

# Op-Ed Template for Highlighting Critical Role of Parks and Recreation During Pandemic

Update this template to be as accurate to your local situation as possible, especially where highlighted.

## Lifting up the heroes of parks and recreation in [CITY/STATE]

By [Insert Appropriate Author Name]

In [CITY/STATE], we're hopeful that we'll begin to safely reopen parts of our community soon. Our shelter-in-place/stay-at-home order started on [DATE], and, I'd argue that [DATE] is when those who call [CITY/STATE] home began to have a new appreciation for many, many services, including those provided by a certain type of hero — our state and local park and recreation professionals.

Our park and recreation professionals — the ones who are committed to ensuring we have access to the vital health, environmental and social benefits that parks and recreation provides — have stepped up to address the needs of our communities. These heroes have always been there and, now, they are on the frontlines of a global pandemic, working to maintain our access to the important services they provide.

A short list of how [CITY/STATE]'s park and recreation agencies are responding during this time include:

- [Update this list to accurately reflect what is happening locally.]
- Cleaning and maintaining parks, trails and open spaces to keep them open and accessible as vital places for people to stay active, seek respite and commute to their jobs as essential workers.
- Educating the public about how to use these spaces safely so they can remain open.
- Providing free meals to food-insecure youth and older adults.
- Creating emergency childcare centers for first responders, medical staff and essential personnel.
- Standing up homeless shelters and offering spaces for overflow testing sites and treatment facilities.
- Providing virtual and mobile recreation opportunities so communities can continue to access benefits, such as exercise classes, healthy living education and opportunities for play.
- Leading emergency management response in communities, including staffing call centers, analyzing and mapping COVID-19 cases and staffing other critical services.

Maintaining the services provided by parks and recreation is more important than ever. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) flagged stress and mental health as a major concern during this pandemic. The mental and physical health benefits of parks and open spaces are well documented, and during these stressful times, these places of restoration are critical to our health and well-being. In fact, a recent poll published by the National Recreation and Park Association shows that 83 percent of adults find exercising at local parks, trails and open spaces essential to maintaining their mental and physical health during the pandemic.

Since the beginning of this crisis, we've seen amazing stories from our park and recreation heroes, such as [insert relevant local story that illustrates impact].

[Provide details around which amenities are open and closed and why. If parks are open, highlight the importance of using them safely so those without access to yards or safe places to walk can still take advantage of the physical and mental well-being benefits these spaces provide.]

This pandemic is taking a huge mental and emotional toll on all of us, and parks and recreation will be key to getting us through the present, as well as whatever the future holds. As stay-at-home orders are eventually lifted, the rush to use our shared spaces, our parks and recreation facilities, is likely to be at an all-time high. However, parks and recreation is not immune to the economic implications of this crisis. Already, [insert relevant economic impacts on local park and recreation agencies. This could include loss of event revenue, employees being furloughed, etc.] Just when we need them the most, our park and recreation services may be struggling like never before.

As we navigate through the pandemic and come out on the other side, I hope you remember the value that your local parks and green spaces are providing to you, your family and friends, and your community at this time. And, I hope you remember our heroes. Remember what parks and recreation did during this pandemic to continue serving their communities. Voice your support. Be a champion and an advocate. And, please say thank you to the maintenance workers at your favorite park and let them know our park and recreation professionals are making a difference.