

Recreation's Air Quality & Extreme Heat Policies

A Case Study



Challenges

In 2012 air quality conditions created by the High Park Fire revealed a variety of challenges and opportunities for the Recreation Department. During this specific extreme event, the Recreation Department realized that no criteria existed to consistently and efficiently respond to significant air quality conditions. The lack of criteria created inconsistent decision making and varied responses were initiated throughout the Department's many service areas.

Recreation provides services to a diverse customer base throughout the city. This diverse customer base also presents multiple levels of health risks. During this event the Recreation Department realized that some areas within the Department were canceling programs, some were relocating programs and others kept their programs scheduled as normal. This lack of coordination created confusion among patrons and inconsistent standards among staff.

Recreation also recognized that similar challenges and opportunities may exist with extreme heat events. The two events share some similarities and should be approached simultaneously.

Solution

Recreation believed that a uniform policy was needed to create a consistent operational plan while addressing public health concerns. By utilizing the AirNow system and Air Quality Index (AQI), Recreation created a policy that includes a detailed response to each AQI value. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Park Service, tribal, state, and local agencies developed the AirNow system to provide the public with easy access to national air quality information. Recreation found the AirNow system to be a credible and accessible resource. Recreation also researched other communities and contacted National Parks and Recreation Association members for additional information.

Recreation's Air Quality Policy provides detailed procedures and responses to a variety of air quality events. Once certain air quality values have been reached staff can refer to well-designed table and determine necessary actions or next steps. The table includes a total of six air quality index levels ranging from "good" to "hazardous," each level includes a corresponding Cautionary Statement (used to advise the public), Response Plan, Particulate Matter and Visibility measurements. This table provides a solid plan for staff members to utilize once an air quality event has been detected.

In addition to the Air Quality Policy, Recreation's Heat and Humidity Policy was created to create consistent responses across the department while ensuring the safety and well-being of participants and staff. This policy utilizes the National Weather Service's Heat Index to provide staff with information and necessary actions. The Heat Index includes levels from "low/moderate" to "very high risk," each level provides a response plan for staff. The policy also includes "Heat Exhaustion Awareness" information and symptoms so that staff can quickly identify and respond to any health concerns.

Results

Together, these policies have helped Recreation create a more consistent response to environmental and weather related events. The policies are also effective educational tools for staff. Our goal is to continuously improve how we operate while placing a priority of the safety and health of our participants and staff.

The development of these policies will benefit Recreation in numerous ways. We have empowered staff by providing them a detailed plan of action that is based on national standards. Recreation staff can now respond in a unified manner and communicate with participants using consistent messaging and communication tools.

Next Steps

Looking forward, Recreation is interested in refining and improving both policies as new information is received. We believe that our initial steps were positive but we also understand that we can improve certain aspects of the policy as we receive feedback from staff and participants. We look forward to continuously focusing our efforts on the health and safety of our participants and staff.

In 2017 we plan on developing a communication plan that features the dissemination of important air quality and heat index information to our participants. Communication resources such as social media, Recreation's website and the "Recreator" will be utilized to offer more information and educate our participants on these new policies.