

# AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO RECREATION FOR ONTARIANS POLICY FRAMEWORK

Every One Plays

A high-angle photograph of three young children playing basketball on an outdoor court. The court has a reddish-brown surface with white and green lines. In the foreground, a child in a red shirt is dribbling a basketball. Behind them, a child in a white and green shirt is watching, and further back, a child in a blue jersey is also playing. The scene is captured with a slight motion blur, suggesting active play.

Prepared by the Ontario Task Group on Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families, supported by Parks and Recreation Ontario with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion



The Ontario Task Group on Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families was established by Parks and Recreation Ontario in 2006. Its goal is to work collaboratively to influence policy development in Ontario to increase access to recreation for low-income Ontarians.

**Task Group Members**

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- Canadian Tire Jumpstart
- Canadian Parks and Recreation Association
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- Ontario Municipal Social Services Association
- Ontario Public Health Association
- Parks and Recreation Ontario

**This Policy Framework was developed by the Task Group in collaboration with:**

- The Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation Ontario
- The Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services
- The Ontario Ministry of Education
- City of Mississauga
- City of Toronto
- Peel Region
- YMCA



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This framework is available online at the Lifestyle Information Network website: <http://lin.ca/access-to-recreation>



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# Introduction



## PURPOSE

This Policy Framework promotes access to recreation for low-income Ontarians. It was created by the Ontario Task Group on Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families in consultation with many others committed to affordable access. It draws on a growing body of work that documents the health, social and economic benefits that affordable access to recreation can provide, and supports the rights of Ontarians outlined in the *Charter for Recreation and Parks in Ontario, 2009* (see Resource Links).

The framework sets out a vision, objectives and strategic directions to guide those who develop public policy, make funding decisions, offer recreation programs, or build and maintain facilities or open spaces. It is a call to action for all involved to work together in a systematic way to make affordable access to recreation a reality in Ontario.

### WHY DO WE NEED A POLICY FRAMEWORK?

The recreation sector in Ontario has come a long way in identifying the benefits of recreation and the barriers to participation that exist for low-income Ontarians. Without a framework for action, solutions tend to occur in a “patchwork” way. A compelling framework can help to galvanize communities, the private sector and all levels of government, based on a shared vision for affordable recreation.

The Task Group hopes that all organizations with a role to play in affordable recreation will endorse the framework and collaborate on ways to achieve the vision.

## WHAT IS RECREATION?

Dictionaries define recreation as activities, such as play, that divert, amuse or stimulate. It comes from the Latin *recreare* which means to refresh. In that sense, recreation has a positive or therapeutic effect that renews or revitalizes one's body or mind.

Recreation is voluntarily pursued during leisure time when one is free from work, school and other duties. Unlike more passive leisure-time activities (like reading or watching television), recreation is active. Some define recreation as “active leisure”.

Recreation includes a wide variety of physical activity, but not elite sport. It can also be an artistic, intellectual or social activity. Formal recreation usually requires special equipment, facilities, and planning. Informal recreation requires little planning and can often be done on the spur of the moment.

For the purpose of this framework, we define recreation as follows:

**RECREATION IS** an active, leisure-time pursuit that enriches the individual by improving health, developing a skill, or building self-esteem.

## WHY IS RECREATION IMPORTANT?

The benefits of recreation and its importance for low-income individuals and families are well documented and summarized below.

### ***Recreation has physical health benefits.***

Recreation that includes physical activity lowers the incidence of illness and obesity.

### ***Recreation has psycho-social benefits.***

Recreation can foster life skills for success at school, work and home; reduce emotional problems and risky behaviour; improve self-esteem; create positive peer and family relationships; and increase opportunities for fun and enjoyment.

### ***Recreation can help to break the cycle of poverty.***

Being excluded from community-based recreation programs is both a result of and a contributor to cyclical and generational poverty. Regular involvement by children and youth in structured, skill building recreational activities that develop self-esteem helps to build resilience and protect against the risks of low success in school and the labour market.

### ***Recreation is a wise financial investment.***

In achieving the benefits described above, access to recreation results in savings in health, social service and justice costs. In addition, savings have been found in the tax system when people exit welfare and gain employment.

“If no cost recreation was proactively arranged for a majority of Ontario Works families, significant savings would result from increased independence and exits from welfare rolls.”

— Dr. Mark Totten, *The Health, Social and Economic Benefits of Increasing Access to Recreation for Low-Income families: Research Summary Report* – Nov 2007, citing Browne et al.



