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VIRGINIA RECREATION
& PARK SOCIETY

Official Publication of the Virginia Recreation & Park Society

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MISSION

The mission of the Virginia Recreation and Park Society is to unite all engaged in the field of parks, recreation, and leisure services in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

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Fall President's Message



**Tabitha Martinez,
M.Ed, CPRE**
*President, Virginia Recreation
& Park Society*

Wow, where did summer go? As we transition into the new season, I hope you all had a safe, fun, and program-packed summer filled with memorable experiences. This summer has been remarkable, from the success of our Play All Day VA initiative to the joy of our summer camps and the excitement of new programs and center openings.

But don't forget, summer is not quite over yet! I hope to see you on Saturday, August 23, 2025, at Kings Dominion for our I Play Too initiative—it's a fantastic opportunity to continue enjoying the season together.

Our Board has worked hard on an updated membership fee structure, which we are eager to unveil for the 2026 renewal period. We're also creating a brochure highlighting our service areas and resource groups to assist new and prospective members in their journey with us.

Looking ahead, we are thrilled about our upcoming conference

in Roanoke. If you haven't registered yet, be sure to do so soon—it's an event you won't want to miss!

Lastly, if you are heading to the NRPA Conference, I encourage you to join our [GroupMe chat](#), where we will share updates, meetups, and photos.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication to promoting recreation and parks in Virginia!

Best regards,
Tabitha Martinez, M.Ed, CPRE
Director
Hopewell Recreation and Parks
2025 President
Virginia Recreation and Park Society

MEET YOUR 2025 LEADERS...READY
AND AVAILABLE TO SERVE YOU!

THE FACES OF VRPS



Bailey Kasten,
CAE, ICE-CPP
Executive Director



Tabitha Martinez,
M.Ed, CPRE
President
Central Service Area



Mike Clark, CPRE,
AFO
Vice President
Southwestern Service
Area



Steve Torpy, CPRP
Treasurer
Northern Service Area



Justin Bullock, CPRP
Past President
Western Service Area



Kat Fish, CPRP
Past President
Northern Service Area

Thank you for your
leadership and service
to the 2025 Board and
members of VRPS.
You are Parks & Rec
CHAMPIONS!



Matt Spruill, CPRP
Board Member
Central Service Area



AJ McCage, CTRS
Board Member
Central Service Area



Amanda Walker
Lay Member



Lori Haislip
Office Manager

WHAT'S NEW

IN YOUR AGENCY?

■ ■ ■

Let VRPS spread
the word about all
your hard work!

Email us at
vrps@vrps.com
and appear in our
next magazine.



TWO YEARS, ONE WORD

Dear VRPS members,

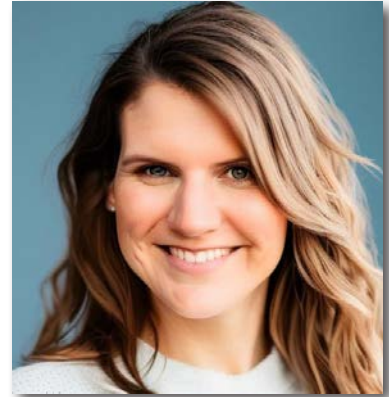
This September marks my two-year anniversary as your Executive Director, and as I reflect on my time with VRPS, one word keeps coming to mind: **adaptive**.

At first, I had so many lengthy observations about the Society and where we were headed, but those descriptions quickly narrowed to a more concise elevator speech. Now, I've basically got it down to just that one word.

I've seen this quality reflected in so many ways: open minds willing to learn and try new things; quick thinking and problem-solving during problems and setbacks; and a passion for evolving best practices. Rather than fearing change, you greet it with excitement, always striving for better inclusion and active participation.

I see this adaptive spirit every day, from the thoughtful questions raised by our committee leaders and board members to the compelling session proposals submitted for our annual conference. Working alongside so many of you—rolling up our sleeves to plan special events and programs, all while considering the big picture and completing our strategic plan—is what makes this job so rewarding. The pivots we make to pull off a successful conference, for example, are what bring the most pride and smiles when we look back at what we've achieved.

When an organization like VRPS has leaders, volunteers, and members who demonstrate these qualities, it means we are ready for what the future will bring. It also means that the work along the way will be filled with joy and passion for our



Bailey Kasten, CAE, ICE-CPP
*Executive Director,
Virginia Recreation & Park Society*

professionals and the communities we serve.

What you've created is truly special. Thank you for bringing this wonderful spirit of adaptation to VRPS. Let's keep it going and see what we can accomplish together!

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bailey Kasten".

Bailey Kasten
Executive Director, VRPS



Introducing our VRPS Conference Keynote Speaker. Join us in Roanoke on **Monday October 27!**



You Are Invited and Welcomed: A Story of Unity in the Outdoors

Written By Earl B. Hunter, Jr., Founder & President, Black Folks Camp Too (The Unity Folks)

After many successful years traveling the world as an executive in the International Sourcing Industry, in 2014 I accepted the role as Vice President of Sales at SylvanSport RV and Gear Manufacturer and stepped into the Outdoor Industry. During my time at SylvanSport, I helped grow the company's sales from \$1 million to over \$17 million in just four years. Yet, even as I traveled the country building partnerships and growing the business in the RV Industry, I noticed something almost immediately: I was often the only Black executive in the room. Later, as I discovered the joys of outdoor recreation (RVing, kayaking, backpacking, etc.) for myself, I realized that harsh reality rang true on the trails and rivers as well. For years, this sat with me as both a burden and

a question. Why weren't there more folks who looked like me in outdoor spaces?

In 2017 this question became unavoidable when I took my son on a three-month-long RV camping road trip through the United States and Canada. We visited 49 campgrounds across 20 states and provinces. Out of all those nights under the stars, across thousands of miles of highways, we only met one other Black family camping. ONE! That experience was the spark that ignited a fire in me.

I founded Black Folks Camp Too in 2019 with a clear goal: to shift the narrative in the outdoor industry by using data-driven strategies that ensure everyone feels Invited and Welcomed into the outdoors — regardless of race, age, or ability. Today, our award-winning company and staff has grown, evolved, and soon we will be known as The Unity Folks. The name reflects the heart of our work. This has never been only about one community. It has always been about Increasing Unity in the Outdoor Community and BEYOND. Under The Unity Folks umbrella, we incorporate and honor all of our diverse brands - All Folks Camp Too, Asian Folks Camp Too, Black Folks Camp Too, Church Folks Camp Too,

Hispanic Folks Camp Too, Latino Folks Camp Too, Mixed Folks Camp Too, Native Folks Camp Too, White Folks Camp Too, and more. Each brand name carries its own story, but together they reinforce a single truth: the great outdoors is for everyone.

The campfire symbol in our logo is called the Unity Blaze, and it carries a simple message. Wherever and whenever you see our logo, it means: YOU are Invited and Welcomed. That message belongs in campgrounds, parks, trails, boardrooms, classrooms, and everywhere people gather. It is about breaking down the barriers of history, perception, and fears that have kept too many folks off the trails and on the sidelines.

Over the years, I have traveled hundreds of thousands of miles, worked with state parks and recreation leaders across the world, and listened deeply to communities who want to see change. What I have learned is this: access alone does not ensure participation... folks must be Invited and Welcomed. Real progress comes when communities are actively invited, when outreach is grounded in respect and data, and when opportunities reflect the diverse stories and traditions of the people you serve.

You Are Invited and Welcomed: A Story of Unity in the Outdoors (CONTINUED)

That is where community outreach comes in. Outreach requires effective communication while building trust. It requires listening, engaging with care, and creating programs and events that reflect the lives of the communities around us. When leaders take this approach, they strengthen the bonds between people and the places we steward.

