



CASE STUDIES

Maintaining Our Shared Spaces

TPL's Parks Initiative is dedicated to expanding equitable park access nationwide, ensuring close-to-home access to parks and their benefits for all. Through the 10-Minute Walk[®] program, we are building strong collaborations with mayors, cross-sector public and private partners, and community leaders to advance local policies and transform park systems. To meet the scale and urgency of parks work across the country, the 10-Minute Walk[®] Park Equity Accelerator works hand-in-hand with communities to advance park equity through policy and systems change. Since launch in 2022, the Park Equity Accelerator has helped 21 cities and more than 150 practitioners and community members across the U.S. create lasting change. This case study shares how an Accelerator helped the Washington D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation reimagine park maintenance to support high quality public spaces for all.

How Washington D.C. is Streamlining Its Work to Better Care for Parks

Every town and city has heard the question before: who's responsible for that? The care of public space, from streets and sidewalks to parks and plazas, often provokes a plethora of government agencies, or the proverbial "alphabet soup." And when jurisdictions blur, regular upkeep tends to fall by the wayside, leading to a decline in service. Without care, parks and open spaces are left worse off, hindering the public's ability to gather, connect with others, play, and relax safely—all essential ingredients for a good quality of life. It could also create potentially pricier problems later on.

Washington D.C. is an exceptional case. About 90 percent of its public park system is maintained by the National Park Service (NPS), which includes the National Mall and Memorial parks. The other tenth is divided up amongst a consortium of city agencies, namely the Departments of General Services (DGS), Public Works (DPW), Transportation (DDOT), and Energy & Environment (DOEE). In fact, the Department of Parks

& Recreation (DPR) has historically been given a limited role in park maintenance. But when DPR's partner agencies are overextended and understaffed, the result is that parks don't end up getting the attention they need and deserve.

The impacts and severity of upkeep, which had been a longstanding issue, became more readily apparent through community engagement events for [Ready2Play](#), the agency's 20-year strategy and vision for the public parks system. "Our teams spoke to hundreds, if not thousands, of residents about their experiences with our sites and amenities," said Riley Piva, a community planner at DPR. "Overwhelmingly, they heard back that maintenance really was the largest concern and barrier to entry."

Thanks to the agency scramble—DDOT in charge of street trees and sidewalks; DGS responsible for some trash cans, not others (those might be under DPW); DPR maintaining a park, but maybe not if it abuts a street

(that's DDOT); and no signage distinguishing any of this—the public was unsurprisingly confused about who to call when they had a complaint, if they could even find where to make one. And they weren't alone. "Almost all of the concerns that come in, there has to be a level of decoding," said Piva. "Who owns it? Is it the District's? Is it national or federal? And if it's District, is it a concern that we can handle in-house? Or does it fall within another team? Every single thing is triaged amongst 10 agencies."

That all takes time and resources, Piva added. But beyond that, it discourages the public from even engaging in the parks around them in the first place; a more streamlined and proactive approach to maintenance would build both quality and trust. Facing these challenges, the District's DPR joined the Accelerator to formulate a new approach to ensuring that all residents received well cared-for open space.

The first task? Figure out the data. DPR staff soon realized the agency didn't own most of the information it needed to understand where problems showed up. So working with TPL, the agency developed a park inspection tool and trained Recreation Specialists to use it at 17 pilot sites throughout the District's eight wards. Equipped with new tools, park employees could visit biweekly and report back conditions, like graffiti, trash, broken equipment, or safety hazards.

"The phone and tablet could snap a photo and drop a pin exactly where the maintenance concern was, which had historically been one of our big barriers to entry. We then receive all of that back at HQ," said Piva. Her team then does the usual triage—but now they also dole out. "Our Level 1 Manager tells us, 'We can handle this,' or if it was a work order for DGS or DPW. We're working on getting it into the hands of the correct folks."

The 'parks maintenance pilot,' with assistance from the Accelerator, established a coherent chain of command. (For example: if a water fountain broke in a specific park, who could they call?) This allowed DPR to respond to low-level service requests much more quickly and nimbly. Beyond that, clear patterns emerged. "Sometimes we're collecting data and we don't take a step back to say, 'Where's the gap? And what can we do to make it more efficient?'" asked Jasmine Byrd, a data analyst at DPR.

If a park didn't have any notable conditions, that means the concern had been solved, helping to produce response rates. This data, combined with visitation rates, will help give planners a stronger sense of whether the maintenance, or lack thereof, had actually

dampened usage. Internally, too, it could help make the case for funding, through a first-of-its-kind 'budget forecasting tool.'

"That helps us estimate future budget needs, not only for maintenance supplies, but also, staffing in our maintenance department," said Byrd. "The pilot will tell us what our level of service was, how quickly things got solved, what number of concerns there were, and how many DPR was able to handle in-house. So with the forecasting tool, we're hoping to say, 'If we increased our team to X amount of people, then we can expect to do Y amount of tasks during this period, increasing our level of service.'"

Within the web of agency acronyms, the team was able to work with Trust for Public Land to develop a suite of research materials and custom tools that could build their internal maintenance capacity, as well as a pilot program to address basic maintenance needs plaguing the District's parks—something that residents repeatedly said was a major deterrent for accessing and enjoying these vital spaces. It doesn't necessarily untangle the web, but it allows DPR to maneuver within it to deliver better maintained open spaces to the residents who deserve and depend on them. Now the work begins to align how the agency operates, plans and executes accordingly.

While the circumstances seem special, the problems in the District are perennial to park systems everywhere. Shortly after joining the Accelerator, Piva, Byrd and their colleagues quickly learned that other cities had experienced the same difficulties—and that network could also offer potential workarounds, too.

"It felt like there was no way to do anything because of the complexities of the situation that we're in. But everyone has a complex situation with nuances that they're trying to work through," said Piva. "This gave us a bird's eye view of where things had worked, what examples we can use, and what people we should be talking to. That not only made us feel like we're seen and not alone in this weird, niche place, but also, it gave us solutions that we would have never been able to see otherwise."

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