

Access to Recreation Receives National Award



Ribbon Cutting at Longfellow reopening following accessibility renovations.

The Council on Foundations, the nation's major organization of philanthropy and grantmaking, has announced that the Access to Recreation initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has received the Critical Impact Award for demonstrating innovative leadership, bold vision, and significant impact in advancing the common good through effective grantmaking.

Creating a safe, accessible water-play area at Longfellow Park in Oak Park was one of the Access to Recreation grantee projects, which included 22 Midwest locations in all. "We are so honored to be part of this award-winning initiative," said Sophia Lloyd, Executive Director of the Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation. "For the first time water play is possible for all children at this facility." A synthetic rubberized surface under the adjacent playground also made this part of the park accessible.

A second Access to Recreation grantee project, Ability Awareness Day, occurred at Longfellow Park on July 10, 2009. Using their skills and senses differently to participate in familiar activities, campers were challenged to play in ways that expanded their perspective. Campers from the Park District of Oak Park wore blindfolds to simulate blindness, played basketball in wheelchairs and competed in a hand-cycle relay. The program consisted of 10 activity stations in which campers visited on a rotating basis, each of which demonstrated a different way to think about a sport or ability. West Suburban Special Recreation Association coordinated this learning experience with the Park District of Oak Park and the Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation.

In addition, an Access to Recreation Endowment Fund has been established at the Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation to ensure that Access to Recreation

opportunities in Oak Park and River Forest continue to increase. “We are grateful to the Kellogg Foundation for designating a portion of their grant for an endowment fund for future accessible recreation projects in our Villages so we can continue this initiative on a long-term basis,” added Lloyd.

“It is really important for community members to support the continuing Access to Recreation Fund,” said Mena Boulanger, Board Chair of the Donor Development Committee. Boulanger said budget cuts in Illinois have put a strain on public funding, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to support initiatives and programs that rely on private donations. “As the state budget gets cut, demand for private dollars goes up,” she said.

The Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation was one of four Illinois community foundations to receive an Access to Recreation grant. Other local community foundations included Community Foundation of East Central Illinois, Sangamon County Community Foundation, and the DuPage Community Foundation. Donors Forum was an important partner to the initiative, coordinating statewide efforts to encourage policy change surrounding the issue of accessible recreation.

Donors Forum provided statewide leadership for the initiative, which included projects in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. “We are so incredibly proud of the work of the Oak Park-River Forest Community Foundation” said Valerie Lies, president and CEO of Donors Forum. “Their commitment to accessible recreation has not only created inclusive family activities, but also changed perspectives and attitudes, fostering a community that is welcoming to citizens of all ages and abilities.”

The most visible result of the initiative are more than 40 recreation projects that include trails, wildlife viewing blinds, an indoor greenhouse, ability awareness, playgrounds, splash pads, and more. In all cases, advisory groups included people with disabilities or family members and advocates of people with disabilities to bring new ideas to the design process and to ensure that the final product met the high standards of the initiative.

Not as visible as the recreation projects, but just as important, were strategies developed to bring communities together to address local recreation needs; to influence public policy as it pertains to accessibility; and to build awareness of the increasing need for accessible recreation. As part of its efforts to build collaboration and community support, Access to Recreation brought new definition to the role of recreation as it serves the public – as a driver of improved health, economic development, and social justice.