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Expanding Care-First Violence Prevention Strategies in County Parks

The Los Angeles County (County) Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) operates a vast network of local and regional parks, recreational facilities, and natural areas, which amount to 73,214 acres of parkland and recreation space. The County parks system serves as a vital resource for millions of residents and visitors to access nature, connect with others, and enjoy programming that supports community health and wellness. Maintaining parks that are welcoming and safe for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds is critical to ensure these public resources truly serve DPR's mission to build healthy and resilient communities and advance social equity and cohesion.

Unfortunately, DPR has reported an increase in incidents impacting the safety and wellbeing of park patrons and staff. In Fiscal Year 2022-2023 alone, 288 safety incidents were reported at County parks. DPR's recreation staff report that these incidents are impacting employee morale and causing high staff turnover. The issue of park and community safety was also identified as a top priority by community members in the 64 community meetings held across the County by DPR in September 2023. In response, DPR took the initiative to create a Park Safety Ordinance (Ordinance) to enhance community safety at County parks. This Ordinance will allow DPR to temporarily remove and exclude individuals from County parks for a set period of time. While the Ordinance

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will expand the tools at DPR's disposal to address incidents as they occur, additional preventative solutions are still needed to address the root causes of safety concerns, using a Care First, Jails Last approach, that acknowledges the role public parks play in our social and community safety net.

Research supports the effectiveness of care first strategies as tools that promote a sense of safety and increased park usage. These strategies include: violence prevention and intervention programs, such as safe passages; alternative crisis response models; mental health resources, including case workers and social workers at parks; field safety and de-escalation training; and investments in staffing, activities, and maintenance. DPR has worked to pilot and implement these strategies, particularly at high-risk parks. Parks After Dark (PAD) is a nationally recognized model for building resilient communities that re-envision parks as community hubs. UCLA researchers discovered that "over the life of the program, 189 fewer crimes — 115 serious or violent crimes and 74 nonviolent offenses — took place in PAD neighborhoods than might have occurred otherwise¹." It is projected that about 509,000 youth and community members participated in these programs in Fiscal Year 2022-23.² As a result, the County saved millions of dollars due to reductions in crime and chronic disease. DPR recognizes the importance of sustaining these recreation programs that serve as prevention and early intervention tools.

In addition, DPR has worked with the County Department of Public Health's Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) to inform and expand its Care First approach using the OVP "Violence Score" (high rates of homicides, assaults with a gun, trauma center visits and gang involvement violent crimes) to target additional resources and inform DPR's staffing standards at County Parks. DPR has also partnered extensively with the Departments of Mental Health, Probation, and Economic Opportunity, to support violence

¹ <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/los-angeles-county-parks-after-dark-safety-health#:~:text=Ninety%2Dtwo%20percent%20of%20people,Center%20for%20Health%20Policy%20Research.>

² Los Angeles County Department of Parks & Recreation. (2023). FY22-23 Revised Performance Measures Report <https://ceo.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/2022-23-PERFORMANCE-MEASURES.pdf>

prevention programming, such as the Safe Passages Program, Our Social Places and Opportunities for Teens Program and the Youth@Work Program, all of which support at-risk-youth populations in parks. DPR is currently working with the Parks Sheriff Bureau and Peace Over Violence on a Partnership for a Park Safety model – evolving from a Community Policing Model.

DPR's collaboration with other Departments serves as a best practice nationally to create programming aligned with the Care First philosophy; however, the data indicates a need for additional and more sustainable resources to support expanded programming. In addition to the existing programs outlined above, there are proven Care First models that can be extended to County parks to provide an alternative response to common incidents that may arise with people experiencing homelessness or a mental health crisis. A report from the Vera Institute of Justices' *Behavioral Health Crisis Alternatives: Shifting from Police to Community Responses* highlights such strategies and approaches, including peer navigator programs, mobile crisis teams, and 911 diversion programs. In Eugene, Oregon, their Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program, dispatches teams of mental health clinicians with a medic to respond to calls involving someone in crisis when safety is not an issue.³ Olympia, Washington has also introduced complementary initiatives to help people in crisis, including the Crisis Response Unit, which is modeled after CAHOOTS, and Familiar Faces, which provides peer outreach to people who repeatedly come to the attention of police.⁴ Similarly, through the County Department of Mental Health's Alternative Crisis Response program, 911 to 988 diversion is being expanded and mental health Field Intervention Teams are available 24/7.

Expanding collaborative efforts between our County departments can lead to a more comprehensive and forward-thinking approach to creating a safer and more supportive environment for all. In addition, full implementation of a proactive Care First agenda for County Parks requires leveraging promising partnerships and using data to inform effective measures that focus on prevention, intervention, education, and

³ <https://www.vera.org/behavioral-health-crisis-alternatives>

⁴ Ibid.

community building.

¶ WE THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) in coordination with the Executive Director of the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) in consultation with the Executive Director of the Anti-Racism, Diversity and Inclusion initiative to report back to the Board of Supervisors (Board) in writing in 60 days with a plan that includes any resources needed to incorporate County Parks safety data into a public facing dashboard that will be implemented by July 1, 2024, and reported on annually to the County's Parks and Receptions Commission and the Board of Supervisors to foster data-driven decision-making and address safety concerns. The data dashboard should include:
 - a. A geographic breakdown and analysis of key indicators, including but not limited to, LASD Parks Bureau calls for service, incident/crime reports, number and type of incidents (including the demographics of crime victims), arrests (including demographic information), park expulsions (including demographic information), referrals to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's Homeless Outreach Portal, park staff vacancy rates, and locations where existing violence prevention programs are in place; and
 - b. Existing data from OVP's Trauma Prevention Initiative.
2. Direct the Director of DPR and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in collaboration with the Executive Director of OVP, and the Directors of the Departments of Youth Development, Justice, Care and Opportunities, and Mental Health, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, to report back to the Board in writing in 90 days with recommendations to expand or pilot evidence-based violence prevention, intervention, and Care First programming in high OVP Violence Score parks. This report should include:
 - a. An initial assessment of outcomes resulting from existing efforts in County parks;

- b. Recommendations to expand existing partnerships and programming with other County departments and community partners and to extend promising, evidence-based violence-prevention and alternative crisis response models into County parks;
 - c. A plan to systematize interdepartmental coordination and collaboration to implement the above recommendations and evaluate existing and future programming using the data dashboard and annual report;
 - d. Consideration of staffing standards, and/or additional policies to improve park safety outcomes using a Care First approach;
 - e. A plan for ongoing, coordinated community engagement with key stakeholders and staff to gather regular input on parks safety issues; and
3. Direct the Director of DPR to work with the CEO, in collaboration with the Executive Director of OVP, and the Directors of the Departments of Youth Development, Justice, Care and Opportunities, and Mental Health to report back to the Board in writing 60 days after the completion of Directive #2, to provide fiscal recommendations to implement the park safety efforts by program and park, including identification of potential one-time and ongoing state, federal, and appropriate/relevant non-NCC and/or salary saving funding options.

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