This October, I look forward to joining the Virginia Recreation and Park Society Annual Conference. I will share more about our mission (and my journey) during the keynote session, and together in my workshop we will dig into how effective outreach can help you Invite and Welcome communities into your programs and spaces.

We will not solve every challenge in one day. What matters is that we take meaningful steps together. Unity is a practice, one that requires consistency. It is the work of opening doors wider, extending hands further, and sitting down at the campfire together – literally and figuratively.

At The Unity Folks, we often say: *We are changing the world... one campfire at a time.* I believe that work continues every time a park leader chooses to engage with a new community, every time a child sees themselves reflected in the outdoors, every time a family is invited on a camping trip for the first time, and every time we remind one another that the campfire is for all of us.

So I invite you to come with open minds and open hearts. Bring your experiences, your challenges, and your passion for the communities you serve. Let's spark something powerful together in Virginia! Our children's, children's, children are counting on us.



I PLAY TOO: SUMMER IS OVER, YOU MADE IT, OR AT LEAST WHAT IS LEFT OF YOU!



*By Jason Bookheimer, CPRP,
Director of Community
Recreation, Danville Parks and
Recreation*

Hear me out... summer is the greatest season in our profession. I know, we are only one sentence into the article, and I've lost most of you who work 50+ hour weeks of summer camp, twelve to fourteen hour days for special events (every weekend or holiday), implement endless community programs and neighborhood events, always set up during the hottest times of the day, or maybe you spent the majority of June with your fingers crossed you had enough budget to make it to the end of the fiscal year and at some point pulled nearly half your hair out trying to cover the office phones because everyone is in the field. So that leaves about .001% of our profession that didn't fall into one of these categories. First things first, if you haven't heard it yet or enough this past summer, thank you. Thank you for the long hours and days dedicated to impacting and improving the lives of residents in the commonwealth during probably the most challenging time

of year and for putting up with all the disgruntled customers whose temper seems to coincide with the temperature.

Each summer, our profession, somehow quite miraculously, manages to double our services during these months if not more. What that means to me is that community members have numerous opportunities to participate and enjoy the many programs, parks, and events that we offer. Simply put, we just do a lot more than the rest of the year, but what we really are doing is creating lifelong learning, memories and meaningful experiences far beyond the planners and staff that interact with them every day.

Most people reading this have at least one, if not numerous stories, of how someone or something in their childhood impacted them or changed their lives forever. Many of these memories and core experiences happened during summer programs or camps, maybe even training and practice

for youth sports or visiting a local park. The importance and impact of what we do in the summer is insurmountable and cannot be quantified. If there was a quality-of-life meter that measured what each department does across the state and the decades of impact it has, I imagine that it would be extraordinary and almost nearly impossible to imagine. The issue is, there is no real way to do that, no actual way to look into the future and predict all the positive outcomes and see the trickle down of what took place because of your department's efforts in your community. Most of the time we tend to look at the challenges or come back to the bullpen with our team and discuss how we can't wait until it's over or anxiously await the kids going back to school. Why do we do this? Why do we default to "just make it to the end of summer" or "thank goodness the kids go back to school next week?"

One of the simplest answers to those



questions is, summer is downright difficult and creates numerous challenges for us as professionals during this season. On any given week of summer, many professionals are juggling their work schedules and tip toeing to balance their personal time. Let's throw a few scenarios out there: how about the camp director that has three kids who play travel sports and every hour of annual leave is used for weekend tournament travel, the staff member who is caring for an ill family member or an aging parent which requires constant attention and changing schedules, the parks staff member who has to prep every ball field and be available for every tournament on the weekends so they never get to take a full weekend to go to the beach or mountains, or what about the director that struggles with determining what program or event do they try to go to

when it is humanly impossible to attend all and internalizes how staff feel about them not showing up? There is a lot that comes with summer.

As you move forward after this season, I encourage you to take time to personally reflect and identify your personal and work needs and how to balance them moving forward. Next summer starts now; it is time to have real conversations with your team and yourself to identify pressure points and what things you can implement or adjust to help. How can you identify ways to recover and support yourself and team members this fall? The important thing is that you don't miss the opportunity to reflect and plan for next year so that we don't end up three weeks in next year and start wishing we could fast forward to the end of the season and end

up on the hamster wheel again.

Lives are forever changed. People grow up to carry the values and lessons you provided them for the rest of their lives. What we do in our profession matters and can forever positively impact your community far beyond what you will ever know or see. This is why it is the greatest season of our profession...

Understand what you need so you can be the best version of yourself as often as you can and at the end of every day, it is just soooooo hot and humid! Give everyone a little extra grace and a whole lot of water.



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JAMES CITY COUNTY PARKS: *Play, Learn, Explore!*

Inclusive Playground Renovation and New Educational Sign Inspire Discovery

By Joy Johnson, M.S. Ed., CPRP, Senior Communications & Marketing Specialist, James City County Parks & Recreation

BEFORE



Parks and Recreation is more than open space – it's a vital part of a thriving, healthy community. Whether it's through inclusive playgrounds, nature trails, or interactive signage, parks provide essential spaces for play, discovery, exploration and lifelong learning. These experiences not only support physical and emotional well-being, but also foster connection, creativity, and a sense of belonging for people of all ages and abilities. At the heart of every park is the promise of opportunity – to engage, to grow and to connect with the world around us.

Treasured Playground Gets Facelift

On Friday, June 13, James City County Parks & Recreation staff, along with community partners and supporters, joined together for a [ribbon-cutting ceremony](#) for the newly renovated **MyPlace playground**. MyPlace is a fully inclusive playground designed to welcome all individuals and families, regardless of ability. The playground originally opened in 2009 as a privately funded project of the Leadership Historic Triangle Class of 2009. The class generated \$133,000 in donations to assist with building costs!

AFTER



New Interactive Sign Unveiled

On Wednesday, June 18, JCC Parks & Recreation held a sign unveiling at [Greensprings](#)





[Interpretive Trail \(GST\)](#) to celebrate the new, interactive interpretive sign at the GST trailhead.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Williamsburg Community Foundation and the dedicated efforts of volunteers from the Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists (HRC-VMN), visitors to GST can now enjoy this new, interactive display. Over the past two years, HRC-VMN volunteers collaborated with JCC Parks & Recreation staff to design the sign as part of the HRC-VMN's "Trailability" project, with accessibility as a key priority. The signage depicts a wetland habitat, notating and highlighting common flora,

fauna, and the importance of maintaining this valuable habitat. Volunteers provided countless hours planning and creating the interpretive sign to educate the public about the trail's wetland flora and fauna, the forested upland, and the spring's geological history.

To enhance the educational experience, the 2.5' x 8.5' sign features two interactive elements—a flip book (8"x12") and a spinner (15" diameter) — along with a QR code that links to more in-depth information and an audio component, making the trail even more engaging and inclusive for all visitors.

Spaces That Inspire

These recent enhancements at MyPlace Playground and Greensprings Interpretive Trail reflect JCC Parks & Recreation's ongoing commitment to creating spaces where everyone can experience the joy of **play**, the wonder of **discovery** and the power of **learning through exploration**. As our parks continue to grow and evolve, they remain essential places where community takes root and memories are made — welcoming all ages, abilities and backgrounds to connect with nature, with each other, and with a deeper sense of belonging. To learn more about JCC Parks & Recreation, visit jamescitycountyva.gov/recreation or follow us on Facebook or Instagram.

Mission Statement:

We work in partnership with citizens to ensure responsive programs, facilities and open space which promote personal growth, social development and healthy lifestyles.

PLAY ALL DAY VA BY THE NUMBERS



By Sarah O'Reilly, M.S., CPRP, Operations Manager
Joy Johnson, M.S. Ed., CPRP, Senior Communications & Marketing Specialist
James City County Parks & Recreation

It's remarkable to consider that we're already approaching the conclusion of summer—2025 has flown by! As the days grow shorter and daylight diminishes, VRPS wraps up its summer celebration and the inaugural **PLAY ALL DAY VA (PADVA)** initiative, which focused on embracing the concept of play centered around the summer solstice! PADVA aimed to spotlight how agencies can engage their citizens to play on the summer solstice by providing free access to programming and park and recreation amenities.

