

Building Resilience in Times of Crises

Exploring the evolving role of recreation in challenging circumstances

By Rick Gilbert

“A resilient community, whether defined by geography, interest, experience, or identity, is one that has the resources to help prevent, withstand, and recover from emergencies. Resilient communities can adapt despite disturbances caused by emergencies and return to acceptable levels of functioning.” (Full Report: The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada’s Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2023)

Introduction

In recent decades, the recreation sector has experienced more change than we are used to. We’ve taken on new imperatives such as physical activity, active transportation, and healthy eating in public settings, often in new partnerships with sectors such as Public Health, Natural Resources, and Transportation/Public Works. We’ve also built new partnerships with traditional allies such as sport and parks worked in new ways to address inequities faced by women and girls and Indigenous people and addressed anti-racism in our sector. Our long-term direction, for the first time, has been articulated through a National Recreation Framework and just as we were tapping into the power and potential of that movement, we were hit with the COVID-19 pandemic that sent our society and our sector into a tailspin.

In recent years, questionable environmental and social justice policy decisions from the past have come home to roost in the form of environmental and housing crises. The scope of this article includes the evolution of recreation’s role in crisis mitigation, balanced with a focus on resilience as a means for individuals, families, and communities to cope with the realities of the times.

Let’s start by exploring some of the building blocks of this topic.

Resilience and Community

Although the word resilience hasn’t been prominent within the recreation sector until recent years, a case could be made that it has been a key benefit of recreation for many years. Resilience is defined as:

*“...the ability of young people, families and communities to navigate to the resources they need (which means those resources have to be available and accessible) and negotiate for these resources to be provided in meaningful ways.” (Michael Ungar, *What Works*, page 18)*

The idea of resilience is often associated with children and youth who grow up to thrive as adults despite starting life in an environment of poverty, abuse, marginalization and, in general, greater problems and fewer resources than required for optimum development. The concept can also be applied to families and communities that face many challenges and a dearth of resources to address them. Resilience is achieved when the community takes on a difficult challenge, mobilizes available human, financial and material resources, achieves success, and builds greater levels of capacity to take on more difficult problems. The human, material, natural, and bricks-and-mortar resources managed by the recreation sector are key, both to providing immediate response to crises and to building capacity to prevent and respond to crises in the future.

Change

The saying, “May you live in interesting times,” is referred to as a Chinese curse, although I’ve often wondered why living in interesting times would be considered a curse. Don’t we all aspire to live in interesting times? The answer lies in the reality that interesting times are often times of uncertainty, chaos, and change. It is interesting indeed that the recreation sector is being called upon to consider new responsibilities while simultaneously maintaining their traditional roles. That reality, while appearing to be problematic, can be embraced as long as people are engaged in deciding what changes are required and when, who will be impacted and how, and what the process of meaningful participation will look like.

Recreation sector leaders at the national, provincial and local levels have undertaken forward looking initiatives that have put the sector in a strong position to manage this new wave of change imperatives. One of the most impactful of those was launched in 2015, following a four-year engagement process. In that year, *A Framework for Recreation in Canada, Pathways to Wellbeing* was endorsed by Provincial and Territorial Ministers (excluding Quebec) and supported by the Government of Canada. Since then, many municipal councils have also endorsed the Framework and made it the foundation for their local recreation planning initiatives.

The Framework’s launch provided a solid, national foundation for the work of the recreation sector across Canada. Since then additional plans such as *Parks for All* and a professional development initiative in cultural competency for Indigenous Canada have been undertaken. More recently, The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) undertook a new initiative related to Gender Equity in Recreational Sport. We won’t (and we shouldn’t) aspire to be free of change. It’s what keeps us vibrant, relevant and meaningful.

Cross-cutting Implications

“Collaborative,” “cross-sectoral,” and “intersectional” are terms that remind us that societal problems are often not experienced “one at a time.” Similarly, the resources

required to address them are rarely the purview of a single department, agency or organization. The interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, and gender, as applied to individuals and groups, creates overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage that turn complicated problems into “wicked” ones. Wicked problems are often only resolved through collaborative action over time. Recreation can respond to this reality by expanding the communities and sectors that we work with, finding ways to get into the rooms and at the tables where we may not have been welcomed in the past and consider the resources required to take on new roles and responsibilities.