### ***Affordable access to recreation supports public policy priorities.***

Enhancing access to recreation can help to further objectives common to provincial and federal governments, such as:

- Helping children and youth to have opportunities to succeed and reach their full potential
- Providing better opportunities for low-income Ontarians to break the cycle of poverty
- Promoting healthy and active living and reducing obesity
- Building safer, stronger communities and reducing behaviour that can lead to violence
- Making best use of schools and other community spaces

“Our goal is simple. We want to ensure the healthy development of children, youth, individuals and families in Ontario, through play.”

— Howie Dayton, Task Group Chair

## WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO AFFORDABLE RECREATION?

The barriers to affordable recreation are evident from research and consultation done in Ontario and at the national level over the past several years. Barriers can be grouped into two broad categories:

1. Barriers faced by low-income Ontarians in gaining access to recreation programs and facilities (“demand side”).
2. Barriers faced by municipalities and local organizations in providing affordable access to recreation programs and facilities (“supply side”).

	<b>“DEMAND SIDE”</b> Barriers faced by low-income Ontarians	<b>“SUPPLY SIDE”</b> Barriers faced by municipal and community providers
<b>PROGRAMS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low awareness of programs and the importance of recreation</li> <li>• Parental mistrust</li> <li>• Lack of structured, culturally sensitive and accessible programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to engage communities and create responsive programs</li> <li>• Shortage of support and training for quality coaches, mentors and volunteers</li> <li>• Lack of structured, culturally sensitive and accessible programs</li> </ul>
<b>FACILITIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of transportation and community-based infrastructure</li> <li>• Lack of places for both informal recreation and structured programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affordable access to community spaces</li> <li>• Maintaining infrastructure and facilities to meet current and future demands</li> </ul>
<b>AFFORDABILITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• User fees</li> <li>• Stigma and complexity of fee subsidies</li> <li>• Transportation and equipment costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for sustainable funding</li> <li>• Cost pressures and competing priorities</li> </ul>
<b>CAPACITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of voice for low-income Ontarians</li> <li>• Lack of program integration and coordination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access policy expertise, coordination and frameworks</li> <li>• The will to take action</li> </ul>
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ways to measure success</li> <li>• Incentives and consequences</li> </ul>

## WHY DO WE NEED A POLICY FRAMEWORK?

Community recreation began as a grassroots movement to increase access for low-income families. Over time it has become inaccessible to many of the people it was intended to serve. We need to find ways to reverse this trend.

The recreation sector in Ontario has come a long way in identifying the benefits of recreation, the barriers to access for low-income Ontarians, and creative solutions. Many promising policies, programs, and facilities exist, but without a framework they tend to occur in a “patchwork” way. This limits opportunities to evaluate their effectiveness and maximize benefits across the province.

A compelling policy framework can help to galvanize community organizations, the private sector, and all levels of government to action, based on a shared vision for affordable recreation. It will also serve as a vehicle for reaching out to those who may not traditionally see themselves as aligned with access to recreation.

**IN NOVEMBER 2007**, 100 academics, researchers, community organizations, and provincial and municipal officials, representing over 80 organizations, attended an Ontario symposium on access to recreation for low-income families. Their commitment demonstrated that access to recreation is a vital public policy issue.



By articulating a vision and strategic directions for affordable access to recreation, the policy framework aims to:

- Inspire action by governments, communities, educators, and the private sector toward a common goal;
- Promote collaboration, coordination and the creation of tools;
- Inform policy and funding decisions for recreation programs, facilities and open spaces; and
- Define ways to measure success and keep everyone on course.

## WHO WILL USE THE POLICY FRAMEWORK?

Provided that the vision, objectives, and fundamental policy directions of the policy framework are broadly endorsed by leaders in the field, the Task Group anticipates that:

- The **Ontario and federal governments** will use the framework as a guide for making policy and funding decisions to foster affordable access to recreation in Ontario.
- In **municipalities, council and senior management** will use the framework to encourage the creation of access policies and to inform decisions related to recreation programs, spaces and community outreach.
- **Allied organizations** (Public Health Units, Social Planning Councils, Social Services Organizations, etc.) will play a vital role in shaping programs and policies. They will partner with local recreation providers/municipalities to align approaches to affordable access to recreation with other social programs (i.e. physical activity campaigns, early learning and child care, etc.).
- The **Boards of Directors and funders of local recreation providers** will use the framework to include affordable access as a primary consideration in planning and delivering recreation policies, programs and spaces.
- The **private sector** will use the framework as an impetus to make corporate donations of money, equipment, and volunteers to support affordable recreation programs and to help with the development of recreation infrastructure through, for example, incorporating active and passive spaces into new construction, areas of revitalization and/or community projects and initiatives.
- The **education sector** will use the framework to inform policies on community use of schools, programs that can promote awareness of the importance of recreation, and training to build capacity to deliver affordable recreation programming.
- **Community organizations** will use the framework as the basis for ensuring that the needs of women, youth, immigrant, ethno-cultural, rural, disability and Aboriginal communities are taken into account by those who create affordable recreation policies, programs, and spaces.
- **Low-income Ontarians** will participate in affordable recreation programs created under the framework and provide input to their development.

