

1. Recognizing each public park and recreation agency is unique in its purpose, mission, culture, financing, enabling legislation, etc., what does your agency do really well in managing its resources, programs, or personnel? This question is worth up to 15 points. 300 words

Bringing parks to people, where 99.8% of Chicagoans live within a 10-minute walk of a park or open space is our specialty. We deliver recreation program offerings in each of Chicago's 77 community areas through over 240 recreation facilities.

As significant as that is, we recognize where we need to grow. The Invest South West initiative of Mayor Lightfoot lays the foundation for equitable, long-term economic development in 10 south and west side communities. Announced in 2019, the pioneering program has brought government, business, philanthropic and community leaders together to lay the groundwork for transformational development. Our parks as an integral part of these communities are a major focus of enhanced capital investment advancing this initiative. A dynamic tracking system identifies these and other capital needs, based on both internal and external inputs, to ensure efficient and equitable use of our resources.

In 2018, we identified equity as a pillar of success and created the Chief Diversity Officer position. This person works across all departments in partnership with an employee-led Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee engaging employees, patrons, and stakeholders to further behaviors, attitudes, and policies which support DEI. Given its importance, we are adding equity as a core value to our strategic plan.

Monuments and memorials, many of which are located in parks, have become a focal point for conversation, protest, and activism in Chicago. Together with City organizers, the Chicago Monuments Project intends to grapple with the often unacknowledged – or forgotten – history associated with the city's various municipal art collections and provide a vehicle to address the hard truths of Chicago's racial history and develop a framework for marking public space that elevates new ways to memorialize Chicago's history more equitably and accurately. We are an integral part of these conversations, particularly around monuments in parks.

2. Cite 3 examples of internally-focused initiatives, actions, or programs your agency has undertaken in the last 3 years that demonstrate how it connect(s) with your community and your constituents and customers. Describe how you measure the outcome(s) of these efforts. Each example will be worth up to 3 points, for a total of 9 points. 240 words

Out of School Time (OST) – Recognizing that when school is out, parks are in, we set out to enhance our comprehensive youth program offering. Developed by staff who work directly with youth, OST focuses on key components of Brain Play, Fitness and Wellness, Nature Education, Sports and Recreation, Visual and Performing Arts. OST values are Inclusion, Gender Equity, Voice and Choice, and Civic Leadership. These components set guideposts for districtwide training and program development that led to over 30 trainings reaching over 1,000 program staff in less than a year.

Customer Service & Leadership – This multi-year phased training initiative developed from extensive research, and staff and customer feedback, focuses on internal and external customer service. Staff have been involved in the development throughout from innovation sessions launching the programming, an all employee survey, to a logo contest on branding. Our all staff effort ensures that everyone has an opportunity to participate. Three modules include communication skills, service excellence, and dealing with difficult situations. Started only a year ago and now with almost all staff trained, the initiative ensures professional interaction with our customers.

Chief Chats – In an effort to create more transparency and access, our executive team has held regular virtual Chief Chats – webinars where staff hear directly from leadership as well as ask questions. Topics are timely and varied including Race and Resilience and Budget issues. Future topics include Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

3. Cite 3 examples of externally-focused initiatives, actions, or programs your agency has undertaken in the last 3 years that demonstrate its relationship with decision-makers, commissions/boards, business community, partners, nonprofits, etc. Describe how you measure the outcome(s) of these efforts. Each example will be worth up to 3 points, for a total of 9 points. 240 words

Partnerships – The Athletic Use, Resident, Contractor, and Service Provider partnership program is a new way we increase recreation offerings. Developed to ensure these offerings align with our mission, community groups, organizations, and business enter into a mutual agreement to provide programs in parks. This reduces duplication of efforts or competition with existing programs. Partners’ offerings are equitably open to the public and don’t require tryouts for participation.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) – A multi-year partnership enhances our shared goal of conservation and equity. TNC co-funds two staff who support 30 natural areas community stewards and volunteers, and who promote equity by diversifying our community stewards in both racial makeup and physical abilities. TNC provides tools that focus on communities most at risk from the heat-island effect, flood mitigation and air pollution – all of which are mitigated by natural areas.

