

Through organized and unorganized play, sports are one of the best ways to engage in physical activity.

For children and adults, sports can offer a range of health, educational, mental, social, and emotional benefits. Participation in sports varies across the nation due, in part, to barriers that can limit equitable access.

Established in 2022 by the Montgomery County Council, the Montgomery County Sports Advisory Committee has identified several areas that have contributed to gaps in sports participation across the county, such as availability and the cost of renting facilities, equipment, and transportation.

The Sports Advisory Committee has also identified several opportunities to help close these gaps and improve equitable access to sports. These opportunities include:

1 **Collect and analyze information** on the existing infrastructure for sports in the county as well as any associated enablers and barriers to use and participation;

2 **Increase awareness and engagement with county residents** about the range of available sports programming; and

3 **Spotlight individuals** who are embodying and promoting the importance of equity for and access to sports in the county.

This 2024 Annual Report provides more detail on these opportunities and recommends actions the County Council can take to help address them.



Sports participation is a significant predictor of young adults' participation in sports and physical fitness activities.
—Aspen Institute¹

Background

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the World Health Organization have pointed to sports participation as an important strategy for promoting physical activity in youth. Studies have consistently shown that participants in youth sports programs tend to be more physically active, expend more energy, and spend more time in moderate to vigorous physical activity than their non-sport participant peers. Similarly, children are more active when involved in organized school sports programs.

However, studies also show that children tend to drop out of sports programs as they transition from childhood to adolescence, due to lack of enjoyment, time constraints, and lack of opportunities for participation. Furthermore, the Aspen Institute’s Project Play Initiative has highlighted that various populations are negatively impacted more than others in terms of physical activity.

For example, African American and Hispanic youth are the least likely to be physically active and the most likely to be active for a minimum of 60 minutes one day per week or less. In addition, African American youth are less active than Hispanic youth, who are less active than White youth. Furthermore, the federal government does not measure the physical level of American Indian and Alaska Native youth. Across all races and ethnicities, girls are less likely to be active than boys. African Americans and Asian Americans girls, for example, are the most sedentary, engaging in physical activity no more than two times a week. And youth with disabilities are 4.5 times less active than other youth. Finally, sports participation among youth living in households with the lowest incomes (\$25,000 or less) is about half that of youth from wealthier homes (\$100,000 or more).²

“I learned that it is important to do physical activities. It was a wonderful experience for me where I had a lot of fun.”
—Participant, Girls on the Run



Montgomery County mirrors national data that show wide disparities in youth sports participation by family income, gender, race, and ethnicity.³ The County has various entities that play a role in youth sports, including the provision of programming and the management of facilities. This includes:

- Montgomery County Government
 - Recreation Department
 - Community Use of Public Facilities
 - Montgomery College
 - Revenue Authority
- Montgomery Parks (Maryland–National Capital Park and Planning Commission)
- Montgomery County Public Schools
- Local municipalities
- Private nonprofit and for-profit organizations⁴

The Sports Advisory Committee’s recommendations involve one or more of these entities given their role in the county’s youth sports landscape.

The committee is statutorily required to prepare and submit to the County Executive and County Council an annual report regarding sports participation in the County, including:

1. factors that affect sports participation in the County, including the availability of and access to athletic fields, facilities, and sports; and
2. recommendations to improve the quality, quantity, and variety of sports opportunities and facilities in the County.

The Committee is also required to formally recognize teams and athletes in the County who win state or national championships, or who represent the United States in international competition.

Recommendations

To help address gaps in sports participation and improve equitable access to sports across Montgomery County, the Sports Advisory Committee recommends the Montgomery County Council take the following actions:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Conduct a participation case study



Conduct a case study in a single Montgomery County Zip code (determined with guidance from the county's Community Equity Index and Energized Public Spaces Plan) with historically limited participation in youth sports to better understand the conditions that create and negate barriers.⁵ This should include the availability of facilities and equipment, fee-waiver programs, and transportation. Given that income is a key driver of early participation, learning from communities with families who generally have lower levels of income and who also are disadvantaged through other socio-economic factors should strengthen the county's understanding of limited sports participation in these communities.⁶ The County Council could then use the results of any such case study to minimize barriers and improve participation. In conducting this case study, the County Council should consider the following:

- **Number of facilities** – Zip codes with more athletic facilities are likely to show more sports activity than zip codes with fewer athletic facilities.⁷
- **Facility cost and reservation process** – The cost of facility use and the Community Use of Public Facilities booking process presents challenges for providers of youth sports.
- **Location of programs** – The location of sports programs is another barrier for families, especially for households with limited access to transportation.
- **Program cost** – Program cost is a barrier for families. Over a third of respondents to a 2020 Montgomery County Office of Legislative Oversight survey reported paying over \$2,000 annually for one child to play sports. Some respondents noted that even the most affordable programs charge over \$100 for the season, which is out of reach for many families.⁸

RECOMMENDATION 2

Implement a public awareness campaign



Develop and implement a dual-purpose, countywide public awareness campaign to promote the benefits of sports participation while also increasing appreciation of, connection with, and sense of belonging for Montgomery Parks and Recreation facilities. The campaign should include visual reminders within the facilities about the value of parks and of sports participation to a community, including a sense of respect for the natural environment and the fellow residents. The message should include aspirational ideals related to respect of the physical space, fellow participants, coaches, officials, and the games themselves.