Crises and Their Impacts

“Parks and recreation (provides) essential and adaptable infrastructure that makes our communities resilient in the face of natural disasters and climate change.”
(National Recreation and Parks Association)

In this article, we are referring to crises that are health-related (COVID-19), natural (wildfires, flooding), and policy-based (housing). This section provides a few examples of how each of those crises has impacted the recreation and parks sector. To some extent, the crises and the impacts will be different from community to community. As stated in the *Chief Public Health Officer of Canada’s Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2023*,

“...some communities have less access to key conditions that enable resilience. This is due to the inequitable distribution of power and resources in society. During an emergency, some communities are more likely to be exposed to hazards and risk. These same communities may also have less access to the resources needed to respond to and recover from emergencies. This can create compounding and inequitable negative health, social, and economic effects on individuals and their communities.”

The COVID pandemic called upon recreation and parks to provide ongoing opportunities for physical activity and outdoor recreation during a period when most outdoor and all indoor facilities were closed. New and innovative initiatives were developed across the province to address those needs. It has been observed that there was more energy and greater imagination than usual within the sector during the pandemic. Conversely, it has also been noted that senior recreation officials were often not offered appropriate levels of engagement in decision-making about the use of the resources that they were responsible for.

One of the most frequently mentioned and most troubling COVID-related issues concerned the isolation and resulting loneliness of people who live alone and were unable to maintain social connections with family and friends. A finding of the

Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in the Yukon Territory (PIRRYT) research project drew specific attention to programming that meets the needs of people across the lifespan as being vital for recovery of physical and social well-being.

During the COVID pandemic the needs for active, outdoor physical activity and for social connection were sometimes at odds with each other. The term “social distancing” eventually came to be used less frequently in favour of “physical distancing” in recognition that people needed to be physically but not socially distanced to prevent the spread of the virus.

Natural disasters such as floods and wildfires have called upon community recreation facilities to be temporarily repurposed as operational centres or temporary housing, or replaced as recreation facilities themselves are lost during a crisis. Staff may be reassigned to cover emergency needs. Two examples from last year’s wildfires were that staff were called upon to search for homeless people in the woods in areas that may be in the path of the fire and to help run the operation centres and emergency shelters that were set up in temporarily repurposed community centres.



Chester Parks and Recreation photo



(Province of Nova Scotia Photo)

The housing crises has called upon municipal recreation to reconsider the role that its indoor and outdoor spaces can play in the provision of emergency shelter and short-term accommodation for unhoused people. Recreation’s role in housing has included addressing hygiene needs through the provision of showers, providing sites for warming and social connection, and providing space for encampments and interim housing via parks, and community centres. These supports provide a medium for

connection with a larger community. Through all of this, recreation, with its reputation of being non-threatening and having no hidden agendas, has been called upon to be a focal point for respite, safety and community engagement.

An expertise that recreation has provided for many years, and may be even more compelling in this context and era, is the provision of play opportunities for children through playgrounds, programs and events. As housing solutions for families are undertaken, the recreation sector has an essential role to play in assuring that those needs, both in terms of quantity and quality, are fully considered. This is absolutely a role that we can and should play as long as the housing crisis returns.

It has been suggested that a policy focus on affordable communities could be more impactful than the current focus on affordable housing. In a crisis, it's not unusual for respondents to focus on a narrow set of solutions, but in a chronic situation of need, a broader focus may be required to engage essential decision-makers and mobilize required resources. The benefits of taking a broader and longer-term approach include achieving higher levels of individual, family and community resiliency.

The current foci for the housing crises are on emergency shelters to serve those living rough or in tent communities, short-term housing for a growing population of unhoused people, and affordable housing options for people who are working but unable to afford to rent or buy a home. To imagine what a focus on affordable communities might look like, in addition to housing issues, think about food deserts that make it difficult to acquire healthy, affordable food; neighbourhoods lacking affordable recreation and community sport opportunities, safe active transportation routes, and good quality schools and libraries; and then consider the pressure on families that live in those communities.