Friends of Big Marsh (FOBM) – In developing the new Big Marsh Bike Park on a former brownfield, located in an underserved area of the City, FOBM has helped us raise significant funding toward construction. A bicycle-focused group, FOBM helped fund the bicycle single-track and BMX jump lines. Last summer, FOBM helped open an asphalt pump track, bringing biking opportunities spring through fall. This year, FOBM will open a vendor space at the park that will provide amenities to riders, job training to local youth and a supplementary space that serves patrons when park staff are not on site.

4. Park & recreation agencies are increasingly being called upon to demonstrate the results of their services and practices to decision-makers and the general public. Cite 3

results, impacts, or outcomes achieved in the last 3 years that your agency has measured; background about the outcome(s); and how the results were achieved. Each example will be worth up to 3 points, for a total of 9 points. 300 words

Arts & Cultural – Our Re:Center Project is a multi-year cultural organizing and creative place-making initiative driven by local citizens and anchored in Chicago’s neighborhoods at our 15 cultural centers in parks. These hyper-local efforts collaborate with residents and community organizations to envision arts and culture as a strategy toward revitalization of many neighborhoods. Recommendations from the collaborations drive facility improvements such as enhanced stages or lighting, which start this year. In partnership with the City of Chicago, we are mapping cultural assets equitably focusing on underserved areas with a goal of providing support to performing arts and cultural production.

Summer Food / Camp Well - According to a 2018 NPRA report, 1 in 5 kids come to parks hungry. Our Summer Food Service Program serves over 1 million healthy meals annually at summer day camps. To assess our impact, we collaborated with Lurie Children’s Hospital and the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children to address physical activity and empower staff and kids with nutrition education at day camp. We created the Camp Well curriculum to promote nutrition education, hands on cooking demonstrations, STEM activities, meditation, and physical activity, all with the goal of improving camper health and wellness. Data collected with Lurie Children’s Hospital revealed increased awareness healthy eating habits and an increase in the number of days per week in which attendees engaged in activity.

Enrollments – For several years, we have collected more enrollment data online, providing additional information about our programs. Each recreation session, a park supervisor can access a 3-year look back for that session’s enrollment. This allows local program decisions and changes that reflect dynamic neighborhoods, changing demographics, or trends in recreation. As programs evolve based on data, a park supervisor can adjust seasonal or year-round staff assignments to accommodate the community’s recreation needs.

5. Park & recreation agencies focus on creativity and innovation. Cite 3 innovations implemented by your agency within the last 3 years that have had a substantial impact on service delivery, customer satisfaction, partnerships, financial condition, and/or internal operations. Each example will be worth up to 3 points, for a total of 9 points. 300 words

On the Block - In Partnership with the Mayor’s office and Chicago Police Department, we adapted our successful “Rollin Rec” program to create “Rollin Rec-On the Block.” This program creates fun and positive activities in Chicago neighborhoods, particularly areas with significant high crime and violence, working with local block club organizers to create a family-style fun atmosphere that kicks off weekends in the summer. Alongside police officers, who directed traffic away from the block, our staff, in collaboration with Chicago Public Libraries and other city and sister agencies provide enrichment and sports programming for 90 minutes, each weekend and Halloween week.

Night Out in the Parks (NOTP) – Our NOTP series, in partnership with the Mayor’s Office and Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, presents cultural events throughout the city. Through multiple disciplines, which include theater, music, movies, dance, site-specific work, nature programs, and community festivals, NOTP supports Chicago-based artists, facilitates community-based partnerships and programs, and ensures equity in access to the arts for all Chicagoans. During the pandemic, NOTP scaled back and pivoted to providing socially distanced theater, drive-in movies and, in partnership with our local public television station, broadcasts of select works from 50 artists in parks. NOTP also provided “Your Night Out at Home” online programming such as Shakespeare in the Parks performances. NOTP plans to continue these virtual engagement opportunities alongside in-person events in the future.

Chicago Connected – Launched last year, Chicago Connected provides free high-speed internet service to public schools students in their households. We identified three parks in socio-economic communities of need, and supported the program with exterior solar-powered Wi-Fi installations. Our parks also increased Wi-Fi availability for both staff and patrons, which was particularly relevant during the pandemic as virtual recreation programming increased.

