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## Parks for All

Parks in Vancouver seek to welcome and serve people all along the gender spectrum

By Danielle Taylor

A central working principle of parks and recreation is equal access for all, and agencies have done an admirable job of providing high-quality services for people in their communities regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious identity, physical ability or other factors contributing to diversity. But what about gender? In most places, gender is accommodated on a purely binary system, with “male” and “female” offered as the only options on forms, in public restrooms and changing rooms, on sports teams and through innumerable other outlets. However, gender identity isn’t as easily defined as that for many people, and the traditional system leaves many people feeling excluded or unwelcome.

Recognizing this, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation in British Columbia recently convened a team of advocates representing the city’s trans and gender-variant community to advise them on ways to better serve this historically neglected population, and the group spent the better part of a year assessing the community’s needs and ways

the Vancouver Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture could improve its services. In April, the Trans and Gender-Variant Inclusion Working Group (TGVIWG) presented its findings in a report titled “Building a Path to Parks & Recreation for All: Reducing Barriers for Trans & Gender-Variant Community Members” (<http://bit.ly/tgviwg>). This docu-

ment identifies barriers that limit equal access to park and recreation services for members of the trans and gender-variant community and offers recommendations for park operations that will improve the park experience for this community and increase their ability to enjoy Vancouver’s many public green spaces and opportunities for active living.

“We are all assigned a gender at birth,” says Metha Brown, co-chair of the TGVIWG. “Some of us come to discover, often very early on, that our true gender does not match our assigned gender. Many recreational programs only have highly gendered options, which can be unwelcoming or unsafe for trans folks. This means that members of our community who could really benefit from well-

ness and recreational activities are staying home.”

The TGVIWG was formed by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation in May 2013 and included eight members and allies of Vancouver’s trans and gender-variant community as well as one park board commissioner. They quickly set out to gather information and divided their process into two phases: community engagement and community review. During the initial community engagement phase, which centered on the fall and winter months of 2013, the team conducted site tours, held workshops and community meetings, conducted polls and online surveys, and led training for recreation staff members. In addition, the group interviewed park and recreation staff at all levels to identify existing access barriers as well as ideas for improving facilities and services. These opportunities generated a lot of feedback for the TGVIWG to analyze and consider as they went into their community review phase, held in the spring of 2014 and consisting of community meetings, online surveys, focus groups and advisory committee meetings. As they gathered their findings and prepared their report, TGVIWG members aimed for realism in their recommendations, recognizing budget restrictions and other limitations, but they also sought to provide truly helpful guidance that would best support the needs of the trans and gender-variant community in Vancouver. “We strove to identify high-impact, low-cost strategies that would create more options for all users to access safe space and programs,” says Brown.

The final report, released in April, includes 77 specific recommendations for public spaces, signage, programming, financial accessibility,


forms and literature, human resources and training, community partners and procedures throughout Vancouver’s park and recreation operations. The list includes the following recommendations, to name just a few:

- In the development of all new changing rooms in aquatic facilities, include three separate change rooms: Universal, Women and Men.
- Ensure current program instructors and facilitators receive information on creating safe, accessible and inclusive spaces for trans and gender-variant individuals.
- Ensure inclusion of trans and gender-variant patrons in gendered classes, groups and/or teams.
- Increase rental subsidies for groups that provide existing trans and gender-variant programming.
- Ensure inclusivity of trans and gender-variant youth in children and youth summer camps and other youth programming.
- Develop and implement a public education campaign in advance of changes arising from the recommendations, including registration, space and signage. Explain different terminology (e.g., universal) and trans and gender-variant needs and issues. Work with leaders in language communities to make culturally relevant materials that speak to differing cultural contexts of gender.
- Identify opportunities to attract and retain staff and instructors and make the workplace welcoming, respectful and inclusive of trans and gender-variant staff people.

With each recommendation, the TGVIWG includes a timeframe for when action should be taken. Significantly, the report does not only recommend that physical changes be made to facilities (e.g., addition of universal washrooms and signage), it also offers

specific advice to help improve staff and public interactions with members of the trans and gender-variant community. In addition, the report notes the recommended changes will benefit the broader community as well. For example, universal washrooms can more easily accommodate families as well as users with limited mobility or those who are accompanied by caregivers.

TGVIWG members presented their report at a Vancouver Park Board meeting in April, where the motion to receive the report, create a new Trans and Gender-Variant Implementation Steering Committee to assist staff with implementing the recommendations, and direct staff to provide a status update on implementation progress and key outcomes within one year was carried unanimously by the board. Starting immediately, many of the TGVIWG’s recommendations will be put into action, improving park services for members of Vancouver’s trans and gender-variant community and increasing accessibility and inclusivity for all.

“The Vancouver Park Board saw record attendance at its meeting to pass this policy,” says Brown. “Trans community members spoke eloquently about how much it will mean to finally be able to access safe recreational spaces. Doctors, lifeguards and disability advocates talked about how dramatically this can contribute to creating safer spaces for all users. Mothers talked about how this will help them to access safer spaces and to help them to raise their children in a more progressive world. People have recognized that providing more users with more options will benefit all users and that it is, indeed, a matter of human rights.” 

**Danielle Taylor** is the Senior Editor of *Parks & Recreation Magazine* ([dtaylor@nrpa.org](mailto:dtaylor@nrpa.org)).