

# Strategies for the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation to Promote Healthy Eating and Nutrition

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June 2011



**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

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## **About D.C. Hunger Solutions**

D.C. Hunger Solutions, founded in 2002 as an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), works to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income people in the District of Columbia. To learn more about D.C. Hunger Solutions, visit [www.dchunger.org](http://www.dchunger.org).

## **Acknowledgements**

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This report was written by Alexandra Ashbrook, Director of D.C. Hunger Solutions and Kristin Roberts, Senior Community Nutrition Associate with assistance from Crissa Nelson, [title], and Safiya Jenkins, intern for D.C. Hunger Solutions. Thanks to Ruth Perot, [please check her title] SHIRE, Inc. for her assistance in providing feedback to the report.



## Strategies for the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation to Promote Healthy Eating and Nutrition

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Combating hunger and obesity demands a comprehensive approach with elected officials, government agencies, business, places of worship, community-based organizations, and residents working together. This is especially the case in Wards 7 and 8, where residents experience both the highest food insecurity and highest obesity rates in the city. In March 2010, the District released its first-ever state obesity plan, *Working Towards a Healthy DC: The District of Columbia's Overweight and Obesity Action Plan*.<sup>1</sup> The D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is a key city partner in the implementation of the plan.

In order to combat obesity, parks and recreation centers must play a role in tackling nutrition as well as fitness. DPR provides a wide variety of opportunities for physical activity at recreation facilities, fields, classes, and playground spaces throughout the city. This Issue Brief suggests that in order to better address the District's alarming rates of obesity and public health, DPR should expand its activities to promote both active living *and* healthy eating.

The Brief highlights:

- Current use of federal nutrition programs by the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation.
- Findings from a nutrition environment assessment survey of Ward 7 and 8 D.C. recreation centers during summer 2010.
- Recommendations for policies and practices that can help transform recreation centers into hubs for healthy eating and nutrition education.

D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation centers have the potential to offer not only healthful, satisfying meals for children and teens, but also education in good nutrition, which can have a ripple effect throughout the most nutritionally-vulnerable wards of the District. The Summary of Findings and Recommendations show what DPR centers are doing now to meet hunger and nutrition needs and how DPR centers can promote healthful eating and nutrition as well.

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<sup>1</sup> The plan is available at:

<http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx?agency=doh&section=2&release=19808&year=2010&file=file.aspx%2Frelease%2F19808%2FOBESITY%2520ACTION%2520PLAN.pdf>.

Objective 4 of that plan is to ensure: "Each year, an increasing number of residents of all ages and abilities will have access to, and will use, safe and clean opportunities to be physically active."

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

<b>Nutrition Environment Assessment Finding</b>	<b>Policy Recommendation</b>
<p>1.) Hungry children depend on the meals DPR serves.</p> <p>2.) All DPR centers participate in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program but center-based outreach of the program is limited.</p>	<p>Maximize participation in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program by enlisting centers in community outreach.</p>
<p>3.) Summer meal quality should be improved to be more appealing to children and teens.</p>	<p>Improve the variety, appeal, and nutrition of the meals served through the federal nutrition programs—D.C. Free Summer Meals and the Afterschool Meal Program.</p>
<p>4.) All seven centers participating in the Afterschool Meal Program in the winter and spring of 2010 valued the program.</p>	<p>Enroll all centers in Wards 7 and 8 and in other eligible areas of the city in the Afterschool Meal Program.</p>
<p>5.) Cooking facilities at centers range from a full kitchen to a small refrigerator.</p>	<p>In centers where kitchens are available, explore the possibility of providing hot meals and holding cooking classes. At smaller centers without kitchens, ensure that facilities are fully equipped to provide adequate food service for participants.</p>
<p>6.) Nutrition education programs and healthy eating promotion are scarce.</p>	<p>Provide a nutrition education for all DPR center managers and staff members and nutrition resources (e.g., posters, recipes, resource guide) to all recreation centers.</p>
<p>7.) Vending machines contain unhealthy beverages.</p>	<p>Establish and promote a healthy vending policy for DPR centers and parks.</p>
<p>8.) Staff generally like the idea of a farmers' market or produce stand at centers.</p>	<p>Further assess the interest and ability of DPR centers to host produce stands, and identify pilot sites.</p>