# Vision



**EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE RECREATION IN THEIR COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO ENJOY HEALTH AND SOCIAL BENEFITS AND TO IMPROVE THEIR PROSPECTS FOR A BETTER FUTURE.**

## Objectives

### **AFFORDABILITY**

*A range of affordable recreation programs will be in place in every community across the province. Where user fees exist, fee assistance will be provided for those facing financial barriers.*

- A core set of high quality recreation programs will be available in each community on a free and universal basis. These programs will have the potential to improve health and quality of life and mitigate conditions of poverty.
- In addition, non-stigmatizing user fee assistance programs will exist that allow Ontarians facing income barriers to participate in a wider range of programs.
- Some programs will target school children or youth. Others will be available for families to enjoy together.

### **PLACES TO PLAY**

*Communities will have formal and informal spaces where people can participate in recreational activities. Rental fees will not be a barrier to community use of public spaces.*

- Informal, non-structured, free recreation opportunities will be universally available in public spaces across Ontario.
- Facilities for structured recreation programs will be available to the community and maintained based on detailed service planning.

### **AWARENESS**

*Low-income Ontarians will be aware of the existence and importance of affordable recreation opportunities.*

- Raising awareness among low-income Ontarians will be a key component in the planning and delivery of affordable recreation programs and spaces.

## **INCLUSION**

***Affordable recreation programs will be responsive to Ontario's cultural diversity, gender, and accessible to persons with disabilities.***

- Program planners will conduct outreach and engagement to ensure affordable recreation programs are responsive to Ontario's diversity. This will help to ensure that segments of the low-income population are not inadvertently excluded and unable to enjoy the benefits of community recreation.

## **CAPACITY**

***Municipalities and community providers will have sustainable funding, and the skills and tools they need to provide affordable recreation programs and facilities.***

- The provincial government will create funding strategies and build on existing models to assist local municipalities in the delivery of core, free and universal programming.
- Providers of recreation programs will have access to sustainable, long-term funding for affordable recreation initiatives, such as reducing or eliminating user fees for low-income Ontarians.
- Providers of recreation programs will have non-stigmatizing fee assistance programs that enhance access to recreation programs that fall outside the core set of free and universal services.
- Training programs and tools will help to ensure that staff and volunteers are qualified to plan and deliver affordable, inclusive recreation programs and to create and maintain accessible recreation facilities.
- Community development strategies will be employed to facilitate engagement of marginalized populations.
- Tools will be developed to meet the challenges of providing access to recreation in rural or remote areas.

## **COLLABORATION**

***All stakeholders will work together to develop and implement access policies and to design and maintain affordable programs and spaces, drawing on the strengths of what already exists.***

- All underserved populations (individuals facing financial barriers, immigrants, youth, seniors) will be involved in the planning and design of affordable recreation programs.
- Collaboration, coordination and partnerships will help to identify and fill gaps in affordable recreation services and spaces in Ontario communities. Governments, community organizations, educators, the private sector, and low-income Ontarians will all play a meaningful role to reap the benefits that collaborative efforts can achieve and to ensure the most effective use of existing and new resources.
- Private and public funding programs will encourage collaborative and innovative services to low-income Ontarians, will minimize duplication and will build on that which already exists.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

***A concerted effort will be made to implement the policy framework, monitor its implementation, and build on successes.***

- Networks involving all players will be formed to generate enthusiasm for the framework, facilitate implementation, and monitor success at the provincial and grass roots level.
- Concrete targets will be in place along with tools to measure success and incentives to participate.
- Successful approaches will be replicated in communities across the province.