The response to PADVA in its second year was overwhelmingly positive, with more participation from each of VRPS's service areas compared to 2024. Forty-seven agencies participated and received free PADVA swag, including clipboards sponsored by **Kaizen Labs**, lanyards, a beach ball, and sunglasses. Event metrics captured from 42 agencies included quantitative and qualitative data composed of participant numbers, program information, sponsorships, success and challenges, and budgets. This data will be used to better serve YOU for 2026. Check out PADVA by the numbers.

Despite the sun and overwhelming heat across much of Virginia on June 20, Parks & Recreation professionals delivered programming in areas including Health and Wellness, Outdoors, Therapeutic Recreation, Arts, and more! Highlights included amenity, facility, and program access with most agencies offering these programs free of charge to their participants. One of the initiative's primary goals was to enhance opportunity for play and to increase accessibility. Highlights from this year's initiative included Town of Wytheville's Balloon Glow, James City County's Firetruck Duck Drop, Staunton's Foam Party, Arlington's Bollywood Dance, Ashland/Hanover's Summer Splash Party, Chesapeake's Junior Park Ranger program, Henrico's Beats and Treats, among many other creative and engaging activities tailored specific to each locality. Many agencies capitalized on providing free access to their facilities, courts, fields, and pools, which helped remove an access barrier for some participants.

Looking forward, our sights are set on 2026! Mark your calendars for **Sunday, June 21, 2026**, when we look to build upon the successes and address the challenges of 2025 by engaging more agencies and inviting everyone to **PLAY ALL DAY VA**. We want to thank all those agencies that provided feedback and supported the initiative in its second year. See the list of agencies that participated this year!

Arlington County
Augusta County
Blacksburg
Campbell County
Charles City County
Charlottesville
Chesapeake
Chesterfield
City of Fredericksburg
City of Manassas
City of Manassas Park
City of Waynesboro



*Note: The graphic only captures 42 of the 47 agencies' feedback and participation numbers.

Colonial Heights

Danville

Fauquier

Gloucester

Goochland

Greene

Hanover

Harrisonburg

Henrico

Hopewell

James City County

King George

Loudoun County

Lynchburg

Montgomery

Nelson County

New Kent County

Northampton

Orange County

Portsmouth

Powhatan

Prince William County

Pulaski County

Reston Community Center

Roanoke County

Shenandoah County

Staunton

Suffolk

Town of Ashland

Town of Christiansburg

Town of Herndon

Town of Vienna

Town of Warrenton

Town of Wytheville

York County

If you have additional feedback, comments, or recommendations to share for 2026, please reach out to Sarah O'Reilly and Joy Johnson. If your agency didn't participate this year, we encourage you to consider joining the initiative in 2026

to celebrate access to play. It's never too early to plan for the Longest Day of Play, and what better way than to offer access to all that parks & recreation has to offer!

For PADVA questions, contact Sarah O'Reilly

(sarah.oreilly@jamescitycountyva.gov)

and/or Joy Johnson (joy.johnson@jamescitycountyva.gov).

To stay updated, bookmark the PADVA website, vrps.com/padva.



Big Buddies, Little Learners

By Hannah Lagana, CPRP, AFO, Program Coordinator, South Middleton Township

In spring of 2025, The City of Colonial Heights launched a new program connecting high school students in the special education department with volunteer opportunities. The department head sought opportunities for students to gain real-world experience through shadowing and assisting at various workplaces. The Recreation and Parks Department was approached due to its robust therapeutic recreation program, offered by the Recreation Specialist II. Following discussions, it was determined that the department would be an excellent resource for students to volunteer with full-time staff.

Due to scheduling, the city's preschool programs were identified as an excellent opportunity for student volunteers. Students would work alongside both full-time and part-time staff. Once arrangements were finalized, students' families were notified about the new volunteer site. The recreation department provided information, including a flyer outlining expected duties and program themes. Two teachers selected two students each for the four programs, and the teachers accompanied the students, providing support when needed. Students assisted staff with tasks such as preparing and handing out materials, and helping participants with crafts. They also engaged participants in warm-up activities, such as sidewalk chalk drawings, stretching, and playing with ribbons.

Overall, this partnership exceeded expectations. Staff were pleased with the students' level of effort and attention to detail. High school teachers were happy with the real-life, hands-on experience the programs provided, and the students were happy to help out in the community. Participant families loved the collaboration and were happy to work with the students, allowing them to assist their children when appropriate. The students were able to express their personalities through the themed preschool programs and gain practice, as some plan to work with children after graduation.

We often see volunteers from colleges and high school, but it's rare for special education departments to offer community service opportunities through programs. This collaboration benefited staff, students, and positively impacted the community. Other departments with the capability should consider this unique avenue for daytime program volunteers.



VIRGINIA NATIVES BECOME HALL OF FAMERS

*By Joe Williams, Marketing & Outreach Coordinator,
City of Hampton Parks and Recreation*



The Hampton Roads Area is not shy when it comes to stand out athletes. Names such as Michael Vick, Allen Iverson, Francena McCorory, and Tyrod Taylor just to name a few. In 1971 Hampton City Council proposed an idea in which it could highlight athletes for their standout careers as well as ways in which they have impacted the community. Thus “The Athletic Hall of Fame of the Lower Virginia Peninsula” was established to highlight the achievements and accolades of various fields within athletics.

Throughout many years a selected amount has been nominated for this high accolade. Hosted at Boo Williams Sportsplex, the event had over 400 people in attendance, which was an amazing site. Within this year’s selection we had a variety of outstanding figures, ranging from coaches,

gymnasts, runners, football players and community leaders. Phillip Smith III was one of the six inductees we honored this past Sunday. Smith was the first African American head coach within the Newport News and Hampton becoming a pioneer in Virginia. Following alongside him was Maurice Pierce, the current Head Coach for Cross Country, and Track at Hampton University. Pierce has led the teams to 34 league titles and counting. Other names such as Antoine Bethea, and Tami Harrison were also selected by the committee this year. After his 14-year career, and 3 Pro-Bowls, Bethea found ways in which to give back to his community by starting his family foundation; this led to the creation of “The Safe Haven Empowerment Center”. Harrison is a household name in gymnastics; she is a five-time member of the USA National

Team. Further into her career she became a coach in which she was to the state, regional and national level.

This year’s Hall of Fame ceremony served as a powerful reminder of the extraordinary talent that has emerged from the Hampton Roads area, and the lasting impact these individuals continue to have both on and off the field. By honoring their achievements, the community not only celebrates athletic excellence but also the dedication, leadership, and service that inspire future generations to pursue greatness.



UNDER THE BERKLEY BIG TOP

*By Leonto Bass, Division Head of Recreation Programs and Community Wellness,
Norfolk Parks and Recreation*

The Univer-soul Circus made a special visit to the Berkley Community Center, giving our summer camp participants an unforgettable experience! Known for its unique blend of music, dance, acrobatics, and cultural celebration, the Univer-soul Circus is a one-of-a-kind, family-friendly show that shows performers from around the world.

During their visit, the talented cast put on a high-energy pre-production performance that had the entire audience in awe. From jaw-dropping tricks and flips to dazzling costumes, the show was nothing short of spectacular.

Even better, the campers weren't just watching them, they became part of the fun! The performers invited the audience to participate, and the kids couldn't stop dancing, laughing, and cheering for their friends.

The experience left a lasting impression on both the campers and staff. The excitement and joy in the room were contagious, and many described the event as the highlight of the summer. Staff members were thrilled to see the campers so engaged and inspired, and the performance sparked creativity, curiosity, and a deeper appreciation for the performing arts.

