Spotlight: Sustaining ParkRx Santa Cruz County Through Funding and Leadership Transitions

Background

ParkRx Santa Cruz County is a partnership between clinicians, parks and recreation, public health, and nonprofit organizations. This initiative connects patients to outdoor recreational activities like swimming lessons, group exercise classes, hikes, and other opportunities that can improve their well-being. This resource describes how ParkRx Santa Cruz County was able to continue its work after funding cuts by diversifying its funding sources and transitioning to a new leader.

Sustaining ParkRx Santa Cruz County

Since its launch in 2021, ParkRx Santa Cruz County has primarily been funded by Santa Cruz County Public Health through California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) grant. Santa Cruz County Public Health also led and convened a working group composed of County Park Friends and the City of Watsonville Parks & Community Services. This working group coordinated partners, administered funds, provided technical assistance, and supported evaluation efforts.

In July 2025, a federal bill ended funding for SNAP-Ed. As a result, Santa Cruz County Public Health ended its leadership role in the ParkRx project in April 2026. This shift resulted in a funding gap and leadership transition. Because the ParkRx project had built strong partnerships and diverse funding streams, the project was able to continue despite the loss of SNAP-Ed funding. To sustain the work, the partners used these key strategies:

Transitioning project leadership. The partners transitioned leadership from Santa Cruz County Public Health to County Park Friends. This shift allowed the partnership to maintain momentum and avoid disruption to its activities.

Diversifying funding sources. ParkRx Santa Cruz County recognized the need to diversify its funding base. The leaders understood that having a single funding source posed a risk and sought out multiple funding streams so that if one organization lost funding, others could still fund the work. They helped partners apply for funds and strengthen their applications by highlighting alignment across partner organizations. For example, Santa Cruz County Public Health partnered with County Park Friends to apply for the Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments grant—a local funding source for pressing community needs. County Park Friends was awarded the grant, which will fund the ParkRx project's intake and navigation process for three years. Leaders also regularly engaged partners in conversations about which aspects of the project they could maintain with little or no funding. As a result, when SNAP-Ed funding was cut, ParkRx Santa Cruz County was prepared to use other sources of funding to continue key activities.

Keys to Success

ParkRx Santa Cruz County's ability to continue its work amid funding cuts and leadership transitions can be credited to several successful strategies.

Assessing capacity of potential leaders. When Santa Cruz County Public Health had to withdraw from its leadership role, the working group met to discuss the transition and determine who had the time, interest, and capacity to assume leadership. The Executive Director of County Park Friends was selected to lead the group because she had the necessary bandwidth, a strong interest in and passion for the work, and fundraising experience that positioned her well for the role.

Key resources: Transition Planning

Review the *Leadership Succession Planning* and *Knowledge Management for Coalitions* resources for support with transition planning.

Providing tailored support for new leaders. Because the County Park Friends' Executive Director was an active member of the working group, she was familiar with many of the job responsibilities. Santa Cruz County Public Health focused the transition on areas where she had less familiarity, providing guidance to ensure a seamless handoff.

Building trusting partnerships for collective impact. Santa Cruz County Public Health played a critical role in establishing trust across partner organizations. The agency regularly shared public health data and research to help partners understand how the ParkRx project improves patient health and well-being. It also trained clinicians on how to discuss the benefits of recreation with patients and refer them to the ParkRx project. By celebrating partners' strengths and assigning roles aligned with their skills and strengths, the partnership secured the buy-in and commitment that were essential to sustain the initiative during a period of change in funding and leadership.

Developing a knowledge management strategy. To maintain institutional knowledge, members of the working group developed a knowledge management strategy. They created a shared drive where working group members and partner organizations could access materials such as trainings, templates, process documents, and resources to run the project. The group identified documentation gaps and created materials to fill them. For example, Santa Cruz County Public Health updated a training slide deck with the most recent research highlights on how time outdoors can benefit specific patient groups, and suggested talking points providers could use in conversations with patients. They also trained the working group on how to access relevant data—for example, on the percentages of overweight and obese youth by census tract—for future trainings or fundraising.

Key resources: Planning for Sustainability

Review the *Sustaining Coalitions* and *Grant Seeking from Foundations* resources for support with sustainability planning.

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