

“Park Rx”- Using Visits to Local Parks and Trails to Promote Wellness, Address Health Inequities and Increase Active Lifestyles

A Collaboration Among Metro Parks Tacoma, WRPA and other Local Park Agencies



Metro Parks Tacoma, the Washington Recreation and Park Association (WRPA), and other local parks agencies believe the time is right for the Legislature to look at new, innovative, and cost-efficient ways to keep Washingtonians healthy, particularly on the heels of a COVID-19 pandemic that has afflicted nearly 230,000 residents of our state and cost more than 3,000 lives.

Evidence linking time spent in nature with improvements in mental and physical health has never been stronger, and more relevant. The solution might be as simple as stepping outside. A study among Washington adults found that those who spent more time outdoors reported less depression, and another study of Washingtonians found that more forests were associated with fewer days of mental health complaints. There is also preliminary evidence that indicates that contact with nature may have greater and more beneficial impacts for populations with less opportunity compared to their more affluent counterparts.



The notion of a “[Park Rx](#)” program is not a brand-new one. The State of Tennessee ([Park Prescriptions – Healthy Parks, Healthy Person \(healthyparkstn.com\)](#)) and the [East Bay Regional Park District in Oakland, CA](#) provide on-the-ground examples of how such an initiative can work. Additionally, [Washington State Parks](#) actively supports Parks Rx programs and advocates the prescription of recreational opportunities to improve health outcomes.

The idea is for medical providers, local parks agencies, and insurance companies to team up around an incentive program that can reward those who get out and use parks, recreation facilities and trails for exercise and document those visits.

Here's what we recommend in establishing a Parks Rx program in the State of Washington:

- Enact legislation setting up a Task Force or Work Group process to establish two to four pilot Park Rx programs around the state. This could involve pilots in Western, Central, Eastern, and Southwest Washington, for example, with focused emphasis on diverse communities and where systematic inequities and discrimination have negatively affected health outcomes.
- Utilize the Task Force to bring local parks, health care providers, and licensed insurers together to develop the scope of what the pilot could look like and how it would work.
- Develop agreements that would enable insurers to offer incentives to public, non-profit, and private employers to create wellness programs that offer employees a discount on health insurance in exchange for a certain usage level of outdoor parks and trails for recreation and physical activity.
(NOTE: Data shows there are benefits of as little as 1-2 hours per week, but perhaps the pilot could focus on something like 3-4 hours/week).
- The Legislature would direct either the Department of Health (DOH) or the Washington State Health Care Authority (HCA) convene the task force and develop the pilots, which would involve advertising and describing it, soliciting interest, and selecting the pilot projects.
- Given the complexity of working out these arrangements, and the fact that many agencies and organizations are still struggling to emerge from COVID-19 setbacks, it might be best to make this a two-year pilot in duration.
- Budget a very modest amount of funding, perhaps \$100,000 with the expectation of matching local and/or private dollars, to direct the Task Force formation and development of pilots.