It was a day filled with magic, energy, and unforgettable memories that will be talked about for years to come!



WHY SHOULD I GO TO LTI?

By Allison Rankin, CPRP, MPA, Chief Strategist, Fairfax County Park Authority

Are you looking for a new and innovative leadership development training opportunity? VRPS Leadership Training Institute (LTI) is a launchpad for anyone looking to expand professionally. There are seasoned speakers, great topics, and lots of opportunities to make new connections or catch up with old friends. Whether

you are preparing for career advancement in the future or simply continuing to develop professionally where you are, LTI is a can't miss! LTI will help everyone, no matter where you are in your career, learn new skills, find new ways to connect, and expand your network.

Let me share a bit about my LTI experience. I am an introvert. I hate networking. Even though I know attending conferences is fun and I'm going to benefit from them, the thought just gives me anxiety. Fortunately, I didn't let any of that stand in my way of registering for LTI. Within the first hour of the sessions, I could see that this program was going to be different. Maybe I went in with a more open mindset since I was determined to make the most of the opportunity. Yes, there were a lot of new faces. Yes, there was networking. Yes, there was

a lot of participation (often my preferred mode is observer, a.k.a. wallflower). Yes, I was seriously out of my comfort zone. But yes, it was FUN. And yes, I learned A LOT. Yes, I NETWORKED and it was actually GREAT. There are so many ways to be a leader – everyone there spent three days learning and growing together as leaders.

Don't just take it from me, Craig Makufka, CPRP, MS, Recreation Specialist for Prince William County Department of Parks and Recreation, said LTI was his first experience participating in a VRPS leadership-type opportunity. "LTI provided a great experience to learn from, collaborate, and listen to colleagues who are leaders in parks and recreation throughout Virginia. One thing that I took from the LTI experience is that being a successful leader can happen at any job level, and it is important to empower staff to become leaders in their own right." What a great opportunity for a relatively new professional to the parks and recreation industry to have. I have no doubt Craig is using his LTI-learned skills to grow professionally in his agency.



Another attendee from last year, Katrina York, M.Ed, CPRP, CPP, Program Coordinator III, James City County Department of Parks and Recreation, said this about her LTI experience, “LTI taught me so much about myself as a leader and different ways to lead my team. I would recommend LTI to anyone who is looking to sharpen their leadership skills, get out of their comfort zone or learn more about themselves as a leader, all while having a lot of fun doing it.” Katrina said LTI gave her a safe space to explore and learn by having many opportunities to work with people she’d never met. Since LTI is a smaller group than most conferences, and is built around participation, there is no hiding – everyone is front and center, together.

LTI is held every two years, so don’t pass it by this year thinking “I’ll just go next year instead.” Take hold of your opportunity and register now for this amazing program. I promise, you will be happy you did!



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PRESS RELEASE

DANVILLE EARNS 'NATURE EVERYWHERE' STATUS, ADVANCING ACCESS TO NATURE FOR ALL



By Maggie Wiles- Outdoor Program
Coordinator and Briana Shelton-
Public Relations Specialist

Danville has been designated as a “Nature Everywhere Community,” the first city in Virginia to earn this distinction. This recognition is part of the Nature Everywhere Community Action Challenge, a partnership between the Children & Nature Network, the National League of Cities, and KABOOM! aimed at ensuring children have access to nature where they live, learn, and play. Danville joins a network of more than 80 cities across the country committed to creating equitable access to nature, especially for children who have been historically excluded from outdoor experiences.

“Being nationally recognized as a Nature Everywhere Community is a great achievement for Danville,” Bill Sgrinia, director of Danville Parks and Recreation, said. “We know there are many benefits for children that have access to Nature based learning and play. Danville Outdoors, and all the partners involved, is a great example of a group coming together to make a difference for our community. We’re proud to join a national movement that prioritizes the health, well-being, and future of our children.”

This recognition highlights Danville’s

dedication to creating safe, inclusive, and enriching outdoor spaces that support childhood development, academic success, and community well-being.

“The evidence is clear: spending time outdoors in nature is essential for children’s healthy development,” said Sarah Milligan-Toffler, president and CEO of the Children & Nature Network. “From supporting academic and social-emotional learning to enhancing physical and mental health, children thrive when they can play and learn outdoors. By completing the Nature

Everywhere Community Action Challenge, Danville has showcased its commitment to providing these essential benefits to children in the community.”

The Danville Outdoors initiative has been central to this achievement. Led by Danville Parks and Recreation, this initiative is powered by a broad coalition of partners, including the Dan River Basin Association, Danville Science Center, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Master Naturalists, the Danville Master Gardener Club, the Garden Club of Danville, the



Gabriella Garden Club, and Danville Public Works. These groups work collaboratively to provide meaningful, hands-on outdoor learning experiences across the city.

"We couldn't have succeeded without the support of our local partners and city departments," Maggie Wiles, outdoor programs coordinator for Danville Parks and Recreation, said. "By working together, we can provide unique outdoor educational opportunities to our schools and community. We're excited to continue learning from other cities and build on our efforts as a Nature Everywhere Community."

A key initiative within Danville Outdoors is the Ballou Park Reforestation Project, which aims to restore the park by planting trees to replace the more than 100 trees lost over the past 80 years. The inaugural tree-planting event drew more than 250 participants, including local families and youth, who learned tree-planting techniques from the city arborist and explored available outdoor resources. Inspired by this success, Danville Outdoors extended its outreach to local schools, leading to a tree-planting event for 75 third graders from Schoolfield Elementary.

"Connecting children to nature helps foster a sense of belonging and responsibility in their community." Krista Hodges, director of Environmental Education at the Dan River Basin Association, said. "We're excited to be part of this national movement and learn from other cities as we work together to engage kids with the outdoors."

Danville Parks and Recreation's Junior Naturalist program, which partners with Danville Outdoors, guides children through local parks as they learn about native wildlife, wetlands, plants, and insects through hands-on exploration. Young participants are



already embracing this connection.

"When I think of Danville, I think of the river and of the otters," Raven Searce, junior naturalist, said, citing how having access to nature through the Junior Naturalist program makes Searce feel "joyful and happy."

Looking forward, Danville Outdoors is focused on expanding access in underserved areas and Danville Public Schools. The team is actively pursuing grants and additional designations, including recognition as a Bee City, which will support pollinator gardens and sustainability education.

Through the national Nature Everywhere Community network, Danville will benefit from shared resources, success stories, and insights from other participating cities, fueling continued growth and impact in outdoor education and environmental efforts.

For more information about the Danville Outdoors team, please contact Maggie Wiles, Danville Parks and Recreation Outdoor Programs Coordinator, at wilesmc@danvilleva.gov.



About Danville Outdoors

Danville Outdoors is a community-based initiative created to bring together all aspects of outdoor recreation and conservation in a collaborative process. Partnering with other community organizations has allowed Danville Parks and Recreation the ability to create a community hub for outdoor services and resources. Current partners include the Dan River Basin Association, Danville Science Center, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Master Naturalists, Danville Master Gardener Club, the Garden Club of Danville, Gabriella Garden Club, and Danville Public Works. Each partner is currently active in Danville and surrounding areas to provide outdoor experiences to our community. Danville Outdoors offers numerous programs, initiatives, and events to educate our community on environmental education and opportunities in the city limits.

About the Children & Nature Network

The Children & Nature Network believes, and research proves, that regular time outdoors is essential for children's healthy development. The non-profit organization leads a global movement of leaders, educators, practitioners, and parents working to ensure equitable access to the benefits of nature everywhere children live, learn and play. Learn more at childrenandnature.org and get connected on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and The Trailhead, a free online community for global children and nature leaders.

MAKING A SPLASH AT SUMMER CAMP!



