

# Parks After Dark

Evaluation Brief

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# Parks After Dark

## Evaluating Program Outcomes and Innovative Strategies

Parks After Dark (PAD) is an innovative Los Angeles County (County) strategy for building resilient communities that re-visions parks as community hubs. PAD began in 2010 at three parks and expanded to twenty-three parks in 2017, evolving into a key County prevention and intervention strategy to promote health, safety, equity, and family and community well-being through cross-sector collaborations.

The parks selected for PAD participation are located in communities that, compared to Los Angeles County as a whole, experience higher rates of violence, economic hardship, and obesity and have fewer resources for physical activity and social gathering (see *Parks After Dark Evaluation Report, May 2017*).

For an eight-week period each summer, PAD extends hours of park operation from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. at participating parks. The program provides opportunities for community members to come together in a safe and welcoming space where they can access quality programming and a variety of health and social resources. PAD offers sports and recreational activities (e.g., swimming, dance), family entertainment (e.g., movies, concerts, arts and crafts,

free meals), cultural and educational programming (e.g., healthy cooking, financial literacy), and employment and volunteer opportunities for youth and adults. PAD also provides resource fairs at which numerous government and community-based organizations connect participants with health, social, economic, and legal resources. Throughout all events, Deputy Sheriffs patrol and engage in activities alongside participants, ensuring safety and fostering positive interactions between law enforcement and community members.

PAD is led by the County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), with strong support from partners, including the County Board of Supervisors, Chief Executive Office (CEO), Department of Public Health (DPH), Sheriff's Department (LASD), Probation Department, Workforce Development Aging and Community Services (WDACS), and many other government and community-based organizations.

This brief focuses on 2017 outcomes and highlights innovative strategies.