## ISSUE BRIEF

Across the country, cities are enlisting parks and recreation centers to help combat obesity by providing safe, clean, and free or low-cost opportunities to be physically active. In Washington, D.C., the Department of Parks and Recreation provides a wide variety of opportunities for physical activity at recreation facilities, fields, classes, and playground spaces throughout the city.

In order to combat obesity, parks and recreation centers must play a role in tackling nutrition as well as fitness. D.C. Hunger Solutions sees an opportunity for D.C. recreation centers to become “hubs” for healthy eating along with active living. This Issue Brief examines ways in which the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation can build on its nationally-recognized free summer meal program and help combat obesity – and hunger – in Washington, D.C., by improving access to healthy food for children, encouraging healthy eating habits, and providing nutrition education.

The Brief highlights:

- Current use of federal nutrition programs by the Department of Parks and Recreation.
- Findings from a nutrition environment assessment survey of Ward 7 and 8 D.C. recreation centers during summer 2010.
- Recommendations for policies and practices that can help transform recreation centers into hubs for healthy eating and nutrition.



## BACKGROUND

Obesity poses a major public health problem in Washington, D.C. Twenty-two percent of adults<sup>2</sup> are obese, and 35 percent of children<sup>3</sup> ages 10 to 17 in the District are obese or overweight (at risk for obesity) and therefore at risk for high blood pressure, heart diseases, diabetes, and lowered life expectancy. These problems also contribute to an estimated \$400 million in yearly health care expenses for the District.<sup>4</sup>

While all residents struggle to maintain a healthy weight, low-income and food insecure people are especially vulnerable due to the additional risk factors associated with poverty, including limited

<sup>2</sup> District of Columbia, Department of Health, Center for Policy, Planning and Evaluation. *Obesity in the District of Columbia*. 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. (2007). *2007 National Survey of Children's Health, Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health Website*. Available at: <http://www.nschdata.org>. Accessed on February 10, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Source: The District of Columbia's Overweight and Obesity Action Plan. 2010. Available at: <http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx?agency=doh&section=2&release=19808&year=2010&file=file.aspx%2Frelease%2F19808%2FOBESITY%2520ACTION%2520PLAN.pdf>

financial resources, limited access to healthy and affordable foods, and limited opportunities for physical activity. Such is the case in Ward 7 and 8, where the problems of hunger, poverty, and obesity coincide: Wards 7 and 8 have the city's lowest average household incomes (\$54,677 median income, \$ 44,076 median income respectively<sup>5</sup>) and the city's highest rates of obesity (40 percent and 42 percent, respectively<sup>6</sup>).

To help reduce obesity rates and improve the health of its residents, in March 2010, the District released its first-ever state obesity plan, *Working Towards a Healthy DC: The District of Columbia's Overweight and Obesity Action Plan*.<sup>7</sup> This plan was developed by an Obesity Work Group, composed of city agencies and 15 members appointed by D.C. Department of Health and representing the District's business, health, and non-profit communities, with community input from stakeholder meetings and town halls.

As a member of the Work Group and chair of the Obesity Action Plan's Policy Group, D.C. Hunger Solutions participated in shaping the Obesity Action Plan. The Obesity Action Plan contains goals, objectives, and strategies for adopting and promoting policies and programs to support wellness, particularly healthy eating and active living, in six key environments city-wide:

1. schools and child care facilities;
2. medical and health services;
3. food retail and food service establishments;
4. places for physical activity;
5. worksites; and
6. faith-based institutions.

While the Obesity Action Plan is an accomplishment, it must be realized, which will require the work and commitment of agencies, non-profit groups, health experts, and residents themselves.

