

Green Portage

Park Rx creates connections with people and nature

Author: Andrea Metzler, Public Engagement Coordinator, Portage Park District



For many, spending time in nature can be just what the doctor ordered. This spring, I learned just how important it was to help our community members make connections and encourage one another to spend more time outdoors. Many are aware that it would be beneficial to our mental and physical health to be more active, but some find it hard to carve out the time. In fact, studies are proving that time in nature will help a person in several ways. In a study published June 2019, it was noted that those people who spent at least 120 minutes a week in nature saw a boost in their physical and mental health (White, Mathew P. (2019) Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing). “Spending time in, or living close to, natural green spaces is associated with diverse and significant health benefits. It reduces the risk of type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, premature death, and preterm birth, and increases sleep duration.” (University of East Anglia. "It's official -- spending time outside is good for you." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 6 July 2018.)

This is where the Portage Park District Park Rx program comes in. The program is a “prescription for health”, engaging participants in new ways to spend time outside and learn more about healthy lifestyles.

This spring Portage Parks began a 13-week pilot program and over 100 people participated in several programs related to health and wellness in nature. Health partners were brought in to share their knowledge with participants. Partners include UH Portage Medical Center, Portage County Health District, Portage County WIC, NEOMED SOAR Clinic, Sequoia Wellness, KSU, and AxxessPointe Community Health Centers.

We explored yoga, fitness hiking and stretching, mindfulness, physical rehabilitation and enjoyed guided hikes learning about the natural resources and environmental wellness in Portage Parks along the way. The programs were incredibly informative and helpful to the participants, many of which attended several programs. But beyond the basic premise of Park Rx, there was something else happening at each event, people were connecting! They were connecting with nature but also with each other and became champions for one another to complete the program and keep moving. When the pilot program concluded, lasting friendships were made, and many were eager to find out when the Portage Park District would offer more sessions of Park Rx.

Testimonials were gathered from participants through an exit survey for the program. Some of the comments that were shared were: “My goal was to meet and connect with people within the community-achieved.” “The days I had a program, I felt really good the rest of the day, and it sparked some additional activity beyond the program. I hope you do this again. The group hikes were both fun and informative, and I got to see a few parks I've never been to before, as well as almost completing my Wild Hikes Challenge earlier than ever before!”; “I absolutely loved taking part in this program! It was fun getting to see the natural world in a way that I wouldn't have without Park Rx.”

Personally, my own take aways were like those of the participants in the program. It was wonderful to have events to look forward to with people that were fun to be around. Simply hiking with a partner allows one to chat along the way forgetting the steps beneath as you walk and talk. The health

professionals were excellent at gearing their programs toward the group in front of them and made it easy to ask questions and learn. As the program organizer, I was thrilled that several participants took their sessions very seriously and wanted to make sure they attended as many as possible to earn their Park Rx “honors”. Often, we are concerned with quantity of participants and while that is an important number to track, it's good to look for quality as well. Park Rx is a great example of the quality results that can come from a program and truly impact lives for the long term. The program will continue this fall with more hikes and programs that relate to nature, health and environmental wellness. The connections will continue too, engaging people and giving them motivation to make time for the outdoors. After all, isn't that what a public engagement coordinator is supposed to do?