# In 2017, PAD was implemented in 23 parks throughout Los Angeles County:

## 2010

Pamela County Park  
Franklin D. Roosevelt Park  
Ted Watkins Memorial Park

## 2012

City Terrace Park  
Jesse Owens Community Regional Park  
Loma Alta Park

## 2015

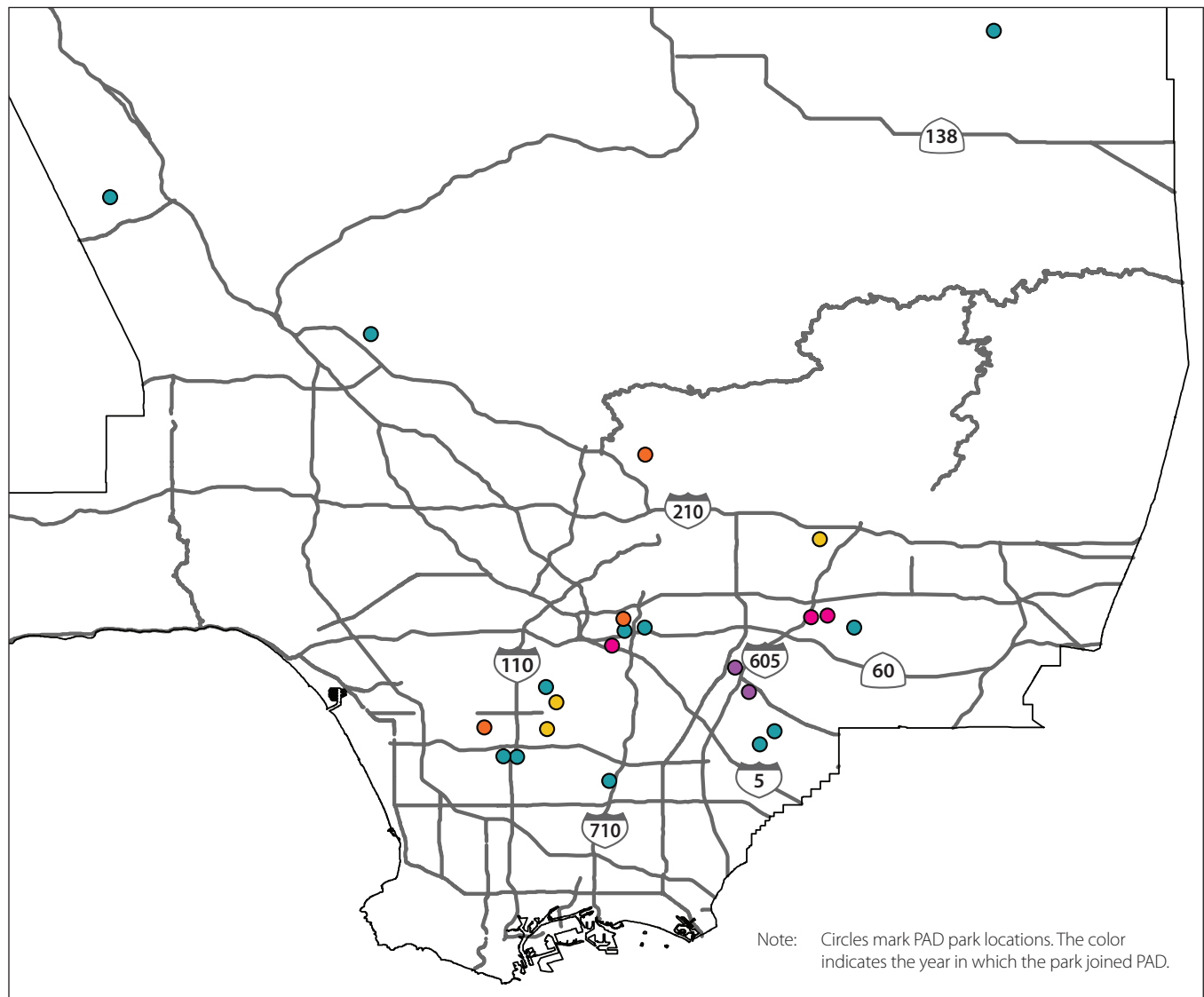
Bassett Park  
Ruben Salazar Park  
San Angelo Park

## 2016

Adventure Park  
Allen J. Martin Park  
Athens Park  
Belvedere Community Regional Park  
Mary M. Bethune Park  
East Rancho Dominguez Park  
El Cariso Park  
Helen Keller Park  
Mayberry Park  
Eugene A. Obregon Park  
Stephen Sorensen Park  
Val Verde Community Regional Park

## 2017

Sorensen Park  
Amigo Park





# GOAL 1: Increase Access to Quality Recreational Programming and Innovative Services

During the summer of 2017, more than 198,000 visits were made to all 23 PAD parks. The program reached the majority of zip codes (64%) in Los Angeles County.

“A family of five attended every night and expressed their gratitude for [having] a safe place to spend time as a family. They later revealed that, financially, they were not able to afford to take the family to the movie theater.”

— PARK STAFF, PAMELA PARK

## Favorite PAD Activities



**26%**  
Movie night



**11%**  
Concerts/music

## PAD Participant Characteristics

**65%**  
Female

**65%**  
Latino

**14%**  
African-American

**34%**  
Ages 0-21

**28%**  
Household income less than \$20,000

Source: PAD participant survey, 2017

## PAD Reach



Source: PAD participant survey, 2017

## Innovation Highlight: Youth Employment and Volunteer Opportunities

Youth workers and volunteers provided program support, including assistance with program set-up and breakdown, registration, scorekeeping for sports events, and more. This helped alleviate park staffing limitations, while providing valuable job experience to teens. The youth enhanced their soft skills and self-confidence, learned to appreciate the value of hard work, connected with mentors and friends, and strengthened their belief in their capacity to positively impact their communities. They were selected from the Los Angeles County Youth Workers List for employment, in partnership with WDACS, and through faith and

community-based organizations. Park staff actively recruited volunteers, many of whom were participants in teen clubs and other park programs.