The D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), with its mission to improve the quality of life of District residents through fitness, health, and recreation programs, provides a natural ally in the city's fight against obesity, especially in carrying out Objective 4.B of the Obesity Action Plan. Each year, the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has had a key role in Objective 4.B of the Obesity Action Plan: "Each year, an increasing number of residents of all ages and abilities will have access to, and will use, safe and clean opportunities to be physically active."

To date, most D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation efforts to prevent obesity have focused on improving opportunities for physical activity. The District of Columbia in recent years has invested millions of dollars in improving targeted recreation centers across the city. While the capital improvements are a key step in encouraging park and recreation center use, advocacy groups are encouraging DPR to take other steps. For instance, the Summit Health Institute for Research and Education, Inc. (SHIRE) recommended in its May 2010 report, "Childhood Obesity and Overweight: One Community's Insights," that parks offer extended hours, conduct more outreach to draw in community members, and develop more programs based on community input. The Healthy Kids,

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<sup>5</sup> Neighborhood Info DC, Neighborhood Profiles, March 2011. <http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org/profiles.html>. Accessed on June 27, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> District of Columbia, Department of Health, Center for Policy, Planning and Evaluation. *Obesity in the District of Columbia*. 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The plan is available at:

<http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx?agency=doh&section=2&release=19808&year=2010&file=file.aspx%2Frelease%2F19808%2FBESITY%2520ACTION%2520PLAN.pdf>.

Healthy Communities (HKHC) team (led by SHIRE, and including D.C. Hunger Solutions, the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, the D.C. Department of Health, the D.C. Office of Planning, Groundwork Anacostia and the National Black Child Development Institute. – funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has been advocating for the development of a “park ambassadors” program, to improve safety in neighborhood parks, offer supervised programs, and provide jobs for neighborhood residents.

DPR should build on its wellness efforts of working to improve the health of District residents, especially children, by providing and promoting good nutrition. This Issue Brief reviews DPR’s current capacity in this respect, and explores opportunities for the agency and its numerous community sites to expand their efforts on nutrition.

## CURRENT FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN RECREATION CENTERS

### *D.C. Free Summer Meals*

The D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation is already a key player in helping children and youth access nutritious food through its leadership as a large sponsor for the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program – which brings in millions of dollars in federal funding to feed thousands of hungry children during the summer months when school meals are not available. By offering free meals and snacks at its recreation sites, DPR draws children and teens into its facilities and camps, helping to keep youth safe and engaged during the summer. DPR’s sponsorship has been a major part of earning the District’s summer meals program the distinction of Number One in the country for serving the highest percentage of eligible children.



<b>D.C. Free Summer Meals Participation Data</b>						
	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Average Daily Participation</b>	27,575	28,724	29,036	26,198	25,174	28,008
<b>Low-Income Participation Rate<sup>1</sup></b>	77%	86%	96%	89%	81%	80.20%
<b>Number of Sponsors</b>	25	19	19	16	20	25
<b>Number of Sites</b>	301	376	404	329	270	317
<b>Federal Funding</b>	\$2,531,945	\$ 3,219,636	\$ 3,307,909	\$ 3,562,064	\$ 3,220,136	\$3,237,896

1. Percentage of students participating in regular year free and reduced-price school lunch who are participating in D.C. Free Summer Meals

DPR has not only opened summer feeding programs at all of its own recreation facilities in qualifying areas, but for years has also sponsored approximately 70 community-based summer meals sites which would not be able to provide this food without DPR's help. As a sponsor, DPR delivers food and oversees administrative and financial duties. DPR's leading role in the success of the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program is a prime example of how DPR can combine physical activity and healthy eating to optimize children's health during the summer. Additionally, despite its success, the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program has substantial room to grow.