# Fundamental Policy Objectives



*In order to achieve the vision of this framework, there are two fundamental policy objectives that must be in place in order to overcome the barriers faced by low-income Ontarians.*

## 1 ACCESS POLICIES

*Municipal and community delivery organizations establish Affordable Access Policies to ensure individuals that face income barriers have equitable opportunities to participate.*

### Rationale

In recent years, recreation has been seen as an opportunity to generate revenue through user fees. However, it is not realistic to expect that fees, equipment costs and other barriers can be removed for all programs and facilities. Surveys conducted in 2007 for the Ontario Task Group on Access to Recreation found that ninety-one percent of municipalities with an access policy (and 70% of those without a policy) reduce or remove fees for at least some recreation facilities or programs for low-income families and individuals. This is an indication that access policies, and in their absence informal approaches to fee assistance, are effective and necessary in increasing affordability of recreation programs when user fees exist.

**Objectives:** Affordability, capacity, accountability.

## 2 CORE SET OF FREE, UNIVERSAL PROGRAMS

*Communities identify a core set of recreation programs that will be universally available to children, youth, individuals and families and offer these programs without a user fee.*

### Rationale

Ideally, all types of recreation would be available to everyone at no cost. The negative, unintentional consequence has been marginalization of those who cannot afford these fees. Evidence-based research provides a strong argument for the sector to reverse this trend. The goal is to identify those program opportunities which align with the social determinants of health and quality of life indicators, and those that support positive social and physical development and provincial policy priorities. These are the kinds of publicly-funded programs that constitute an essential, core activity and should be available to everyone to ensure the healthy development of individuals and to enhance the overall quality of life within the community. As an essential service, these programs must be funded 100% and offered at no cost so that financial status does not determine who does and who does not participate.

**Objectives:** Affordability and inclusion.

# Policy Strategies

*The two fundamental policy objectives provide the basis for action at the community and provincial level. This section sets out policy strategies that will be implemented in order to achieve the policy objectives. The strategies address the capacity to deliver programs, secure sustainable funding, improve access to community space and engage partners and stakeholders.*

## 1 COMMUNITY ACCESS TO COMMUNITY SPACE

*Maximize affordable access to community space that can be used for formal and informal recreation activities.*

### Rationale

In order to maximize opportunities for participation, it is important to maximize the use of existing community spaces, such as schools. Recreation providers depend on the affordable use of such space, especially in rural and remote areas. Collaborative partnerships and reciprocal agreements are essential to facilitating community access to community spaces.

**Objectives:** Affordability, places to play, awareness, inclusion, and collaboration.

## 2 PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

*Establish community-based partnerships that will determine how to make affordable access to recreation a reality in communities.*

### Rationale

Working in isolation often leads to duplication and ineffective approaches to community issues. Improving access to recreation requires a collaborative model not unlike the provincial Task Group in Ontario. A collaborative planning table will be effective in generating creative ideas, making effective use of existing resources, and building credibility in the community, helping to leverage support and funding. A collaborative approach also ensures that the expertise and resources of public health, recreation, education and other social services organizations will be used effectively.

**Objectives:** Capacity, affordability, accountability and collaboration.



## 3 TARGETED COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

*Build awareness among marginalized populations (i.e. youth, seniors, persons with disabilities, immigrant, low-income families and Aboriginal) of the benefits of recreation, affordable programs, and provide opportunities for community engagement in program design and delivery.*

### Rationale

Marginalized populations are unlikely to participate in community recreation, even if it is low cost or free, unless they are aware of these opportunities and understand the benefits of participating. This is not a case of “build it and they will come.” Individuals and families need to feel welcome. They need to know how they can take advantage of fee assistance programs. These programs must be non-stigmatizing and simple for the client to navigate, as intrusive eligibility assessments and complex forms are likely to deter take-up. Input from families and community organizations into the kinds of outreach approaches, fee assistance processes and program opportunities available is necessary to building an inclusive system of services and supports.

**Objectives:** Awareness, inclusion, accountability and capacity.

# Champions for Success



Photo: Get Active Now

The success of a policy framework lies in the degree to which its strategies are implemented to achieve the vision. There are a multitude of stakeholders who have a role to play to ensure success, and to promote and monitor implementation of the policy framework and to share benefits, challenges and success stories.

## GOVERNMENT

Federal, provincial and local government support is crucial for the successful implementation of this framework. Each has a different role to play.

### Federal Government:

- Balance tax credits (which benefit middle-income families) with funding that will support provincial and local affordable access to recreation policies and programs.
- Align affordable access to recreation with other national sport and physical health policy objectives.
- Ministries such as Health and Sport will work with the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association to create a national strategy to engage low-income Canadians in sport and recreation in every community.
- Provide additional, targeted recreation infrastructure funding for underserved and high risk communities.