### PAD employees and volunteers

**17** of the parks hired **55** youth workers.

**22** of the parks utilized **337** youth volunteers.

PAD also provided an opportunity for 309 adults to volunteer.

Source: DPR administrative data, 2017

“This opportunity also allowed for job experience for the teens, because for many of them, it was their first job.”

— PARK STAFF, PAMELA PARK



Youth volunteer serving popcorn during Movie Night at East Rancho Dominguez Park.



## GOAL 2: Increase Collaboration Among Different Stakeholders

DPR is the lead organization for PAD and works in close collaboration with LASD, DPH, the Probation Department, and various community-based organizations and County departments, with strategic support from the Office of Child Protection (OCP) and CEO. Cross-sector collaboration

was supported by the appointment of a PAD Coordinator in 2016. The coordinator oversaw PAD administration, promoted stakeholder engagement in meetings and the community resource fair, and fostered new partnerships and innovative programming for PAD parks.

### Innovation Highlight: Community Engagement



PAD stakeholder engagement and planning meeting at Roosevelt Park.

PAD originated when community members identified the need for summer park programming during the County’s Gang Violence Reduction Initiative planning process in 2009. Each year, DPR conducts stakeholder planning and debriefing meetings at the parks, then uses feedback from participant surveys to shape and improve programming. Regional and park-level planning meetings convened in the

spring of 2017 (prior to PAD’s June kickoff date) encouraged the involvement of County departments, local leaders, and community-based organizations. Undertaking planning in a collaborative and transparent way allowed DPR to build and sustain strong relationships with stakeholders, demonstrated accountability, and contributed to better overall outcomes for communities. In the fall, debriefing meetings are held to discuss successes and lessons learned, share evaluation results, address questions/concerns, and obtain feedback and recommendations for program improvement.

“The meetings were very successful and allowed the park staff to connect with numerous stakeholders and build important partnerships for programming.”

— COORDINATOR, PARKS AFTER DARK

### Innovation Highlight: Probation Youth Programming

The Park Enrichment Program (PEP) was a prevention strategy of the Probation Department to reduce truancies, improve academic performance, deter gang membership, and increase self-awareness among at-risk youth ages 12-18. Participation in the PAD resource fair enabled PEP to provide services at the parks and increased participation of at-risk youth in park programming.

PEP took place at three PAD parks—Ted Watkins, Roosevelt, and Helen Keller—between October 2015 and September 2017. Activities were tailored to meet local community needs and were led by district police and park-based Deputy Probation Officers. PEP provided gang intervention

and gender-specific services; workforce development training and job placement; educational resources; and field trips that exposed youth to educational, cultural, and recreational activities outside of their community. For the PEP officers, providing services at the parks transformed the dynamics of their services and allowed them to build closer relationships with the community and establish greater rapport with youth and families.

“That’s what saved me, getting involved in sports and different things at the parks. It’s the same for them. I can relate and identify.”

— PEP OFFICER



# GOAL 3: Decrease Community Violence and Increase Perception of Safety

PAD was designed to provide a safe space where community members could access high-quality programming and needed services. Evaluation results indicated a reduction in both serious crimes (such as homicide) and nonviolent crimes (such as petty theft) in PAD parks, as well as increased perceptions of safety. These perceptions were largely attributed to the presence of Deputy Sheriffs during PAD and their positive engagement with the community. Among PAD attendees who expressed not feeling safe in their neighborhood, 78 percent said they felt safe at PAD.

## Participants' view of Deputy Sheriffs at PAD

**96%** Agreed PAD improved relationship between the community and Deputy Sheriffs

**94%** Felt safe at PAD programs

**83%** Agreed that the number of Deputy Sheriffs at PAD was just right

Source: PAD participant survey, 2017

## Innovation Highlight: Deputy Sheriff Engagement

Prior to PAD, LASD Deputies patrolled parks primarily in their cars. During PAD, however, Deputy Sheriffs patrolled the parks on foot and joined in activities with participants. Their presence was intended to deter crime and increase perceptions of safety, and to foster more positive and trusting relationships.