By Emma Poff, Program Coordinator, Christiansburg Aquatic Center

The Christiansburg Aquatic Center's summer camp program has operated for nearly 15 summers. Each year, the dedicated Fins Summer Camp staff works tirelessly to create exciting themes and engaging activities for every camper. The program's success continues to grow within the community and over the course of eight weeks, the Christiansburg Aquatic Center welcomed 240 campers to Fins Summer Camp. Every week introduced a unique theme that brought new energy and excitement to camp. From the prehistoric thrills of Jurassic World to the hometown pride of Town Spirit. One highlight of the summer came during Town Spirit week, when campers had the exciting opportunity to meet Patricia Colatosti, the Town of

Christiansburg's Environmental Program Supervisor. Together they explored one of the area's natural streams and discovered how these waterways support local ecosystems. Campers learned about the importance of stream health, the wildlife that depend on these habitats, and what

they can do to help protect natural water sources for future generations. Community is at the heart of Fins Summer Camp. Though the camp lasts only a few short months each year, the connections made and memories shared leave a lasting impact that stays with everyone long after summer ends.



ELDEN THE BEAR: WHEN A REAL-LIFE VISITOR BECOMES A PARKS & REC SENSATION



By Reid Okoniewski, Marketing & Communications Specialist, Town of Herndon Parks and Recreation

When a black bear was spotted in the heart of Herndon, Virginia in early June, the town's response was swift, safe, and... strategic. Rather than letting the moment fade, the parks and recreation department built a full summer engagement campaign inspired by this unexpected visitor. Elden the Bear became the department's newest "employee."

This article recaps the success of that campaign, which proved that with a little creativity and a lot of teamwork, even an urban bear encounter can become a catalyst for community building, brand enhancement, and playful fun.

A Summer Star is Born

On June 9, a real black bear found its way to Elden Street, right outside the Herndon Community Center. After it was safely relocated by local and state officials, the department recognized the opportunity to create something memorable.

Herndon Parks and Recreation developed Elden the Bear—a fun, family-friendly mascot designed to reflect the curiosity and warmth the community showed that day. From branding and illustration to programming and communications, Elden was shaped to feel like a genuine part of the team.

By late June, we officially welcomed Elden

as our summer staffer, complete with an introductory video, social media rollout, and planned appearances throughout July.

What Elden Did in July

With July as Park and Recreation Month, the town once again became Elden's playground and our platform to connect with the community in new and refreshing ways. Here's how we brought him to life:

1. "Where's Elden?" Scavenger Hunt

Elden was hidden in plain sight across our parks and facilities, encouraging residents to explore new locations while



snapping photos and tagging us online. This simple activation led to a steady stream of user-generated content and community interaction.

2. "Elden Says" Safety Tips

From sun safety to park rules, Elden helped us share educational reminders through posters and social posts.

3. Coloring Pages and Stickers

We distributed Elden-themed coloring pages at camps, events, and the Herndon Community Center. Kids were excited to color their new favorite bear and even adults got in on the fun. Limited-edition stickers also made their way into town events and giveaways.

4. Event Appearances and Themed Signage

Whether promoting Town Square Tuesdays or reminding visitors about summer events, Elden made visual cameos in all sorts of communications. His presence strengthened event branding while keeping things light-hearted and family-oriented.

Why It Worked

Elden became more than a character, he became an ambassador. The campaign worked because it:

- Leaned into storytelling. Instead of telling the public what happened, we invited them to join the next chapter.
- Was cross-functional. Every part of our department, from camps to customer service, got involved with the effort.
- Embraced seasonal flexibility. Elden was framed as a summer staffer, allowing for natural transitions as the season ends.

For a campaign born from real-life spontaneity, its execution was rooted in strong planning and a willingness to embrace the moment.

What's Next for Elden?

While Elden only planned to stick around during the summer, we're officially announcing that he's not going anywhere! Elden will remain a fixture in the Town of Herndon Parks and Recreation Department for quite some time. Scavenger hunts and coloring pages were only the beginning.

A Call to the Profession

To my fellow parks and recreation professionals: not every bear in a tree is a bad day.

Sometimes, your town's most unpredictable moment can become its most unforgettable. With the right strategy, a bit of humor, and full buy-in from your team, even the most chaotic spark can lead to meaningful engagement.

Elden reminded us that joy, curiosity, and storytelling are some of the strongest tools we have.

So the next time something unexpected happens, lean in. You might just find your own Elden.



A Personal Reflection **on the Role of Parks and Recreation in Positive Youth Development**



By AJ McCage, M.S., CTRS, Therapeutic Recreation Coordinator II, Henrico County Recreation and Parks

When you tell someone outside of the field that you work in parks and recreation, the reactions are often familiar - a polite head nod, a casual “Oh, so you play outside all day?” or the ever-popular, “Like the TV show, right?” These responses usually come with a smile, but they also reveal just how little people truly understand about our work within a community.

It's easy to see how people arrive at these ideas - thanks to TV portrayals, the flashier moments of ribbon cuttings, or the fun photos from summer camps on social media. They see the visible highlights, but not always the depth. And honestly, it's not their fault. It's hard to see the magnitude of the work we do, especially when it comes to youth development.

We are not just program planners or providers of affordable childcare.

We are youth workers. Mentors. Community builders.

And our role in shaping young people has never been more critical.

Parks, People, and Positive Youth Development

Our field is uniquely positioned at the intersection of community and connection. As a society, we now understand that **Positive Youth Development (PYD)** is a powerful framework that doesn't just help young people “stay out of trouble” — it helps them thrive. And when you pair PYD with the accessibility, consistency, and creativity of parks and recreation, the results can be transformative.

PYD invites us to focus less on fixing and more on **strengthening** —emphasizing the importance of **belonging, leadership, opportunity**, and most of all, **support** (Lerner et al., 2005).

I came to understand this more deeply during my time in Clemson University's Youth Development Leadership graduate program. As I studied the theory and research behind the work I was already doing in recreation, everything started to click. I finally had the language to describe the outcomes I had witnessed for years in the

field. What I once called “good programs” were, in fact, examples of developmentally rich environments — spaces where young people were growing in confidence, responsibility, and connection.

The 6 C’s That Changed the Way I Work

One concept that especially stuck with me is the **6 C’s of Positive Youth Development**. Dr. Lenner and other researchers’ work highlights six essential outcomes that young people need in order to flourish:

- **Competence** — Building real-life skills
- **Confidence** — Gaining self-worth through challenge
- **Connection** — Forming positive bonds with adults and peers
- **Character** — Developing integrity and responsibility
- **Caring** — Fostering empathy and kindness
- **Contribution** — Engaging in meaningful roles and service

I imagine that if you’ve spent any time in youth programs, at least one of these categories sparks a memory of how one of your participants stepped up, spoke out, or showed growth in unexpected ways. But here’s the deeper question: **Are we designing programs that intentionally nurture all six of these outcomes?**

If so — amazing. You should be sharing those stories, training others, and advocating for more resources.

If not — ask why. What’s missing? What could shift?

Reflecting on the Work: The Bravery of the Early Years

When I think back to my early years in parks and recreation, I remember how brave I was. Not that I’ve lost that bravery — but I do miss the boldness that came with being unafraid to fail publicly, often brushing off missteps as part of being young and learning. I was constantly trying new things. I didn’t always get it right, but I owned it when things didn’t work.

I pulled teens into projects and involved schools. I listened differently. I experimented. I built bridges between youth and staff—and I did it all with the belief that a small group of young people could have fun while changing their community. Not to mention I was in desperate need of volunteers, and I couldn’t get adult participation. Maybe it was easier for me because I felt like I could appeal towards a younger population.

Looking back, I now realize I was practicing PYD before I had the vocabulary for it.

And that’s true for so many professionals in our field. We’ve been doing the work.