### ***Afterschool Meals Program***

The District's Afterschool Meal Program began in late 2009 and provides a full, nutritious meal, as well as a snack, for children and teens who participate in afterschool, evening or weekend programs at schools or in the community. DPR now has the opportunity to extend its summer meal program success throughout the calendar year. In the spring of 2010, DPR began serving suppers through the Afterschool Meal Program at 12 of its recreation centers, located in high poverty areas. The agency had planned to expand its service beginning in the fall of 2010. However, plans were delayed because of the need to find a new vendor for the meals and delays in completing the health and safety inspections for two new sites.

## **NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT FINDINGS**

In summer 2010, with support from the MARPAT Foundation, D.C. Hunger Solutions' staff and interns visited and surveyed staff at Department of Parks and Recreation centers in Wards 7 and 8 of the District. Through the surveys and interviews, D.C. Hunger Solutions examined how DPR might build on the success of the D.C. Free Summer Meals program and become city-wide centers for fitness and nutrition. These wards were chosen because of the interrelated problems of obesity, hunger, and poverty impacting many residents of these Wards.

There are 19 DPR recreation and community centers\* spread throughout Wards 7 and 8. The centers vary widely in size, facilities, and programs and activities offered. Visits and surveys were conducted at 15 of the 19 DPR centers in Wards 7 and 8. (Attempts to contact or visit the remaining four – Kenilworth/Parkside Recreation Center, Oxon Run Park, Ridge Road Recreation Center, and Southeast Tennis and Learning Center were unsuccessful; Oxon Run Park appeared to be unstaffed, with only a pavilion.)

\* The Fort Dupont Pool, Therapeutic Recreation Center, and Lederer Gardens were not included in the total number of recreation and community centers.

The table below lists the sites visited by D.C. Hunger Solutions.

Center Name	Ward	Address
Anacostia Recreation Center	8	1800 Anacostia Dr., SE
Bald Eagle Recreation Center	8	100 Joliet St., SW
Barry Farm Recreation Center	8	1230 Sumner Rd., SE
Benning Park Community Center	7	Southern Ave. and Fable St., SE
Benning Stoddert Community Center	7	100 Stoddert Pl., SE
Congress Heights Recreation Center	8	Alabama Ave. and Randle Pl., SE
Deanwood Recreation Center	7	1350 49 <sup>th</sup> Street NE
Douglass Community Center	8	Frederick Douglass Ct. and Stanton Ter., SE
Ferebee Hope Community Center	8	3999 8th St., SE
Fort Davis Community Center	7	1400 41st St., SE
Fort Stanton Recreation Center	8	1812 Erie St., SE
Hillcrest Recreation Center	7	3100 Denver St., SE
Kelly Miller Pool	7	301 49th Street, NE (inside Kelly Miller Middle School)
Malcolm X Recreation Center	8	1351 Alabama Ave., SE
Watts Branch / Marvin Gaye Park Recreation Center	7	6201 Banks Pl., NE

## ***FINDINGS***

Through interviews and visits to 15 recreation centers, D.C. Hunger Solutions found that DPR provides a vital service to the community by providing free breakfast and lunch (and in some cases supper) to low-income children during the summer. They also showed that DPR centers have the potential, with some policy changes and additional programming and nutrition promotion, to become centers for good nutrition in the community. Appendix A summarizes the results of the surveys for each of the 15 DPR sites D.C. Hunger Solutions visited. Appendix B provides a chart which overviews key nutrition-related findings.

The visits to recreation centers, pre-arranged by phone, consisted of: touring the inside of the center, walking around the outside of the center, and interviewing a staff member using a survey tool that explored: participation in feeding programs, nutrition and quality of meals, nutrition and physical activity programming, and the role of the center in the community.

D.C. Hunger Solutions found:

**1. Hungry children depend on the meals DPR serves.** DPR staff at the 15 centers visited commented on the importance of feeding the children. Many children and teens arrive at the sites hungry. Providing children with proper nutrition is key to ensuring that the children can partake in DPR activities. About half of the centers began to participate in the federally-funded Afterschool Meal Program in spring 2010; several others indicated they would like to serve suppers.