The Deputies helped plan and participated in sports tournaments and other special events, conducted safety and self-defense courses, and distributed food and promotional items. Many of the Deputies emphasized that they were “seen as much more approachable” as a result of PAD, creating an important dynamic in which Deputy Sheriffs, park staff, and the community shared responsibility for identifying, preventing, and eradicating safety problems and improving the community’s overall quality of life.

“... The Deputies being on-site, outside of safety purposes, was the repairing of community relations. This is a community that only sees Deputies present when something has gone wrong, so when they are here and are playing catch, interacting without arresting anyone, passing out food to children and families, shooting a jump shot, [or] laughing with the community ... it really bridges the gap.”

— PARK STAFF, VAL VERDE PARK



Deputy Sheriff with PAD youth participants at Val Verde Park.



Deputy Sheriff teaching PAD youth basketball skills at Amigo Park.



# GOAL 3: Decrease Community Violence and Increase Perception of Safety

## Cumulative Crime Reduction, 2010–2017

**Serious and violent crimes**  
(e.g., homicide)



**Nonviolent crimes**  
(e.g., petty theft)



Note: Crime analyses presented in this report are not directly comparable to the *PAD Evaluation Report* for 2016 due to changes in the selection of comparison parks, general increases in crime in 2017, and refinements in methodology.

Source: Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and Los Angeles Police Department data, 2009-2017

“We are in an area where there are two neighborhood social groups who have historically been at odds with each other. However, during our PAD concerts and other entertainment events, these opposing groups were able to come together in one area and enjoy time with their families. Clashes were averted as a result of ‘family time’ at the park.”

— PARK STAFF, ALLEN J. MARTIN PARK

## Innovation Highlight: Interventionists and Parks Are Safe Zones



Deputy Sheriff with Community Intervention Workers at Watkins Park.

“The interventionists interacted very well with both staff and the public at the park. They . . . worked alongside [Deputies] to keep the park safe. They were very good at detecting potential conflicts and resolving them immediately so that situations did not escalate.”

— PARK STAFF, JESSE OWENS COMMUNITY REGIONAL PARK

The Los Angeles County Center for Strategic Public-Private Partnerships facilitated a collaboration between DPR and the City of Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Office (GRYD) to pilot intervention services at Jesse Owens and Ted Watkins Parks, two county parks adjacent to GRYD Zones that were experiencing an upsurge in gang-related crime.

With funding from DPH, Community Intervention Workers (CIWs) engaged in peace-building with gangs,

provided referrals for current/potential gang members to GRYD services, and reached out to at-risk youth and families to invite them to participate in PAD. The CIWs' expertise in gangs and community dynamics, combined with GRYD oversight, provided a seamless response to crime and safety concerns.

Park staff reported that CIWs worked closely with staff and Deputies to ensure safety, anticipated potential conflicts before they escalated, and assisted with programming. The pilot program built a foundation for

future regional collaboration and set a precedent for establishing intervention services at County parks.

The intervention pilot coincided with a community safety outreach project called Parks Are Safe Zones, which was developed by members of the group Westmont West Athens Community Action for Peace to encourage community members to use the parks. The outreach was implemented at these and five other South Los Angeles PAD parks.



# GOAL 4: Increase Physical Activity and Decrease Chronic Disease Risk

PAD offers a wide variety of free physical activity programs in communities with high rates of obesity. If participants in PAD physical activities maintain that level of activity throughout the year, the program will have the potential to reduce the incidence of chronic disease in the community.

## Estimated Reduction in Disease Burden

(estimated across entire PAD population)



Source: UCLA adaptation of Integrated Transport and Health Impacts Model (ITHIM)

## Physical Activity at PAD

**83%** of attendees participated in physical activity (of any form) at PAD.

**55%** indicated both attending PAD at least once a week and participating in physical activity at PAD at least once a week.

