

DC Park Rx: Connecting Patients to Parks and Creating the Next Generation of Environmental Activists

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As a public health-minded primary care pediatrician, I now regularly prescribe parks to my patients and their families. I have come to the conclusion that we must have a varied approach to both preventing and treating chronic disease, as well as promoting wellness.

Looking at the US population from a birds-eye view, we see millions of Americans suffering from serious mental illness (depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc.), diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and unhappiness. We know that, on average, Americans spend only 7% of their time outdoors. While indoors, we are more likely to be sedentary, sitting in front of a handheld device, often eating. In contrast, spending time outdoors in natural settings, we are less likely to experience anxiety, rumination, or negative affect. Just being in green space is restorative and boosts attention. Shinrin-yoku or “forest bathing”, as it is called in Japan, reduces cortisol level and blood pressure. Living in a neighborhood

with one or more opportunities for physical activity is associated with lower risk of Type 2 diabetes. When adjusting for sociodemographic factors, living near green space reduces our overall mortality.

These are enough reasons to place a high level of significance and importance on helping patients spend more time in parks.

This is why, 6 years ago, I set out to establish DC Park Rx, a community health initiative whose mission is to prescribe parks to prevent and treat chronic disease and to promote wellness.

DCParkRx.org is now a regional initiative that provides healthcare professionals in their respective organizations with the tools they need to fully integrate the park prescription not only within the electronic health record, but more importantly within our daily routine of providing health care to our patients.

Just as doctors and other healthcare professionals prescribe medicines, write referrals to specialists, and order diagnostic tests, we can just as easily prescribe parks, when provided the right tool. We have been prescribing parks since July 1, 2013. Our catchment area now includes Washington DC, as well as parts of Maryland, with a current total patient population reach of nearly 200,000. We now have nearly 300 healthcare professionals with ready access to prescribe parks within their electronic health record.

DCParkRx.org is quickly expanding throughout the Northeast region, as well as nationally, currently expanding into Connecticut, Virginia, and West Virginia.

DCParkRx.org is popular among healthcare professionals because it is relevant to our work, and easy to use. DCParkRx.org is popular among park agencies because we share common goals:

1. Increasing park utilization, and
2. Decreasing the burden of chronic disease in our communities.

By partnering closely with many local park agencies and the National Park Service, DCParkRx.org has developed a scalable method to import essential park attributes (longitude/latitude, accessibility, activities allowed, seating, water features, etc.) into a searchable park database, which is easy for healthcare professionals to use. By partnering with healthcare provider organizations, including community health centers, hospital systems, and group clinical practices, DCParkRx.org is demonstrating the value of Park Rx in

achieving our common goals of providing high-quality healthcare while promoting a culture of prevention and wellness. DCParkRx.org is a win-win for park agencies and healthcare provider organizations alike.

But perhaps the biggest winner is the environment. Whether we realize it or not, our lives are dependent on the health of the environment. Without a healthy environment, we perish. We all need clean air and water, as well as natural undisturbed areas to restore our attention and to bring happiness and meaning to our lives. By connecting millions more people with parks and other outdoor areas, we are rekindling the connection between humans and Nature. By spending more time in Nature we develop a sense of belonging to the flora and fauna, and we begin to place value to our experience and place. Our renewed sense of connection to Nature inspires and motivates us to advocate for a most essential human right, access to green space.



Rock Creek Park Trail
Photo Credit: TrailVoice, Flickr



View of Downtown San Francisco from Twin Peaks
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley