Services, provide food security screenings and help families fill out SNAP applications. Some ideas to consider as you think about providing these types of services:

- Download and use [NRPA's WIC/SNAP prescreening tools](#).⁴ These may give you a head start on helping families through the process.
- Determine if your state has a public online eligibility screener and/or application tool for WIC/SNAP. If it does, share the website link with families, and if you have time, consider assisting them with their applications using a computer at your site (remember to do this in a private area to avoid privacy concerns). After their application is uploaded, the local WIC/SNAP office takes over and contacts the family. (See an [example of an online application here](#).⁵)



A child enjoys a healthy meal.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MONKEY BUSINESS IMAGES, DREAMSTIME

Spotlight:

The City of Little Rock and Central Arkansas Library System created a very simple, electronic, two item food insecurity screening survey for families. If the family member answers often true or sometimes true, they are sent an email, text, or receive a phone call containing information about additional resources and next steps for accessing food assistance resources. Check out their [survey referral website](#).⁶

1 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. (2022). SNAP Outreach for Partners. Retrieved from <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/snap-outreach-for-partners>

2 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). SNAP Education Connection. Retrieved from <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov>

3 USDA. State SNAP-Ed Programs. Retrieved from <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-snap-ed-programs>

4 NRPA. (2022). Foods of the Month: Food Security Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/commit-to-health/foods-of-the-month>

5 Colorado Peak. (n.d.). Colorado Peak Homepage. Retrieved from https://peak--coloradopeak.force.com/peak/s/peak-landing-page?language=en_US

6 Central Arkansas Library System: Be Mighty Little Rock. (2022). Food Security Survey. Retrieved from <https://bemightylittlerock.org/food-survey-resource-referral>



- Provide a list of specific documents that families will need to provide to the WIC/SNAP office as part of their application. This could be part of a checklist you create for your families.⁵
- If your local WIC/SNAP office has a mobile unit, invite them, like is done by the The Parks Alliance of Indianapolis (Indiana), to bring their van to your site so WIC/SNAP staff can conduct screenings and help families sign up at your site.

In some states, there is the opportunity for nonprofits to become formal partners with their state SNAP program or an associated community action association to assist with enrollment. These arrangements enable the partner to have direct access to enrollment portals/websites on behalf of those they serve, and often provide training and technical support to expand outreach. Typically, there is some reimbursement for outreach activities and administrative expenses as part of the agreement. For example, in Arizona a community action organization called [Wildfire](#)⁷ offers funding and support for this type of partnership. This may be something for your park and recreation site to pursue either independently, or with a local nonprofit partner if the opportunity is available in your community.



People choose produce at a farmers market.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARINAHABICH08, DREAMSTIME

Navigating privacy concerns when assisting with WIC/SNAP prescreenings and application assistance. Because you will have access to private and personal information when you are assisting families in prescreenings and applications, knowing how to navigate privacy concerns is of utmost importance.

- Make sure that your site has a confidentiality policy with regards to assisting families with food assistance programs, and that the policy is included in your employee handbook, posted in staff areas, and perhaps even part of employment contracts and volunteer agreements.
- Provide a private space at your site for each person who seeks your assistance to sit, talk with you and fill out sensitive paperwork.
- Don't discuss family needs (food, medical, social service, etc.) with other staff at your site. Treat this information like you do medical information, which is protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA).
- Store sensitive paperwork in a secure location. If collecting screening information from families for use in referrals, make sure you store the information in a secure location, and allow it to be seen only by the staff member(s) who oversee the process of following up on referrals.
- If families bring documentation of their economic status as part of the screening/sign up, try to ensure that all paperwork goes back home with the family — don't keep it on site.

⁷ Wildfire. (2022). SNAP Partnership Opportunity (2022-2023). Retrieved from <https://wildfireaz.org/snap-partnership-opportunity-2-2/#toggle-id-2>



Referrals. Park and recreation sites also are good locations for referrals. Many community members access park and recreation programs and services on a regular basis, and so it's a natural role for park and recreation professionals to refer families to local WIC/SNAP programs. What may not be well known is that WIC/SNAP programming recommends that participants increase their physical activity. Thus, a partnership between park and recreation agencies and WIC/SNAP offices can work the other way as well — WIC/SNAP can refer families to park and recreation agencies for help with increasing the physical activity of families on WIC/SNAP.

Feedback. Because so many community members access park and recreation services, park and recreation professionals are a good source of feedback for food assistance programs. Staff may hear about barriers encountered by families as they try to use WIC/SNAP benefits, and this feedback would be very useful to program assistance offices so they can work on fixing any gaps in services or problems with the program. Park and recreation staff and families may consider creating a formal mechanism for sending feedback up the line to the WIC/SNAP program offices. Periodically hosting WIC or SNAP listening sessions may be something for parks to formally include in their programming a few times a year.

Program Delivery. Finding ways to leverage programming related to food assistance is another way park and recreation agencies can assist WIC/SNAP initiatives. For example, West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services supports their local farmers market WIC voucher program. “We will be processing online orders, packaging orders and delivery,” West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services says. With funding from the NRPA Parks as Community Wellness Hubs grant program, New London Recreation Department says it provided “vouchers to pass out to their [WIC/SNAP] clients for the farmers market.”

Advocacy. Advocacy around community issues such as food access, health equity or other needs identified within your community may be something your park and recreation agency decides to include in its mission. If that is the case, there are a number of ways you can take action to advocate on these issues that support the work of your local WIC/SNAP office(s).