**84%** participated in PAD physical activities (of those who did not meet the recommended activity guidelines for their age).

Source: PAD participant survey, 2017

“Thank you for the exercise motivation for the kids.”

— PARK STAFF, JESSE OWENS COMMUNITY REGIONAL PARK

## Innovation Highlight: Walking Clubs

Walking clubs have been a popular PAD activity since the program’s inception in 2010. Each session has been led by DPH staff, who recruited participants and provided them with health and nutrition education during the three-hour session.

Walking club participants at Sorensen Park.

The walking club was designed to be accessible regardless of participants’ past physical activity experience. Participants were encouraged to walk at their own pace and talk with others while they discovered new walking paths and trails in their community.

The walking clubs gave participants new opportunities to get to know one another and to develop a stronger community bond, while creating community champions for healthy living.



“Silvia became our Community Walking Club champion at City Terrace Park. She would be waiting for Public Health to arrive and start the walking club. She brought her children, mom, and neighbors with her to join in the walk. Over the next couple of years, she says the walking club helped her lose over 50 pounds.”

— DPH WALKING CLUB LEADER, CITY TERRACE PARK





# GOAL 5: Improve Social Cohesion and Community Well-Being

PAD provided opportunities for families and neighbors to socialize, spend quality time together, develop positive relationships, and create a sense of community in a safe public space. Rates of self-reported social cohesion and family bonding were high among PAD participants. Of the individuals who identified as not living in a close-knit, unified community, 88 percent agreed that PAD improved their relationship with neighbors.

Family spending time together at PAD Movie Night at Amigo Park.



“I’m glad to see my neighbors come together.”

– PAD PARTICIPANT, ADVENTURE PARK

“Hope you can continue to serve this community with these great events.”

– PAD PARTICIPANT, BELVEDERE PARK

## PAD Attracted Family Participants

- 88%** of all participants attended with children
- 31%** attended with children 0-5
- 57%** attended with children 6-12
- 23%** attended with children 13-18

## PAD Strengthened Bonds

- 98%** of participants said PAD increased chances to spend quality time with family.
- 96%** of participants said programs helped improve relationships with neighbors.

Source: PAD participant survey, 2017

## Innovation Highlight: Park Therapy

The Park Therapy pilot program was designed to provide nontraditional mental health services in a welcoming space; to help overcome stigma around mental health service use; and to support individual, family, and community well-being.

The year-round program began in February 2017 at five parks in South Los Angeles in collaboration with DMH, the South Los Angeles Health Neighborhood collaborative, and DPH’s Trauma Prevention Initiative. DMH used existing Prevention and Early Intervention contracts with the Tessie Cleveland Community Services

Clinic, Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic, and University Muslim Medical Association Community Clinic to provide services. The program offered wellness activities and positive mental health talks, using informal discussion groups and workshop activities to discuss mental well-being. Programs were tailored to community needs and included the mental health mobile game truck, healthy cooking classes, health screenings for older adults, art therapy, fotonovelas, and stress management classes. Mental health screenings and linkage to services were offered during these events.



Families enjoying the game truck provided by Tessie Cleveland Community Services Clinic.

“I just painted because my daughter wanted me to go with her. It felt really good to sit down and free my mind of everything for a moment.”