**2. All DPR centers participate in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program but center-based outreach of the program is limited.** All the centers visited participate in the D.C. Free Summer Meals. According to conversations with site staff, outreach by center staff for summer meals is fairly limited. Only several of the centers were aware that the D.C. Free Summer Meal Program was advertised through avenues beyond the required banner hanging outside the center, e.g., flyers, local newspapers, radio, and television. At some centers, the Free Summer Meals banner was not displayed in a prominent and visible location. A possible limitation is that most centers have relationships only with the children attending the center, but not to their families or to institutions in the surrounding community.

**3. Summer meal quality must be improved to be more appealing to children and teens.** Although DPR staff stressed the importance of providing free summer meals at recreation centers, many of the site managers and staff voiced the need for improving the quality of the food provided even though most agreed that it appeared to be nutritionally-balanced. Most staff interviewed noted that both breakfast and lunch lacked variety, and that children would like hot meals occasionally (examples included hamburgers, pizza, and spaghetti). Some center staff suggested that DPR serve more fruit, and that the fruit be cut-up so children would be more likely to eat it. Others noted that when children did not like the food, they were more likely to consume high calorie and/or high fat purchases from neighboring fast food restaurants, carry-outs, and corner stores. Additionally, while many children are drawn to centers (and center programs) for a meal, center staff suggested that children leave if they do not like the food.

Common “dislikes” among children included the lack of variety of the lunches which mostly consisted of sandwiches. Many center staff reported that the children disliked the salami sandwiches. One staffer suggested that DPR conduct a focus group with children participating in D.C. Free Summer Meals to help improve the meals.

**4. All seven centers participating in the Afterschool Meal Program valued the program.** The director of one center which is not in the program would love to participate since children came to her site hungry. Without the benefit of any federal nutrition programs during the school year, some centers provide chips, juice pops, and other snacks of limited nutritional value. In fact, half of the managers interviewed use other funds, even their own money, in order to provide sufficient food.

**5. Centers have a range of kitchen facilities ranging from a small refrigerator to a full kitchen.** DPR centers in Wards 7 and 8 widely vary in size and layout, therefore there is no standard kitchen facility. At one end of the spectrum are centers like Bald Eagle Recreation Center, which has two full kitchens, with space for preparing, cooking, and storing food. At the other end are centers like Malcolm X Recreation Center, which has only a refrigerator with no dedicated kitchen space.

**6. Nutrition education programs and healthy eating promotion are scarce.** D.C. Hunger Solutions' visits revealed that most sites do not offer any nutrition education classes and do not have any posters, signs, or other materials promoting healthy eating or nutrition. At the few sites which did have some nutritional messaging, the messages were not always appropriate. For example, posters were not geared to children, had outdated health messages or were displayed in areas not accessible to site participants. On the wall at one center, a cartoon of a children's TV character happily eating cookies is next to an unhappy character who has milk.

Only two centers offered any nutrition education as part of the programming (and of these, one has a class only for seniors). Three had cooking classes, e.g., on baking. While we did not directly assess these programs, the center staff indicated that the cooking classes did not include a nutrition portion. Staff at several sites indicated interest in providing cooking and nutrition education classes for children.

**7. Vending machines contain unhealthy beverages.** D.C. Hunger Solutions staff saw vending machines at only four of the 14 recreation centers. These vending machines sold only beverages: sports drinks, juice, soda, and water. At most of the sites, water and soda were sold at the same price.

**8. Staff generally like the idea of a farmers' market or produce stand at centers.** D.C. Hunger Solutions asked if centers might be interested in selling produce at parks. This is a new opportunity, since the Healthy Schools Act in May 2010 lifted a ban on selling produce on DPR property. Most of the center staff generally liked the idea of hosting a produce stand or farmers' market provided that it would be not operated by DPR staff. The majority were optimistic that a broad spectrum of the community would be interested in visiting the stand/market, but most also pointed out potential challenges, such as low incomes in the surrounding neighborhood, and insufficient foot traffic to generate sales.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Maximize participation in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program by enlisting centers in community outreach.** Maximizing participation in the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program is a win-win for DPR. The program brings in millions of dollars in federal funding to feed hungry children and teens during the summer.