6. What initiatives or actions has your agency undertaken in the last 3 years to ensure all people within your community have equal access to the benefits of quality parks and recreation, focusing on “equity at the center”? This question is worth up to a total of 3 points. 120 words

Douglass Park – Through an effort led by local schoolchildren and community members, last year we renamed Stephen A. Douglas Park, recognized as a former slave owner, to the well know social reformer and leader Frederick Douglass and his wife Anna. To ensure continued community input, we developed procedures and policies to allow for equitable review of park names and potential renaming when requested by the community.

Headquarters – Our administration facility has historically been located in the central business district. Identifying a park deficient neighborhood, we are building a 17-acre park and moving our headquarters there. Based on extensive community feedback, this park will contain two artificial turf fields, fieldhouse, gym, and teen center, as well our administrative offices.

7. What initiatives or actions has your agency undertaken in the last 3 years to advance community health and wellness education and promotion? Cite efforts undertaken for personnel and /or community members. This question is worth up to a total of 3 points. 120 words

Mental Health – In response to a need to support staff’s mental health, we expanded our team with a Crisis Support Manager. This person is a licensed clinical social worker, who provides clinical level support and trauma-informed training for staff.

Work Well – Launched last year, this employee wellness initiative provides monthly newsletter and yoga classes, both in person and virtual, to help our staff stay fit and healthy. A Microsoft Teams group helps staff stay connected and access resources.

Covid19 – The pandemic challenged our park space to remain open for residents' access to recreation. Parks served as Covid testing and vaccination locations. We provided PPE for staff and collaborated with Lurie's Hospital to provide vaccination opportunities to staff.

8. What initiatives or actions has your agency undertaken in the last 3 years in planning, managing, promoting, and educating in support of conservation, environmental stewardship and sustainability practices? This question is worth up to a total of 3 points. 120 words

Biodiesel – We process used restaurant grease into biodiesel for 250 vehicles and lawnmowers, reducing emissions annually by 52 tons. Biodiesel blends can reach 50% depending on weather, with blends averaging at least 20% year round. During the pandemic, we transitioned from making biodiesel to creating hand sanitizer, which we distributed to more than 200 facilities, and partners like Cook County.

Nature Play – We successfully connect urban kids to nature in nature play spaces, where they can engage and manipulate natural elements and materials. A community identifies and designs new nature play spaces, and using materials from landscape operations to keep costs down, we have built nine with eight others in development. We provide pop-up programming for these spaces.

9. What challenge(s) has your agency experienced in the last 3 years and what action(s) has your agency undertaken to address these challenges? Cite agency's role in the challenge(s), the steps/actions undertaken, and the measured effectiveness of the effort(s). This question is worth up to 10 points. 300 words

Historically, Chicago was a center for strong track and field competition. From a young age in elementary schools, boys and girls over the years would compete in the sport, continuing in to high school and beyond. Over the years, as facilities became scarce, interest waned. Recently, we recognized track and field's popularity is making a comeback, and noted that a lack of facilities meant student athletes had resorted to practicing in school hallways or gyms during inclement weather. We collaborated with philanthropic and private entities to raise funds to develop the first publicly accessible indoor track and field complex built in Chicago and in a community underserved by recreational facilities.

The track and field facility includes a banked 200-meter track, an eight-lane sprint track, seating for 3,500 spectators, and space for track and field events like hurdles, shot put, and long jump. Additionally, the building will host sports such as volleyball, lacrosse, football, and basketball and serve as a base of operations for Chicago's nonprofit After School Matters (ASM) program. ASM provides after-school and summer program opportunities to nearly 19,000 Chicago high school teens each year through apprenticeships in the arts, communications, sports, and STEM.

At the same time, we developed the Go Run series, providing free timed runs in typically underserved communities. We expanded Go Run to provide opportunities for girls' access to recreation, women's health, and leadership in sport. Annually we host Girls in Sport Day of Play with over 1,000 girls participating.

This summer we will host the Fastest Kid in Chicago competition, providing young people the opportunity to compete in races at various locations. We expect 9,000 kids to compete in these timed races and the fastest young person will achieve the title of Fastest Kid in Chicago.