### Government of Ontario

- Be an active partner for change across the province. Through policies and programs, the provincial government will ensure that communities have the funding and resources necessary to implement the fundamental policy objectives that will increase access.

- Build on existing funding models to create ongoing and sustainable financial resources to support affordable access initiatives (free, universal programs and fee assistance programs), especially where such initiatives support provincial strategies and policies.
- Implement the After School program funding as a first step in addressing the recreational needs of low-income children and youth.
- Expand Community Use of Schools program to other community spaces and require Boards of Education to report on the impact Community Use of School funding is having.
- Provide additional, targeted recreation infrastructure funding for priority communities.
- Implement policy, legislative and regulatory options that enable improved access to recreation, i.e. Ontario Works benefits extended to include participation in recreation for children and youth; MPMP measures which examine the correlation between universal programming and increased access/participant hours; provincial funding, similar to Community Use of Schools, that would allow for greater access to recreational spaces.



- Strengthen the role of the Ministry of Health Promotion to engage other ministries to provide support.
- Establish a joint sector/Ministry task group to fully develop these and other recommendations, estimate provincial budget allocations required and define measures of success.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Will make a statement about who will benefit from affordable access policies and initiatives in their community.
- Will support the development and implementation of access policies that meet local needs. More detailed action steps are contained in the companion “Policy Development and Implementation Guide for Communities.”

All governments will ensure that tax policies that apply to sport and recreation program fees and facility rental do not become a barrier to participation because of increased cost to the user.

## ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

Provincial organizations and other government agencies (i.e. Public Health units, Association of Municipalities Ontario, Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, Heart & Stroke Foundation) have been instrumental in the advancement of the Affordable Access to Recreation agenda. In many instances, these organizations also have the capacity to disseminate the recommendations of the Framework throughout member networks.

As well, in many communities local planning tables exist that would benefit from understanding the issue of access to recreation in order to help improve opportunities, one community at a time.

- Provincial organizations will continue to collaborate with Parks and Recreation Ontario to advance the Affordable Access to Recreation agenda.
- Local planning networks will be informed through the municipal or not for profit recreation provider of the Framework and opportunities to align mandates and initiatives will be explored.
- Parks and Recreation Ontario will continue to seek opportunities to share resources, tools and information at various conferences of allied organization.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community organizations, foundations, the private sector and citizens will be engaged in the planning and implementation locally.

- Participate on local community planning tables.
- Develop formal approaches to reducing fees where they are unaffordable.
- Establish local fundraising initiatives and engage local businesses to dedicate corporate giving toward community sport and recreation.
- Advocate to local government/authorities to remove barriers that exist (i.e. fees associated with use of public space, etc.).

# Taking Action



This policy framework provides the guiding principles for increasing access to recreation for low-income Ontarians. The policy objectives and strategies in this document are enhanced and supported by a Policy Development and Implementation Guide for Communities. The Guide and the Framework are available for download from the Parks and Recreation Ontario website: [www.prontario.org](http://www.prontario.org)

## Conclusion

Recreation benefits all who participate, whether for the simple enjoyment of leisure time or the more concrete benefits that lead to improved health, life skills and a better future. The Task Group on Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families hopes that the Ontario government, municipal governments, and all those involved in community recreation will endorse this policy framework and take steps to achieve its vision.

The time for action is now. Communities in Ontario must take the time to have a meaningful discussion on Affordable Access to Recreation. It may seem like an overwhelming task but for the first time, the Policy Framework and Community Guide provide Ontario with the tools, steps and supporting research to affect meaningful and sustained change. All it takes is local political and organizational will. Creating systemic change in recreation will

require champions across many human services sectors to work together towards our common goal.

The Task Group on Access to Recreation by Low-Income Families would like to thank all those who helped in the creation of this policy framework. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion for the development of the framework and much of the research and consultation that led up to it.

Please contact the Task Group or Parks and Recreation Ontario to discuss the framework and how you can be involved in furthering the vision it promotes.

**[www.prontario.org](http://www.prontario.org)**

**[access@prontario.org](mailto:access@prontario.org)**

# Resource Links

## LIFESTYLE INFORMATION NETWORK

**This policy framework and the following materials are available online at the Lifestyle Information Network at <http://lin.ca/access-to-recreation>**

Parks and Recreation Ontario, *Affordable Access to Parks and Recreation Services: Positioning Statement* (April 2000)

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*Charter for Recreation and Parks in Ontario* (2009)

[http://www.prontario.org/charter\\_2009.pdf](http://www.prontario.org/charter_2009.pdf)





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