Montgomery County has already conducted successful public awareness campaigns using social media and other methods aimed at residents of all ages, background, and languages on related community topics. For example, the County implemented Move Your Way, a physical campaign from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to promote the recommendations from the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.⁹ Additionally, given the diversity of county residents, the campaign could also be used within Montgomery Parks facilities to promote sports to specific groups with historically low participation. For example, one-fifth of Montgomery County residents are Hispanic.¹⁰ A campaign could target Hispanic mothers to showcase how sports can positively impact their daughters' lives, as many first generation immigrants need to know the value of sports before letting their children play.¹¹



RECOMMENDATION 3

Expand the reach of county’s community outreach specialists



Expand the reach of Montgomery County Recreation Community Outreach Specialists to increase sports participation county-wide.

The county currently has Community Outreach Specialists who support Montgomery County Recreation’s mission to provide high quality, diverse, and accessible community-based programs, activities, and services that serve the recreation and leisure needs of the community. There are opportunities to explore new partnerships with existing organizations that provide sports in underserved areas of the County or to underrepresented youth.¹² These Specialists could engage with other government agencies, private entities, and non-profit organizations to collect, evaluate, and distribute opportunities to foster community engagement and better allocate resources.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Grow the county’s Community Liaison Program



Add resources to the Montgomery County Recreation Community Liaison Program, including creating and filling a new Data Analyst position, increasing available funding, and revisiting hiring policies and classifications for positions.

If hired, a Data Analyst would collect and analyze data specific to recreation programming and community engagement efforts. The County should also build capacity for the Community Liaison Program through an increase in funding for operational and personnel costs. Montgomery County Recreation should also review the hiring policies and classifications for the Outreach and Marketing Specialists to ensure that it is not limiting the likelihood of receiving talented applicants through outdated or misaligned requirements for those positions.



RECOMMENDATION 5

Publish a sports programming directory



Publish a directory of available sports programming offered by the County, municipalities within the County’s jurisdiction, and private providers that would be publicly available online or via a mobile app.

Sports programs may not take place near residents’ schools or homes. In addition, the location of sports programs may make it difficult for some families who do not have access to transportation to get to and from programs.¹³ Sports participation advocates have suggested the creation of a digital directory that allows users to find nearby sites for sport programs, integrated with internet maps, and including quality measures to assess the programs themselves.¹⁴ The directory would increase awareness of both public and private providers that provide sports programming to Montgomery County residents.

The directory would also provide Montgomery County Recreation and other providers with information on where programs are offered. This information could help inform discussions about how to best target available County resources and outreach for sports programs, and could also be used to increase collaboration between public and private providers.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Implement a sports recognition program



Implement an “Unsung Heroes” awards program to recognize champions of youth sports in communities across Montgomery County.

The County Council directed Sports Advisory Committee, as part of its enabling legislation, to create a sports recognition program. The program should recognize individuals or groups who have made significant, yet under-recognized, contributions to the development and growth of sports programming within and throughout the County. Specifically, the recognition should be of those who have made an impact in areas where there is limited programs or other opportunities for residents to play and compete together. The program should also include an annual ceremony hosted during the Montgomery County Sports Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony. Montgomery County Recreation would collect the nominations via an online form on its website and promote the program to residents.

Next steps

In looking ahead, there are several other topics that the Sports Advisory Committee has also started to address and will continue to examine in the coming year. The committee believes the Montgomery County Council should keep their attention on these topics as well.

Field use studies

The committee has both observed and heard concerns from the community about the number and availability of fields in the county, especially outdoor baseball and softball fields as well as an indoor multi-sport facility. These facilities are facing greater requests for usage, particularly at the high school level, in response to increase in sports and non-sports related activities. The ongoing dialogue about future policies for natural grass versus synthetic turf fields may result in additional challenges as well. In addition, the County Council has initiated a taskforce to consider building a new, multi-use sports complex, and suggestions have been raised about the need to incorporate a community use model for such a complex.

Permit processes and fees

Montgomery County Parks has initiated a study of the process for permitting its facilities across the county, including a range of courts, fields, and other facilities. This study is expected to be completed in 2025, including an internal review process for its first phase and community engagement for its second phase where both the Sports Advisory Committee and other user groups will be involved. Additionally, the Community Use of Public Facilities, which is another government entity that permits public school athletic facilities, hired a contractor to complete an initial study of its facility fees and will be determining next steps in response to that study.

“ I learned how to be more effective on the field as well as a teammate, how to not give up and continue to work hard to achieve my goal, and how to remain calm during intense situations.”
—Participant, RemerBall

Coaches and officials

The committee heard about the need for improved recruiting, training, and other professional development opportunities for coaches and officials. The quality of coaching impacts how much exercise players get, children’s anxiety and self-esteem, and attrition from sports. However, most youth coaches have not received training in sports skills or motivational techniques, according to a 2022 *National Coach Survey Final Report*.¹⁵ Areas most desired for training focused on traditional coaching practices. Ensuring coaches are better prepared to address the diverse and multi-faceted needs of youth remains a growing priority.¹⁶ A shortage of officials to manage games is also a serious problem throughout the country and here in Montgomery County. Nationally, more than 70 percent of new officials quit within three years, chiefly because of abuse from spectators and coaches.¹⁷ The County needs to work to recruit, train and support new officials to keep pace with changing demands in schools, sports, and other areas.

Community engagement

The committee is interested in strengthening youth voices on the committee. This can be achieved by directly surveying youth to capture feedback on their experience participating in sports across the county. The committee could help to analyze this feedback and share any findings, as appropriate, with coaches, officials, school athletic directors, county leaders, and others to improve the youth sports participation in facilities overseen by Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery County Recreation, and Montgomery Parks. The committee could also consider creating opportunities for student-athletes to engage directly with its members.¹⁸



Notes

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18. The Aspen Institute, *Sport for All, Play for Life*.

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For more information about the Sports Advisory Committee, visit www.montgomerycountymd.gov/rec/about/sac.html.

