



Vibrant parks and athletics help revive communities

Neighborhood sporting events can sometimes feel like a Norman Rockwell slice of Americana: dusty Little League slides under the hot summer sun, diving catches in pee wee football, the newest generation of Michael Jordans driving to the hoop on the corner playlot.

But the reality in low-income communities is often quite different. Parks are more likely to be dangerous and deteriorated. Equipment and facilities are lacking. Organized athletic programs often have little foothold, without the financial resources or human capital to push them forward. In many of these communities, neighbors struggle just to keep a roof over their heads. Sports programs feel like a luxury.

It's no accident that people and places trapped by poverty tend to be sicker than their more affluent neighbors. Lack of health care, lack of healthy food, scarcity of healthy housing, and proximity to high crime are certainly all part of that equation. But so, too, is lack of green space and limited opportunities for physical activity.

“Disadvantaged communities need safe parks and sports programs, just as they do good schools, affordable housing and local grocery stores,” noted Beverly Smith, senior program director for LISC’s Youth Development and Recreation program.

That’s why LISC has made revitalized city parks, new athletic fields, multipurpose sports facilities, and a wide range of recreational programs a key component of our *Building Sustainable Communities* strategy. Indeed, a ground-breaking partnership with the National Football League to fund community athletic fields was among LISC’s earliest *Building Sustainable Communities* efforts, expanding on the housing investments already made in many struggling areas and moving toward a comprehensive approach to community development.



“The [LISC/NFL Grassroots](#) field program has been a remarkable effort that is contributing to healthier, safer recreational opportunities in underserved neighborhoods across the nation,” Smith said. “Numerous young people now have an opportunity to participate in sports, connect with positive adult mentors and challenge

themselves while building confidence and learning valuable life lessons, such as teamwork."



What's more, local LISC investments in athletic facilities and community sports programs are helping residents reclaim neighborhood parks from the gangs and drugs that have too long dominated them. That has been the case in Newark, where [Nat Turner Park](#)—the largest city-owned park—once stood as a dilapidated crime haven that threatened the surrounding Central Ward neighborhood. It depressed local property values, discouraged commercial investments and impacted the ability of nearby schools to both protect and promote the well being of their students. It wasn't just dead space. It was dangerous space.

Not so today. Thanks to a wide-ranging partnership between the city, the Trust for Public Land, LISC/NFL Grassroots Program and many others, safe walking paths snake through the nine acres of green space. Playground equipment and picnic areas dot the landscape. A new track pulls in hopeful runners. A new athletic field hosts soccer matches and football games.

"It sounds simple—clean up and restore a neighborhood park," said Judith Thompson-Morris, senior program officer with Greater Newark LISC. "But we're not just talking about new flowers or adding a swing-set. We are talking about reclaiming a sense of community, of helping anchor genuine quality of life gains for this area."



Much the same is true in Chicago, where LISC support for safe parks, new athletic fields and sports-based youth development programs like [Hoops in the Hood](#) and BickerBikes—a program that teaches young people in the city's Humboldt Park neighborhood to repair old bikes and use them for transportation—have been transformative. Summer music programs, citywide cycling programs and crime reduction efforts all focus on reclaiming public space and introducing healthy athletic activities as the centers of many low-income communities quality of life.

Targeted athletic programming is very much in keeping with LISC/Chicago's strategy of working with local leaders to upgrade the entire neighborhood. It's grassroots and it's comprehensive, a strategy that includes but transcends real estate to involve schools and parks, health and safety, the arts and—yes—recreation. "The impact on young people is pretty amazing," noted Keri Blackwell, senior program officer with LISC/Chicago. "Community-based sports programs are reframing the way residents view their neighborhoods and each other." By introducing a street-basketball program, upgrading park space or just providing opportunities for unstructured play, residents are reclaiming public space for public purpose and building bridges across racial and geographic divides.

That's the hope in Indianapolis, too, where the [Super Bowl 2012 Legacy Project](#) promises to help revitalize the long-disinvested Near Eastside neighborhood. The Legacy Project is a partnership between the 2012 Super Bowl Host Committee and Indianapolis community development groups that has generated more than \$100 million to help implement Near Eastside's comprehensive quality of life plan.

"The important thing about the Legacy Project is that it's not just a stand-alone, one-shot investment from the NFL," noted Bill Taft, Indianapolis LISC executive director, who led the effort to bring the NFL to Near Eastside. "It is part of the broader revitalization of this neighborhood. That's what the NFL recognized—that its investment could build on what was happening with housing and schools and economic development to help move redevelopment to the next level. The

impact is that much greater because it is part of the larger whole."



That's been true in the Providence area as well, where Rhode Island LISC has supported significant park restoration efforts that range from neighborhood pocket parks to LISC/NFL Grassroots athletic fields to the nine-acre Riverside Park in Olneyville. [Riverside Park](#) is part of a far-reaching development that includes public bike paths along the Woonasquatucket River, playgrounds, open greenspace and high-quality affordable housing. It is the result of a strong collaboration among LISC, Olneyville Housing Development, Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, and the Providence Police Department, among others.

"As they are in any community, these pieces are interconnected," said Nancy Howard, senior program officer with Rhode Island LISC. "Safe streets make parks more accessible. Those parks give kids a place to play and for seniors to safely walk and exercise. They encourage families to put down roots in the neighborhood and help draw business to local shops. We aren't just

investing in playground equipment. We are investing in quality of life."

The same story plays out in Kansas City-where LISC helped transform [Waterway Park](#) from a base for prostitution and drug deals into a centerpiece of a safer, healthier community-and in Washington, D.C., where [Marvin Gaye Park](#) and its Riverside Center are now marked by live music, after-school programs and youth mentoring rather than gun shots and gang fights, thanks in part to LISC and its local partners. Parks like these help create healthy, flourishing communities that are good places for families to raise children and bustling business environments for entrepreneurs to set up shop.

"These are the aspects of community that we all look for when we think about where we want to live," Smith stressed. "Lush, active urban parks and the local programs they host shouldn't be an affluent luxury. They help families live happier, healthier lives. They help their communities to thrive, even in the toughest of times. They are an important part of sustainable communities."

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