Individual parks and recreation centers can play a significant role in drawing more children to summer meal programs because they are based in the community and have frequent contact with neighborhood children (and, in some cases, with parents and families). For summer 2011, DPR and D.C. Hunger Solutions partnered on an aggressive outreach strategy for local centers providing outreach toolkits which included:



- yards signs advertising availability of summer meals
- nutrition education / promotion posters
- posters, postcards
- giveaways for children: attendance prizes, t-shirts, movie tickets, and sports bags
- packets of nutrition education activities and/or videos for center staff

These toolkits will be supplemented by a city-wide information campaign on D.C. Free Summer Meals and the locations of sites. Depending on funding, outreach could include advertising the program through signage at targeted sites (e.g., WIC offices, libraries, parks, schools, grocery stores, faith institutions, local business); “robo-calls” from schools to tell families about summer meals; public service announcements on television and radio; and a special kick-off event. D.C. Hunger Solutions has set up a text message number where residents can get information on nearby D.C. Free Summer Meals sites via a text message.

**2. Enroll all centers in Wards 7 and 8 in the Afterschool Meal Program.** DPR has an opportunity to replicate its successful summer meal model with the availability of the Afterschool Meal Program. Unlike summer meals, the federal afterschool meal program requires that meals be served as part of afterschool enrichment programming. DPR should seek this opportunity to identify centers which have, or would like to have, afterschool programs. A DPR-based afterschool program serving 50 children or teens during the school year (Monday-Friday) could receive approximately \$24,000 in funding for supper. Instead of relying on local funding or the generosity of individuals, DPR can supply food with federal funds and expand its enrichment programming.

Despite plans to expand the Afterschool Meal Program by offering suppers at all centers in Wards 7 and 8 in the fall of 2010, DPR has been unable to do so. There are two main reasons. First, DPR is facing challenges to get centers to complete the necessary paperwork for the required health and safety inspections necessary for program participation. Second, DPR is soliciting a new food vendor contract so as to improve the food quality. DPR should make sure this plan is carried out by September of 2011.

**3. Improve the variety, appeal, and nutrition of the meals served through the federal nutrition programs—D.C. Free Summer Meals and the Afterschool Meal Program.** DPR has a unique opportunity to improve the appeal of meals since vendor meal contracts are up for bid. Under the leadership of Mark McCain with support from D.C. Hunger Solutions and OSSE, DPR is working to improve the nutrition quality of food served through the afterschool and summer programs. To that end, DPR issued a new bid for the D.C. Free Summer Meals and Afterschool Meal Programs, drawing on lessons learned and requiring that the vendor:

- offer a greater variety of food;
- provide meals consistent with the Healthy Schools Act guidelines; and
- host a taste-test to gather opinions from children and teens participating in the program.

As it begins serving hot food and a wider variety of foods, DPR should scale up the new menu cautiously. Unless centers are properly equipped to serve hot meals, the program will not be financially sustainable.

As the administering agency for the Afterschool Meals and D.C. Free Summer Meals programs, OSSE could develop nutrition standards that program sponsors and sites (e.g., DPR) must follow. These standards could help DPR in its quest to improve the quality of food served and encourage other sites to follow suit. OSSE could also deepen its involvement in nutrition education and promotion at DPR sites and push DPR to make improvements in afterschool and summer meals (whole grains, fruits, and vegetables) similar to those being made in school nutrition.

**4. Provide nutrition education for all DPR center managers and staff members and nutrition resources (e.g., posters, recipes, resource guide) to all recreation centers.** Serving healthier meals does not automatically translate into children *eating* the healthier foods. Promotion and modeling by adults is important for encouraging children to try healthy foods (which often are new to children) and develop a taste for them. Therefore, it is important to have trained and knowledgeable staff members who are able to model healthy eating and active living practices.

