

# IMPROVING YOUTH SPORTS: ROLE OF CITIES AND COUNTIES

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT



## OVERVIEW

Youth sports in America are largely delivered by community-based organizations, training and competing mostly at publicly owned recreational spaces. So, even more than states and the federal government, municipal and county governments can shape access to and the quality of programs in communities.

Key mechanisms that they can employ include:

### Collaboration with Schools and Sports Providers

City and county governments often team up with local schools and community groups to coordinate and enhance youth sports opportunities. These efforts can involve sharing resources, coordinating schedules and promoting collaboration among stakeholders.

- ✔ Fairfax County, Virginia established an [Athletic Council](#) in the 1970s that still meets monthly to coordinate and manage youth sports across the area. With representatives from every district and the most popular sports, along with top county officials who oversee public sports spaces, the council addresses challenges collaboratively and works to reconcile competing interests.
- ✔ Montgomery County, Maryland, formed a [Sports Advisory Committee](#) in 2022 to address equity gaps in play options among youth. Composed of residents and public officials from schools and parks departments, it also works to coordinate field use and to make better use of county resources.
- ✔ Des Moines reduced the fee for many afterschool sports to \$5. The city's Parks and Recreation Department [partnered](#) with its schools to increase participation among low-income kids, with the goal of having all children involved in an extracurricular activity by the end of 5th grade.

### Permitting and Regulation

City and county governments may establish permitting processes and regulations for sports events and activities held on public property ("power of the permit"). This can include requirements for safety measures, insurance coverage and adherence to zoning ordinances.

- ✔ Cincinnati used its permitting authority to require all teams using public fields and parks to get at least one coach trained in safety, skills, communication and respectful behavior.
- ✔ Houston in 2022 became the first city to [adopt](#) the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports, a statement of minimum conditions for serving youth. All sport providers that apply for permits to use public spaces need to acknowledge their understanding of the eight rights.
- ✔ Baltimore required that all high schools hire certified [athletic trainers](#), develop emergency action plans (EAPs) with fire departments and boost coach training. The 2023 regulation came in the wake of the death of a football player and also prompted new state regulations on EAPs.
- ✔ New York City in 2007 barred the use of metal bats in high school baseball. With safety as its catalyst, the City Council passed a [resolution](#) in 2021 to require its Public Schools Athletic League to have a medical professional and ambulance at every high school football game and practice.

## Funding and Grants

Local governments may provide funding and grants to support youth sports programs, leagues and organizations operating within their communities. These funds can be used for equipment purchases, facility rentals, coach training and program development. They can also offer discounts to programs that serve vulnerable populations or are from or best serve the community.

- ✔ In 2022, Philadelphia provided five years of funding to a youth sports [collaborative](#). The \$2.93 million appropriation supports research to locate gaps in local sports and funds pilot programs that pair city schools and parks with youth sports organizations. In her FY2025 budget, the Mayor called for an additional [\\$3.2 million](#) in funding for youth sports programs.
- ✔ [Minneapolis/St. Paul](#) applied pandemic relief funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to eliminate fees attached to most youth community sports, sparking a 38% surge in basketball registrations in 2022. St. Paul will employ another \$1.5 million in ARPA money to renovate recreation centers. [Montville, Connecticut](#) also used some relief funds to purchase new football helmets for its high school team, and [Umatilla County, Oregon](#) devoted \$200,000 to youth sports projects.
- ✔ After finding that only 19% of its youth population gets the recommended amount of daily exercise, King County, Washington, in 2024 offered \$3.5 million in grant [funding](#) to schools, nonprofit organizations and other groups that improve access for kids to sports, play and the outdoors.

## Facilities Management

Local governments often own and operate parks, community centers and athletic fields. They can allocate resources to maintain and improve these facilities, making them accessible for youth sports programs and activities.

- ✔ Cambridge, Massachusetts has partnered with the city's popular non-profit soccer association by providing up to 20 fields a day at no cost. Through its Department of Recreation, the city manager's office also maintains all the fields and offers the group a small annual subsidy. Sign-ups have [tripled](#).
- ✔ [San Francisco](#) oversees 179 playgrounds, 82 recreation centers, 220 parks and 4,000 acres of open space. Leaders claim that it's the first major American city where all residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park, a function of the Parks Department's commitment to outdoor spaces.
- ✔ Summit, New Jersey's Department of Community Programs [collaborates](#) with the city's Board of Education to discount the cost of its recreation programs for low-income kids. It also works with youth sport organizations and schools to coordinate field and gym use and [cooperates](#) with neighboring towns to offer sports instruction for children with special needs.

## Community Outreach and Engagement

Local governments can engage with residents through community events, workshops and outreach efforts to promote the benefits of sports participation and encourage involvement in programs. They can also work to address barriers to participation, such as transportation issues or lack of awareness about programs.

- ✔ [Chicago](#) launched a public campaign in 2021 to spur more physical activity among teenagers with materials from [Move Your Way](#). The city was one of 10 communities across the country to pilot the promotion, using fact sheets, posters and YouTube videos.
- ✔ [Boston](#) created a CDC-funded campaign in 2015 that got 10,000 children involved in afterschool programs. The city's Public Health Commission collaborated on the effort with Harvard University and the Greater Boston YMCA, with a focus on reducing health disparities in five low-income neighborhoods.
- ✔ Miami-Dade County, Florida launched its [Fit2Play](#) program, an afterschool program held in parks to promote health and fitness and build life skills among vulnerable kids. Sponsored by the recreation department, and created in partnership with the University of Miami, communities that participated showed a reduction in the rate of [arrests](#).

Read our Aspen Institute [report](#) by Linda Flanagan on the different models used by three communities.  
Read Aspen's [research](#) on how school leaders can collaborate to develop more students through sports.