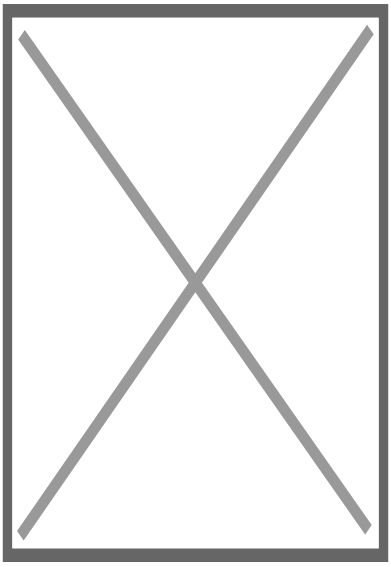
Health, Education & Play: A Conversation With Philadelphia's Commissioner of Parks & Recreation

Health Equity

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One of the best ways a city can encourage children to get the exercise their bodies and minds need is to provide safe, accessible opportunities for outdoor play and recreation. As Commissioner of Philadelphia Parks & Recreation Kathryn Ott Lovell is doing just that. Commissioner Ott Lovell oversees more than 10,200 acres of land, 225 miles of trail, 250 playgrounds and thousands of programs and events throughout Philadelphia. In this official role, she is a key influencer in the city's health and health-related policy.



A significant example I can point to is Commissioner Ott Lovell's supervision of the city's ambitious REBUILD initiative, dedicated to revitalizing neighborhood parks, libraries, recreation centers and playgrounds with the goals of promoting equity and encouraging economic growth across the city. The promise of REBUILD includes addressing social determinants of health and well-being (a focus shared by PolicyLab).

Here at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), I am happy to say that we can highlight other examples of her leadership. Commissioner Ott Lovell has backed Philadelphia Parks & Recreation's partnership in NaturePHL, a collaborative initiative with CHOP and the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education to promote outdoor recreation for Philadelphia's children and families. NaturePHL serves as a growing hub for up-to-date resources about outdoor recreation in the city. The program reaches community members by engaging pediatric primary care providers as featured ambassadors of a core public health message: "Outdoor play is good for you!" Just this week, the American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed the importance of play for the health and well-being of children—a position now backed by more evidence than ever before.

I first met the Commissioner in the spring of 2017 at an event hosted by The Nature Conservancy, where we spoke together on a panel discussion about "Why Urban Forests Matter." A warm and welcoming presence on the panel stage, Commissioner Ott Lovell delivered powerful reminders about the interconnectedness of our work, highlighting how TreePhilly, the ongoing effort to green Philadelphia neighborhoods through a robust tree-planting program, improves the health of local neighborhoods and, as one of the world's largest city-based greening projects, is poised to make a global impact.

I asked Commissioner Ott Lovell to join me on the PolicyLab blog for a virtual discussion as part of their "PolicyLab Goes Back To School" series. Join in the conversation by reading our Q&A below!

Dr. Renjilian: In your opinion, why is it important for communities and cities to invest in parks and recreation programs for children?

Commissioner Ott Lovell: Investments in parks and recreation children's programming are investments in the future of our city. A quality parks and recreation system provides accessible and affordable experiences and spaces for all. The children we engage at our Parks & Recreation facilities are healthier, more active and better connected to their community than those who do not frequent our facilities. This leads to better performance at school, respect for their neighbors and access to an assortment of life skills that serve as the foundation for well-rounded children who will grow up to be productive members of society. Furthermore, investing in children's programs helps keep them out of harm's way. For example, children who are engaged in productive activities are less likely to get into trouble with the law.

R: What do you see as the most important ways in which your department contributes to the health of children? What department resources, policies and services might have the greatest impact on health?

O: Our department contributes to the health of children with our robust food program through which we provide free nutritious meals and snacks for young people under the age of 18. The food program provides approximately 20,000 meals a day during the summer and 4,000 meals per day during the school year.

We also run Play Philly, a program dedicated to ensuring that every Philly kid gets 60 minutes of heart rate-elevating play every day. We accomplish this goal by providing structured, high-quality active play and recreation programming in Parks & Recreation Centers and by educating, training, empowering and supporting adults who work with kids. Separate from this program, we also offer a variety of opportunities for young people to stay active through organized physical activities including free swim lessons, baseball, basketball, tumbling and gymnastics and more.

R: As a pediatrician, I recognize the importance of balancing recreation with safety. What is your department doing to help promote safe recreation for children and families?

O: All of our recreation programs are monitored by trained recreation professionals. They ensure that the children know the right way to play their chosen sport to minimize injury. Additionally, our recreation staffers preach the importance of good sportsmanship and of respect for your teammates, coaches and opposing players.

R: What are some other examples of how your department provides leadership to promote health of Philadelphians through its programs and community engagement?

O: Philadelphia is leading the way with innovative parks and recreation programing to promote the health of its citizens. We host "We Walk PHL," a free walking group that meets several times per week at various public parks. Launched as a pilot program in 2017, We Walk PHL seeks to promote positive health outcomes, increase use of Philadelphia's park system and create opportunities for people to pursue fitness goals while meeting their neighbors.

Our department also runs FarmPhilly, which supports over 60 urban agriculture projects on Philadelphia Parks & Recreation land including orchards, vegetable and fruit production, youth-education gardens, intergenerational gardens, community gardens and market farms. Through FarmPhilly, we offer youth education programs at Philadelphia's recreation centers, support community gardens on city parkland, provide greenhouse propagation opportunities and work on garden preservation. With these diverse program areas, FarmPhilly seeks to uplift the importance of urban agriculture and support its expansion across Philadelphia.

R: As families across our city are preparing to go back to school, what after-school programs would you like to highlight—particularly for children of working parents?

O: Philadelphia Parks & Recreation offers nearly 100 after-school programs throughout the city, providing safe places and structured activity for thousands of children five days a week during non-school hours. Programming focuses on five wellness areas: fitness and healthy habits, environmental awareness, outdoor activities, sports and athletics and the arts.

R: What are the best-kept secrets about Philadelphia's Parks and Recreation programs/sites?

O: I would say that our Performing Arts program and our gymnastics programs are our best-kept secrets. We have top level coaches and teachers in both programs that are providing young people with impeccable training.

Chris Renjilian, MD, MBE, is an assistant professor of Pediatrics in the Division of Adolescent Medicine and the Division of Orthopedics, Sports Medicine at CHOP. He studies how sports, recreation and play can promote positive development for all children, and is a founding physician leader of NaturePHL.

This post is part of a collection of back to school-related research and information that we're curating for the new school year. Follow our hashtag #PolicyLabGoesBacktoSchool for more.