As a first step, DPR should incorporate a workshop on basic nutrition into the staff training for Free Summer Meals. DPR could partner with the University of the District of Columbia Cooperative Extension or another nutrition education entity to help with this workshop. The workshop should provide DPR staff with information on how to encourage healthy eating and how to promote the healthier summer meals. Second, DPR should convene a group of nutrition experts to help locate consistent and up-to-date messaging to be posted at DPR sites, to identify evidence-based nutrition education lessons appropriate for DPR use, and to help DPR connect with organizations, schools, and chefs that may be able to conduct nutrition education sessions on site. The experts could prioritize no-cost resources for nutrition information, such as free USDA materials. Third, DPR should consider upgrading kitchen facilities in selected recreation centers. Modern and well-equipped kitchens would enable and encourage center staff to prepare healthy meals from fresh ingredients and teach cooking and nutrition classes.

**5. Make full use of kitchen facilities and supply all centers with necessary cooking equipment.** In centers where kitchens are available, DPR should make full use of these facilities, including: explore the possibility of providing hot meals at selected D.C. Free Summer Meals sites, and hold cooking classes for the community. At smaller centers without kitchens, DPR should ensure that facilities are fully equipped to provide – at the minimum – complete summer and afterschool meals for children attending the center.

**6. Establish and promote a healthy vending and food policy for DPR centers and parks.** To reduce competition with healthy summer meals (and afterschool suppers) and to reinforce nutrition education, DPR should restrict the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks high in fat, sodium, sugar, and calories in its vending machines. Such a healthy vending policy should be modeled on the policy for schools contained in the Healthy Schools Act to provide children with consistent options available at school and parks and recreation centers. This would ensure healthy choices at school and in parks and recreation centers would be mutually reinforcing. Children and staff who bring snacks from home should also be encouraged to bring only healthy foods and beverages.

The District community, including children who attend programs at DPR centers, should be involved in creating the healthy vending policy and in choosing healthy beverages and foods to sell in machines.

**7. Further assess the interest and ability of DPR centers to host produce stands, and identify pilot sites.** The D.C. Healthy Schools Act, passed by the D.C. Council in May 2010, created a great opportunity to improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables and to increase use of public parks and recreation facilities across the city. According to the Act, the D.C. Municipal Regulations (DCMR) “shall not preclude the use of public recreation facilities to provide community access to healthy foods, such as farmers’ markets.” It is important that the District of Columbia take advantage of this opportunity by making it easy and affordable for farmers’ markets to operate on park land, especially in low-income areas of the city.

The D.C. Farmers’ Market Collaborative, in partnership with the D.C. Department of Health, Community Health Administration, has prepared and presented to DPR recommendations to make the new policy easy to implement and advantageous for both farmers’ markets and the Department of Parks and Recreation:

- DPR should create a definition of “farmers’ market” within DPR’s schedule of permits and fees for park use.
- DPR should charge an annual flat permit fee for farmers’ markets in parks, on a sliding scale based on market size.
- DPR should waive the permit fee for farmers’ markets located in “food deserts.”
- Permit fees should be charged at the mid-point of the season or end of the year.

The Farmers’ Market Collaborative is working with DPR leadership to create a fair, manageable, and sustainable system.

When a farmers’ market permit system is established, DPR should work with center managers and community leaders to identify several parks at which to pilot park-based farmers’ markets or produce stands.

## CONCLUSION

The Department of Parks and Recreation is an influential part of the fight against childhood obesity. With recent improvements to a number of park and recreation facilities across the city, and its years of success serving D.C. Free Summer Meals, DPR is well positioned to expand efforts to improve children’s nutrition. Given the budget crisis facing the District of Columbia (along with most other states and cities), DPR, with support from community partners, must fully embrace its role in the community and make the most of low- or no-cost ways to encourage healthy eating.

D.C. Hunger Solutions looks forward to continued partnership with DPR in the future, particularly in the vital areas of nutrition and health for children and young people.

D.C. Hunger Solutions wishes to thank the MARPAT Foundation for its support of this project.