

# Reimagining Parks, *Health and an Entire Small Town*



College Park in Winchester, Kentucky, was in desperate need of repair. Among other challenges, the 20-year-old facility featured wooden structures that could no longer be serviced and a playground that was not accessible to children of all abilities. Evaluating the state of this single park within an aging system pinpointed the need to revisit the city's outdated Park Master Plan. This led to a rethinking of the parks at a systemwide level, which is helping transform the small town on the edge of Eastern Kentucky.

Change came through conversations among a group of representatives from the Clark County Activity Coalition, which helped secure a grant from the National Recreation and Park Association to aid the park improvement process. The coalition was born out of a report that identified obesity as one of several major health concerns, leading to the formation of a health-focused community group to expand wellness programming. Today, the coalition includes the parks and recreation department, health department, hospital, city planning department, a local private foundation and representatives from Winchester's health- and fitness-focused businesses.

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- Deborah Jackson, Winchester-Clark County Parks and Recreation

“Our connection with the Activity Coalition really helped us envision things through a health and equity lens,” says Deborah Jackson with Winchester-Clark County Parks and Recreation. “Did we have quality parks available to every neighborhood? If not, why not? And how do we effectively engage with residents?”

The outcome was the first parks master planning process in nearly two decades, which became a vital component of the redevelopment of the whole city. “Creating a healthy community is a key part of our vision of the Winchester we want to be—a growing, vibrant place that serves current residents and attracts new ones,” Jackson says. The process has sparked a new way of considering the very notion of parks. The city is working with the community to reexamine the current amenities including playgrounds and ball fields and imagining a future park system with interconnected spaces, free imaginative play and myriad healthy outdoor activities that provide broader access to all of Winchester's residents.

“In the end, our collaborative approach is helping garner more use of the parks and encourage greater support, both in the community and at City Hall,” Jackson says. “What started with a conversation about our park system is really helping to reimagine Winchester.”



William E. Finchum



# Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Winchester →



## WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- Clark County Health Department
- Clark Regional Medical Center
- National Recreation and Park Association
- The Greater Clark Foundation
- Winchester-Clark County Department of Parks and Recreation
- Winchester health- and fitness-focused businesses
- Winchester neighborhood associations
- Winchester Planning and Community Development

## 1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The park system in Winchester, Kentucky, was outdated and in need of an overhaul. Winchester-Clark County Parks and Recreation began considering improvements by asking:

- How do we leverage existing relationships to move the process forward?
- What does change look like, and what are the steps in achieving it?
- Who has access to parks now, and how do we ensure all residents of the city are connected to quality parks that meet the needs of each neighborhood?
- How do quality parks, quality of life and improved quality of resident health intersect?

## 2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

Leveraging its relationship with the Activity Coalition—a group composed of local stakeholders—the parks department received a grant to create its first master plan in nearly 20 years. A set of follow-up questions began to emerge:

- What are the elements of a quality park that will mean the most to Winchester and its residents?
- What role can quality parks play in making our city a more attractive place to live?
- How can we broaden our relationships and partnerships to increase access to health and expand health equity for Winchester residents?

## 3. CLOSING THE LOOP

As the master planning process continues, and Winchester begins to build an interconnected system that brings quality parks to more people and draws more people to parks, the parks department and its partners are asking:

- How do we keep the community involved and engaged in this process?
- How do we expand our thinking to continuously improve on what we're building now?
- How do we leverage the success we've had so far into ongoing support from our stakeholders (everyone from neighborhood associations to the business community to City Hall)?