PYD in Action: Real Programs, Real Impact

Consider a youth leadership program where teens take the lead in planning and running a community clean-up — on the surface, it looks like just another volunteer project through the parks and recreation department. But beneath that, they’re gaining real-world experience in planning, perseverance, collaboration, and empathy.

Or picture a skatepark outreach initiative. A part-time staff member shows up every day — not to run a program, but simply to be there. They learn names, listen to stories, and build trust through consistency. That steady presence becomes a source of stability, and over time, a vital connection. That’s youth work in its purest form.

And one of my favorites: the traditional summer camp counselor. Often equipped with only basic training, they design activities they hope the kids will enjoy — gym games, arts and crafts, group challenges. Then they come back and do it all over again the next day. What they’re really doing is creating a safe space for kids to explore their interests, express themselves, and maybe discover something new. For some youth, especially those facing instability at home, these counselors might be the only adult that truly engages with them all day. Right in front of us, they’re making a lasting impact.

These aren’t hypothetical. They’re real examples happening in communities right now — many within our own departments—and they’re scalable with the right mindset.

If you’re working in this space, I hope you take pride in your role, even if you notice differences in how you operate. I hope you share your stories. And I hope you continue to be brave — even if it means learning, failing, and growing along the way.

Because what we do matters.

And the youth we serve?

They deserve our very best.

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UNCOVERING THE SECRETS OF PLAY REQUIRES STRATEGY AND STRUCTURE

By Greg Cronin, MPA, CPM, CPRP, Manager, Claude Moore Park, Loudoun County Parks, Recreation and Community Services

“Now, for the first time in history, the children of entire industrialized nations, especially American children, are losing their natural outdoor grounds for play and forgetting how to engage in free, spontaneous outdoor play. The consequences are profound” (Frost, 2010).

Play is an important part of how children grow. It is a universal phenomenon that has been passed down from generation to generation as a societal, expressive, and educational practice. Developmentally, it provides an opportunity for younger children to create and rehearse fundamental skills such as learning how to walk or to understand what personality traits people have. In later adolescence,

research reveals play is a critical part of problem-solving and includes the formation of boundary setting, appropriate physical interaction, and the ability to use creative imagination.

By definition, the motivation behind play is pleasure. If left alone, children of all ages typically have a reasonable ability to create (either healthy or unhealthy) some sort of self-originated type of activity. This unstructured time is important because it allows children to gain a better understanding of their environment. It allows youth the freedom to be creative and make up rules while learning important concepts. Some of the unintended consequences of this process

are innovation, the ability to deal with stress, collaboration, and functionality of peer relations.

The problem now is children do not have sufficient time to play. Because of rigid schedules that diminish free time, technology that promotes self-absorbed entertainment, and a social environment that no longer promotes free play, children are spending an inordinate amount of time sitting inside being entertained by a screen. Play is not a luxury we should ration, but rather a crucial dynamic of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development for children of all ages (Elkind, 2007). Our society is now trying to cope with the challenge of reduced

opportunities for unstructured play with the realistic constraints of single-parent families and the pressure to perform at high levels.

Camp directors frequently tell me their staff spend too much time checking their phones, or they wait for someone to tell them what to do during downtime. According to them, one of the big areas of concern is staff being able to create spontaneous play during nonscheduled activity periods. Usually, a few staff are great at implementing spur-of-the-moment ideas, but when they are not available, programming stagnates. This behavior is to be expected as some staff are coming from a world where self-gratification is often the norm and putting individual desires aside is not a priority. How can this problem be addressed and what can you do to help?

Be Part of the Solution

Fortunately, you can be part of a very dynamic and simple solution: help campers learn how to play. A huge part of being successful at camp is knowing how to play and realizing what you can learn from its intended outcomes. But if camp is fun and you get to play every day, why is the job so challenging? Many campers come to camp without the benefit of having had recess at school. In a 2014 study from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) entitled “Bridging the Gap,” the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found only five states required daily recess for elementary school students (Center for Disease Control, 2014). Another study by the CDC revealed only 21 percent of American youth meet the current guideline of 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day (health.gov, 2016). These alarming statistics mean not all children who come to camp will know how to play.

Campers (and some staff) may not understand the unwritten rules of play etiquette, so teaching them presents a potential process challenge. The key to showing campers how to play is to first assess your own comfort level in presenting activities, then choose games (established or made up) that will be effective given your level of teaching experience. Be genuine when leading activities, even if it means admitting you don’t know how to do something. Knowing what the campers are gaining from an activity is far more important than obsessing over rules. Challenge: try looking at a traditional game or field differently and then make up your own version of what can be played.

Find the Right Balance

Finding a balance in activities will help you to achieve intended outcomes. Intentionally mix individual activities with ones that feature interaction with other group members and when appropriate, let campers be a part of the decision-making process. Campers are much more likely to participate if they have input into what they are doing. Camp is the perfect place for children to learn how to play because unstructured time gives you a chance to model intentional leadership behavior by promoting individual and group choices. Try finding opportunities to do that during meals, line-ups, special events, cabin time, rainy days, etc.

Teaching the proper way to play is fundamental to the camp experience because it represents how important life skills are transferred from the camp to the camper. You are the catalyst that conveys this message, and how you do it is as meaningful as what you do. In his book, *What Children Learn through Play*, George Morrison outlines six key developmental areas that camp-aged children can experience through the parameters of play (2008):

1. Learning concepts — like using all senses to help make informed decisions and putting logical-mathematical theories to use by teaching time (before, after), series, and classification.
2. Developing social skills — sharing, taking turns, negotiating, compromising, and leading.
3. Developing physical skills — using fine and large group muscles. While some camp activities combine both, it is important to offer specific ones for each.



4. Practice language skills through conversation— taking turns, listening, using appropriate responses, finding ways to express feelings, verbally reacting in stress situations like sports or ropes course.
5. Enhance self-esteem— by demonstrating accomplishments and how they relate to other group members.
6. Master life situations and prepare for adult life — learning how to be independent, individual thinking, making decisions, cooperating, and learning how to be inclusive.

Your schedule will include activities such as dance, swimming, soccer, archery, ropes course, etc., which are examples of primary activities. These program choices are the main reasons campers sign up for camp. Most parents do not enroll their children in camp to increase listening skills, but it is important to interpret these intended consequences for campers. Your ability to maximize the activity takeaways is dependent on how well you understand the value of play. For some children, acquiring the skills needed to interact in a camp community can be a daunting task. Learn how to take advantage of your camp experience by interpreting the guidelines each activity has to offer and using them to create teachable moments. It will help break up each camper's schedule and give the group a chance to practice cooperation and collaboration.

Play gives campers the opportunity to become empowered by going first, mastering a skill, or making a friend. This is not always the case in school or doing other activities outside of camp, so your insight into making sure these developmental areas are included will help close the gap between what campers are thinking and how they execute.

Now that parameters have been established, you need to add implementation methods. To help campers process the information, make sure you present play in a user-friendly format. Keep it simple and change how you lead campers by:

- Giving them time to explore- this might mean factoring in down time or teaching creative ways to use camp resources.
- Informally guiding them- using existing camper skills, you can give suggestions, propose different scenarios, or add the secret weapon of mystery
- Ask them questions- change your leadership style by framing activities with probing statements which reflect what campers do and say to help gauge fun, frustration, or friendship.

- Providing a demonstration- remember you do not have to be an expert in everything so ask for help on areas outside of your expertise.
- Setting up a self-guided experience for the campers- be patient and let the activities drive the group focus.

Your methods should vary and reflect the group's developmental needs while being fun.