(Province of Nova Scotia Photo)

In all of the crises mentioned above, human resources have been called upon to undertake new, unfamiliar, often temporary responsibilities to assist in crisis response. There are a number of possible implications for this situation, including the need for staff training in new skill areas, backfilling positions where long term replacements are required, and management considerations for dealing with unfamiliar staff assignments, risk management decisions, and support for staff who may develop conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through encountering unfamiliar workplace hazards.



(Province of Nova Scotia Photo)

A Bit More About Resilience

In gathering information for this article I was fortunate to connect with Michael Ungar, PhD, founder and Director of the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University where he also holds the Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience. Among other resources, Dr. Ungar brought my attention to *What Works, A Manual for Designing Programs that Build Resilience*. This section borrows heavily from the manual's Introduction.

Ungar tells the story of the Aquarelle program in Brazil that serves about 200 children living in impoverished neighbourhoods. The children in these neighbourhoods have schools to attend but their parents send them to scrounge for recyclables, beg on the streets, or work as domestic labourers instead. Aquarelle provides an alternative through recreation workers and educators who offer "...an energizing, hope inspired

blend of arts, music, sports, tutoring, and mentorship that is transforming children's lives". The early pages of the manual also make an important point about resilience, that it isn't just about the personal traits that allow children to do well in life despite difficult beginnings, but is also about the process through which communities apply psychological, social, political, economic and even environmental resources that help children become the best they can be. (*What Works*, page 6)

As a person who thinks a lot about the opportunities and challenges facing the recreation sector, I am always encouraged when I learn of professionals from other sectors who recognize the benefits of recreation, despite viewing it through a very different lens. Michael Ungar, a Social Worker describing the recreational components of Aquarelle, is a great example of that and makes it clear that recreation belongs in the discussion about how to help build individual, family and community resiliency.

A local example of a resilience-building initiative began in 2011 when Phoenix Youth Programs was invited by residents of the Mulgrave Park community to collaborate in the design and development of fun, meaningful and relevant programs and opportunities for youth age 12 and above. The resulting program, Phoenix Youth & Community Centre (PYCC), opened its doors after several years of working with local youth to organize workshops, develop teen centres, and provide after-school programs. Ongoing efforts also include arts and recreation, leadership, community building, and education and employment-related programs and supports. (*Phoenix Youth Programs Annual Report*)

Conclusion

This paper has described the crises-induced change that has been part of the recreation sector reality in recent years. It has also made a case that responses from the sector are imperative to ensure that our support for individuals, families and communities continues to be relevant in the face of this change. A strengthened focus on resilience as a means to that end is an important element. Without reviewing any of that rationale, here are five considerations for the recreation sector to move forward. To be clear, these are not intended to be recommendations and they do not comprise a strategy, but they do represent some excellent things to think about as the recreation sector moves forward.

- The current housing situation is finally getting some of the attention it deserves, but there is much more to be done. The recreation sector can examine whether it is adequately engaged in developing emergency, short term and longer-term solutions and find its way into discussions where it plays, or could play a role. A modern, strategic approach to integrating children's play into housing strategy also has an essential place in this discussion.

- The idea of taking the broadest possible view of resilience by applying it to individuals, families and communities is laudable and should be considered within a long-term vision. More specifically, resilience could be put forward as having a prominent place in the revised Framework for Recreation in Canada. A strengthened focus on the resilience of children and youth within a broad partnership of service providers, would make a strategic beginning.
- COVID-19 raised our awareness that for some, social isolation and loneliness can affect levels of happiness across the life span but particularly with elder adults. Our response to the pandemic did not anticipate the loneliness that arose as an unintended consequence of social isolation. The simple, yet essential, concept of happiness may need to be given a higher level of importance as we plan for the future.
- With respect to all of the above, the recreation sector can consider the question of equitable distribution of resources as we plan and offer programs, design, build and operate indoor and outdoor infrastructure, and provide services. Where can we make the most strategic investments that build resilience, is a question that should be explored often and in depth.
- Human resource implications that may arise from engaging in new work challenges need to be considered, particularly with respect to our growing role in crisis response.

References

What Works A Manual for Designing Programs that Build Resilience, Michael Ungar PhD

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