Community members shop at a farmers market on Roosevelt Island, New York.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRCEA NICOLESCU, DREAMSTIME



Asheville Parks and Recreation has chosen to work on food access by joining a food working group. “[T]hey come together to chat about problems they are running into regarding food insecurity in the community, gaps, wins, number of people served, and they brainstorm how they can support or fill in those gaps...We are supporting Bountiful Cities in conducting their emergency food preparedness surveys in the community. Which will bring results that will implement programming around emergency food preparedness,” says Asheville Parks and Recreation.

Equity is another topic Asheville Parks and Recreation has chosen to address as part of their food working group activities. One staff member is part of the food justice planning committee, within the food waste solutions committee, and part of their work is creating equity guidelines for their food justice planning initiative. Determining how they can “bring more diversity and inclusion to stakeholders and committees” is one task this subcommittee is addressing, Asheville Parks and Recreation says.

An important part of advocacy is the process of bringing an issue to light. People in your community may not realize there is an issue with food access, representation on community boards, or barriers to accessing health care. Park and recreation professionals, due to their frequent contact with families from across the community, are in a good position to identify and then highlight such issues as a first step towards advocacy on these topics.

- The City of Ozark – Ozark Leisure Services says it hosts classes and events “to help get an understanding of where the community is” with respect to food insecurity and/or health care access.
- West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services describes their role as bringing about an awareness about the challenges faced by families in their community, more so than outright advocacy. According to West Allis-West Milwaukee: “We are working to reduce/eliminate the stigma associated with food insecurity as well as raising awareness of the food insecurity and health care access issues that exist in our community. Sometimes if people are not affected or connected to it, they do not realize it exists or understand the challenges associated with.”
- Asheville Parks and Recreation was asked by their local WIC/SNAP partners to join a local taskforce on hunger issues. This is another way park and recreation agencies can work to advocate for attention to food insecurity issues.

We all know that data are important for successful advocacy. If your park and recreation site conducts needs assessments, consider including food security screening questions as part of this process, like is done at Asheville Parks and Recreation, that says “we’ve added food insecurity screening questions in our park and recreation’s summer playground program’s registration form.”² While these data can be very powerful in future advocacy efforts, it is important to make sure that you collect the information on a survey that is not attached to any registration forms or other documents with identifiable information. Keep the food insecurity survey(s) separate, and anonymous, from all other forms with identifiers.



A group of volunteers serve food.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHERNETSKAYA, DREAMSTIME



How to Get Your “Foot in the Door” (How to Initiate a Partnership With WIC/SNAP)

If your park and recreation agency decides to make partnering with food assistance programs a component of your mission, the next step is to figure out just how to get your “foot in the door” — how to make the first contact with your local WIC/SNAP office in order to get the partnership going. Interestingly, based on a survey of park and recreation agencies who have partnerships with their local WIC/SNAP offices, it seems that the majority of partnerships originated due to park and recreation agencies, not local WIC/SNAP offices, making the first contact. That being said, when considering how to get a partnership going, professionals provided the following suggestions for getting started:

- Take a food assistance need identified by your park and recreation agency (or a working group you are associated with) to your local WIC/SNAP office to see if a partnership can be created to jointly address the need.
- Invite your local WIC/SNAP office to participate in a grant (grant application) with your park and recreation agency (as done by New London Recreation Department, West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services).
- Join an existing coalition, partnership, or working group on food assistance in order to be introduced to the local SNAP/WIC contacts.
- Ask a current partner, such as a county health department, to introduce you to WIC/SNAP contacts. Similarly, utilize your connections within existing partnerships — for example, at the City of Little Rock and Central Arkansas Library System, one grantee was successful in obtaining SNAP training for their staff and volunteers through an indirect connection. “We work with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance...They have a direct relationship with the Department of Human Services SNAP Office,” says the City of Little Rock and Central Arkansas Library System.
- Utilize contacts of your staff for referrals, like a park and recreation professional did at the City of Ozark – Ozark Leisure Services. “I actually have an aunt who works at the Department of Human Resources. She connected me with the right person and from there I have had no troubles with making a connection,” says a spokesperson for the City of Ozark – Ozark Leisure Services.
- Invite local WIC/SNAP staff to be part of events and meetings you host, as a way to open channels of communication.

“Through another workgroup I learned of the struggles and needs of the WIC farmers market WIC vouchers and approached them on joining us in the grant application process. We have learned that oftentimes partnerships lead to other partnerships.”
– **West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services**

A child holds a bag of produce.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIA KHAMIDULINA, DREAMISTINE.



- And last but not least, make “cold-calls” to your local WIC/SNAP office(s) and make the connection. For example, Asheville Parks and Recreation was creating a cross sector committee team as part of a grant application, and designated representatives from SNAP and WIC as key members. Staff from the park and recreation agency cold-called the local offices, beginning their partnerships with SNAP and WIC.

There are many ways park and recreation professionals can help address food access in their communities, and a powerful way is through partnerships with their local WIC/SNAP offices. If your local WIC/SNAP office does not feel they can address the need you identified, ask them for a referral to another organization that may be able to help.

For more information, check out the NRPA resource called [Partnership Building Resources](#)⁸ for general suggestions for building partnerships in your community. Also, NRPA has created [WIC and SNAP resources](#),⁴ including checklists for, and [how to use WIC/SNAP at the grocery store](#).⁴

This document was informed by email surveys conducted in June and July 2021, by Healthy Communities Design and Research, Inc. The following Parks as Community Wellness Hubs grantees participated in the surveys:

- The City of Asheville Parks and Recreation
- Integral Youth Services
- The City of Little Rock and Central Arkansas Library System
- The City of Ozark – Ozark Leisure Services
- The Indianapolis Parks Foundation
- The New London Recreation Department
- The West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services



A park with community garden planters in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES ANDREWS, DREAMSTIME.

8 NRPA. (2021). *Partnership Building Resources*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/commit-to-health/commit-to-health-resources>