Get in There

To maximize play time with your campers, you must participate. This means being involved in activities by being physically, intellectually, or emotionally present. If you are talking to someone else, sharing too many stories, looking at your phone, or paying attention to your own interests, you are not available. Great counselors find a way to be interactive with daily tasks. You need to approach each day with the idea you are going to establish meaningful relationships through maximum participation. Here are some ways to show your commitment: help campers to plan, come up with alternative ideas, bring in other staff, lead cheers, learn new skills along with your campers, assist specialists with teaching, create a group or division special event, be on a team, and above all, be able to set limits.

Child development specialist Dr. David Elkind says when adults unite play, love, and work in our lives, we set an example that our children can follow. That just might be the best way to bring play back into the lives of our children and build a more playful culture (Elkind, 2008). Any kind of play you choose (social, informal, indoor, outdoor, pretend, or free-for-all) needs to have boundaries. When you are actively engaged in activities, keep the danger of letting things get out of control in check by constantly gauging the over-stimulation factor. This increases your chance for success because participation allows you to spontaneously alter the rules to meet intended outcomes.

Today's parents are looking for value beyond the camp season. By understanding how play affects camper growth and knowing why children are facing limited opportunities throughout the year, you can exceed these expectations by choosing the right parameters for appropriate individual and group play. Come to camp ready to make a difference and know the transitions you make during play will be the foundation campers will use for a lifetime of decision making.

Example: Intended Play Outcomes through Archery

Traditional Goals include:	Intended Outcomes through Play
Safety	Being respectful toward the instructor, listening, and gaining respect for the environment
Learning about the bow and arrow	Duplicating a sequence of skills, working on muscle development, practicing eye/hand coordination, and learning history
Range commands	Following instructions, patience, taking turns, concentration, understanding a sequence
Scoring	Integrity, cooperation, being honest, self-improvement
Fun	Appropriate responses, camaraderie, sharing, decision making, self-esteem, and transition to life skills.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the definition of play?
2. Why is getting time for unstructured play important?
3. What are some developmental areas campers can experience through proper play?
4. How are campers empowered by play?
5. What implementation methods can you try to meet the campers' developmental needs?

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VRPS FALL 2025 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Visit
<https://vrps.memberclicks.net/upcoming-events>
 for the complete VRPS Calendar of Events.



VRPS MEMBER News

Credentials (New or Renewed Certifications)

Andrea Kiehle

It is our pleasure to inform you that Andrea Kiehle has been awarded the credential, Certified in Volunteer Administration, and is entitled to use the designation "CVA" through December 31, 2030. The CVA is the only internationally recognized credential in the profession of volunteer administration and is valid for a 5-year period before renewal. To earn this designation, applicants demonstrate the achievement of 80 points in the areas of education, professional experience, and the application of core competencies. Successful applicants become candidates for the CVA who then complete a two-hour examination testing knowledge, application, and analysis of skills in six competencies related to the mobilization and leadership of volunteer engagement. Successful CVAs also pledge to work within the professional code of ethics. Andrea joins a select group of over 1100 professionals worldwide who currently hold this credential.

Please join us in welcoming her to the community of those Certified in Volunteer Administration.



Making Moves (Promotions/New Job)

Hannah Lagana

In June I finished my third year with the City of Colonial Heights. At the start of July, I moved back to Pennsylvania to start a new job as Program Coordinator in South Middleton Township. This was a difficult decision to leave not only my job, but my community within Virginia.

We decided to move to help care for my father-in-law. While I am excited to take on a new role with a new community, I will miss everyone within VRPS and Virginia! I always felt welcome in VRPS and felt right at home amongst other professionals who want to make a positive change in their community. Thank you to everyone who has helped me work on various projects, including getting the Outdoor Resource Group off the ground and turning it into a wonderful resource. This is not a goodbye, just a "see you later."

Also — Credentials (New or Renewed Certifications) Hannah Lagana
In June I passed my CPRP!



Jerrold Hurr

Jerrold Hurr was promoted to Parks Administrator in April 2025. With over 20 years of experience in



parks and recreation operations, Jerrold has served in three divisions - parks, centers and recreation services. Prior to his promotion, he was the Operations Manager at the James City County Recreation Center, where he oversaw daily operations, served as the Department's liaison to Risk Management and managed the County's Working Towards Wellness program. Congratulations, Jerrold!

Awards

AJ McCage, M.S., CTRS

AJ McCage, who leads the Therapeutic Recreation section and Inclusion Services for Henrico County Recreation and Parks, has been named a recipient of the Jacob Leonard Mission Award—a meaningful recognition presented to individuals or organizations that have made a significant impact in advancing the mission of Jacob's Chance.

In her role, AJ oversees countywide inclusion processes, facilitates community-based therapeutic recreation programs, delivers disability and inclusion trainings, builds key partnerships, and manages inclusion support across camps. Her dedication ensures that individuals of all abilities have equitable access to recreation opportunities throughout the county.

Jacob's Chance is a nonprofit organization devoted to enriching the lives of individuals ages 5 to 40 with developmental, intellectual, and physical disabilities. Through a wide range of inclusive programs—including athletics, enrichment activities, and outdoor adventures, the organization promotes personal growth, connection, and a sense of belonging.

The Jacob Leonard Mission Award, named in honor of Jacob Leonard—whose life inspired the founding of Jacob's Chance—celebrates those who have furthered the organization's mission by creating meaningful, accessible opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Over the past three years, AJ and the Jacob's Chance team have worked collaboratively to expand adaptive programming and build a stronger foundation for inclusion in the community. Their efforts have resulted in innovative program development, broader access, and a partnership that continues to break down barriers and foster inclusion for all.

This recognition not only honors AJ's contributions but also highlights the power of community partnership and the lasting impact that inclusive recreation can have in creating a more welcoming, connected world for everyone.



MEMBER PROFILE

Lizzie
Shores



Place of work: Spotsylvania Parks & Recreation

Position: Special Events and Leisure Programmer

Education: Bachelors of Science in Sports and Recreation Management from James Madison University (Class of 2019)

Professional memberships: VRPS Central Service Area (At-large board member), VRPS Special Events and Marketing Resource Group, VRPS Young Professionals Network, member of NRPA

Hometown: Born and raised in Lynchburg, VA, but currently living in Fredericksburg, VA

Family: Tyler (husband), Carson (son – 4 months old), and Bear (dog)

Favorite experience on the job: Planning fun events for the community and working with our small preschool program (Grow & Giggle) – For our First-Responders themed Grow & Giggle, we had the local fire department and sheriff's office come out and talk to the kids about safety, what to do in an emergency, and who to look for...plus they were able to go inside a fire truck, ambulance, and squad car!

Toughest part of the job: Dealing with the weather during events/swim lessons

Favorite recreational activity: Spending time with family and friends, playing games, and going on walks with husband, baby, and dog

Favorite book: The Hunger Games (the whole series – can't pick just one!)

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be? Back to Australia! Visited there in 2016 for Study Abroad and absolutely loved it. The weather was great, and the people, food and culture were awesome...just don't want to do the LONG plane ride again.

OR Antarctica – I want to visit all 7 continents...so far I've been to North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia – just missing South America, Africa, and Antarctica



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All of these workflows are equipped with the technologies we all love — Google Pay, Apple Pay, digital wallet-friendly memberships and tickets, card readers enabled with tap-to-pay, and offline capabilities.

This year, our technologies will be used by over 30 million residents across the country, including departments like Vail Recreation District and the State of Maryland DNR.

We know how much hard work and compassion go into serving your communities — we see you and appreciate all that you do. If there's anything we can do to help your operations or if you have any questions about Kaizen, please feel free say hello.



Pulaski County, VA

Facilities, programs, and services for the whole community.

"Working with Kaizen has been a refreshing experience. The team is incredibly approachable—always open to our questions and receptive to new ideas. They've gone above and beyond to collaborate with us on software modifications that meet our department's unique needs... We're excited to continue our partnership as we branch into new lines of memberships, athletics, and program offerings—knowing with confidence that Kaizen will be ready and willing to grow right alongside us."



Jenna Kinder, Assistant Director
Pulaski County Parks and Recreation

www.kaizenlabs.co | info@kaizenlabs.co | 646-904-4259

2025 VRPS BOARDS, KEY LEADERS AND STAFF

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President	Tabitha Martinez, CPRE	Hopewell Recreation & Parks	804-541-2353	TMartinez@hopewellva.gov
Vice President	Michael Clark, CPRE, AFO	Oxbow	540-915-7272	mike@navigatetheoxbow.com
Treasurer	Steve Torpy, CPRP	Loudoun Co PRCS	703-777-0345	steve.torpy@loudoun.gov
Lay Member	Amanda Walker	Patdart, LP	804-643-0406	acwpinrich@aol.com
Board Member	Matt Spruill, CPRP	Colonial Heights Recreation and Parks	804-520-9392	spruillm@colonialheightsva.gov
Board Member	Kat Fish, CPRP	Prince William County Parks & Recreation	703-792-8203	kfish@pwcgov.org
Board Member	Justin Bullock, CPRP	Greene Co. Parks and Recreation	434-422-6059	jbullock@gcva.us
Board Member	AJ McCage	Henrico Recreation and Parks	804-833-5064	Mcc159@henrico.gov

SERVICE AREA CHAIRS

Central	Emmy Richards	Ashland Parks & Recreation	804-299-3236	erichards@ashlandva.gov
Eastern	Angie Sims	James City County Parks & Recreation	757-259-5403	Angie.Sims@jamescitycountyva.gov
Northern	Julie Kagler	Herndon Parks and Recreation	703-435-6800 x2119	Julie.kagler@herndon-va.gov
Southwest	Jason Bookheimer	Danville Parks and Recreation	434-799-5150	bookhjl@danvilleva.gov
Western	Jered Hoover	Shenandoah County Parks & Recreation	540-459-6777	jhoover@shenandoahcountyva.us

RESOURCE GROUP CHAIRS

Aquatics	Michael Suggs	Prince William County Parks & Recreation	703-792-8623	Michaelsuggs87@gmail.com
Health & Wellness	Kristen Tolj	James City County Parks and Recreation	757-259-4176	Kristen.tolj@jamescitycountyva.gov
Park Operations	Alister Perkinson	James City County Parks & Recreation	757-207-0002	Alister.Perkinson@jamescitycountyva.gov
Seniors	Elaine Thompson	Colonial Heights Recreation and Parks	804-520-9220	thompsons@colonialheightsva.gov
Special Events & Marketing	LaTanjia Snelling	Reston Community Center	703-390-6180	Latanja.Snelling@fairfaxcounty.gov
Therapeutic Recreation	Tracy Newsom, CTRS	James City County Parks & Recreation	757-259-5354	Tracy.newsom@jamescitycountyva.gov
Young Professionals Network	Katie MacCammon	Fairfax Parks & Recreation	703-591-3689	Katherine.MacCammon@fairfaxva.gov
Outdoor Resource Group	Hannah Lagana	Colonial Heights Recreation and Parks	804-520-9390	bellh@colonialheightsva.gov
	Thomas Schoenauer	Loudoun County PRCS	571-367-8362	Thomas.schoenauer@loudoun.gov

ENTERPRISE GROUP CHAIRS

Annual Conference 2025	Cindy McFall	Roanoke Parks and Recreation	540-853-1198	Cindy.mcfall@roanokeva.gov
LTI 2026	Brian Gannon, CPRP	Reston Community Center	703-390-6170	Brian.Gannon@fairfaxcounty.gov
Awards & Citations	Leslie Bowery, CPSI, CPRP	Winchester Parks & Recreation	540-662-4946 x16	Leslie.Bowery@winchesterva.gov
	Tracy Newsom, CTRS	James City County Parks & Recreation	757-259-5354	Tracy.newsom@jamescitycountyva.gov
Foundation	Darrell R Crittendon	Norfolk Parks and Recreation	757-259-5377	Darrell.Crittendon@norfolk.gov
Professional Education	Arlana Fauntleroy, CPRP	James City Co. Parks & Recreation	757-259-5377	Arlana.Fauntleroy@jamescitycountyva.gov
Magazine Editor	Rebecca Johnson, M.Ed., CPRP	Hopewell Recreation & Parks	804-541-2353	rjohnson@hopewellva.gov

VRPS STAFF

Bailey Kasten	Executive Director	804-730-9447	bailey@vrps.com
Lori Haislip	Office Manager	804-730-9447	lori@vrps.com

BOARD LIAISONS

SERVICE AREAS

Central	AJ McCage
Eastern	Matt Spruill
Northern	Steve Torpy
Southwestern	Mike Clark
Western	Justin Bullock

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Membership Restructure.....	Mike Clark
Marketing & Communications.....	Tabitha Martinez
Strategic Plan	Kat Fish
Mentorship Program	AJ McCage
DEI Task Force.....	Justin Bullock
Rural Agency Network.....	Justin Bullock

RESOURCE GROUPS

Aquatic	Tabitha Martinez
Health & Wellness	Justin Bullock
Park Operations.....	Mike Clark
Senior.....	Steve Torpy
Special Events & Marketing.....	Tabitha Martinez
Therapeutic Recreation.....	AJ McCage
Outdoor.....	Mike Clark
Young Professionals.....	Kat Fish

EVENTS

LTI.....	Matt Spruill
Annual Conference.....	Tabitha Martinez
Directors Conference	Todd Brown

COMMITTEES

Awards & Citations	Kat Fish
Nominations & Elections.....	Justin Bullock
Professional Education.....	Steve Torpy
Student Initiatives	Justin Bullock
Legislation	Steve Torpy
Governance	Kat Fish
PADVA	Matt Spruill
I Play Too	Mike Clark

VRPS Preferred Vendors



ACTIVITIES/ ENTERTAINMENT

Busch Gardens & Water
Country USA
Kings Dominion
USTA Mid-Atlantic

AQUATICS

Berry and Company
National Pools of Roanoke, LLC
Sparks@Play
Vortex Aquatic Structures
Waterplay

DESIGN/CONSULTING/ CONSTRUCTION

BerryDunn
Foresight Design Services
Gordon
Keystone Sports Construction
Kimley-Horn & Associates
LDDBlueline
Lose Design
McGill Associates
The LandTek Group
Timmons Group

DIGITAL/SOFTWARE

Ankored
CivicPlus
Kaizen Labs
MyRec.com
REC Technologies
Vermont Systems
Xplor Recreation

EDUCATION

Share The Air

FACILITY AMENITIES

Abacus Sports Installations
Bonitz, Inc.
Brock, USA
DrillPickle
Flexirocks
Genesis Turfgrass
Mosca Design
Musco Sports Lighting, LLC
Pioneer Athletics
Public Restroom Company
R.J. Thomas Manufacturing
Rogers Breakaway Base System
Romtec, Inc.

Sealmaster
Smith-Midland, Inc.
Tarkett Sports Indoor
Zoll Medical Corporation

PLAYGROUND/PARK

All Recreation
Carolina Recreation
Coastal Recreation
Commercial Recreation
Products
Cunningham Recreation/
GameTime
Kompan
MaxPlayFit, LLC
Playcraft Systems
Playground Specialists, Inc.
Site Concepts
Sparks@Play

UNIFORMS/APPAREL

Big Green T's
TSI Promotionals

LOOKING FOR KEY TEAM MEMBERS?

Visit the VRPS Job Board and Career Center!

Posting jobs to the Job Board is a FREE service to VRPS members, and you can have your ad featured for \$25. Visit www.vrps.com and click on **Job Board and Career Center** at the top of the main page — to post a job you will need to log in with your website credentials.

For information and instructions on posting to the job board you may visit the link below.

[Job Board Posting Instructions](#)