– ART WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, TED WATKINS PARK

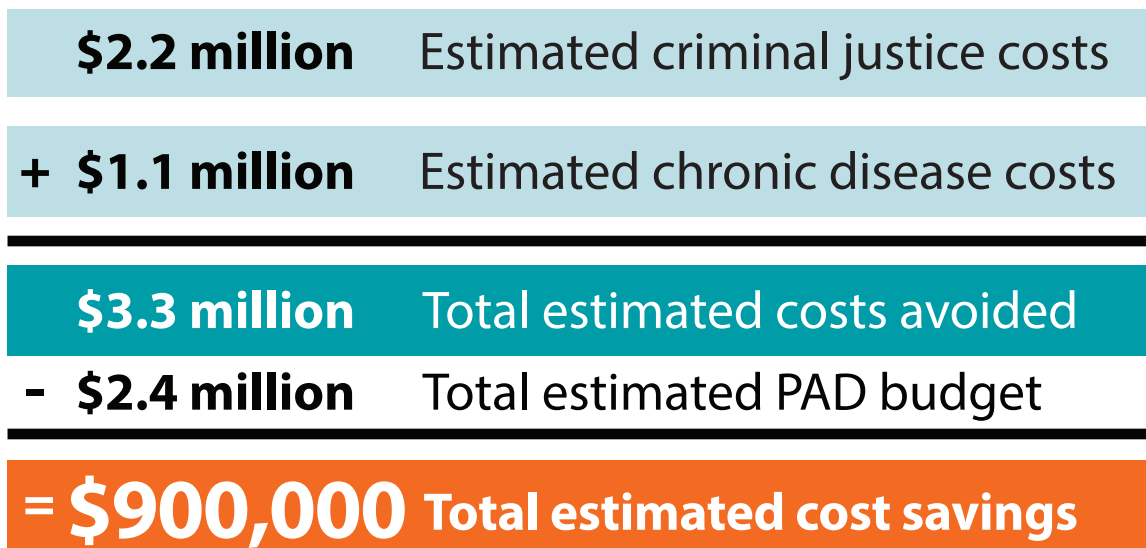


## GOAL 6: Achieve Cost Savings

The evaluation of PAD showed an estimated \$3.3 million in costs avoided associated with the program in 2017. This included approximately \$2.2 million in savings due to reductions in crime (based on reduction of Part I crime using LASD and Los Angeles County Police Department data as presented in Goal 3) and \$1.1 million in savings in health expenditures due to a reduction in morbidity and mortality (based on the ITHIM analysis presented in Goal 4). These savings were \$900,000 greater than the \$2.4 million cost of implementing PAD in 2017.

“PAD shows the value of investing in prevention and that all sectors have a role to play. Parks promote well-being for attendees and also transform how government interacts with community. There’s a lot of untapped potential to leverage parks as community hubs to address a long list of health and social issues, work toward a common mission to promote equity, and realize further cost savings.”

—DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH



Source: UCLA analysis

### Innovation Highlight: Cross-Sector Investments

PAD uses the cross-sector collaboration between County departments and private-public partnerships to fund and support programming. PAD was first conceived as a gang violence prevention initiative when it was funded by the CEO in 2010. DPH also funded PAD from 2012 to 2014 to promote physical activity and reduce chronic disease, and again beginning in 2016 to promote healing and reduce trauma through the Trauma

Prevention Initiative. Beginning in 2016, the Probation Department invested in the expansion of PAD throughout the County as a strategy to help keep youth out of the criminal justice system.

PAD serves as an incubator space for innovative programming to respond to different community needs with each new partner. PAD has been incorporated as a key element of many

County strategic plans and initiatives, including the Los Angeles County Health Agency Strategic Priorities, the Office of Child Protection Strategic Plan, and the County’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative. Additionally, DPR and DPH have received numerous requests to provide informational presentations on PAD statewide and across the country to help other communities implement similar strategies.



# Evaluation Recommendations



Youth workers getting ready for PAD at Pamela Park.

The appointment of a PAD Coordinator in 2016 significantly improved outreach, partner communication, and cross-sector collaboration. Pilot programs, including those highlighted in this report (such as Park Therapy, the Probation Enrichment Program, and Community Intervention Workers), demonstrate the potential of innovative on-site services to address PAD community needs. However, additional effort is needed to sustain and expand initial efforts.

### **Recommendations from the 2016 report that remain relevant and require further effort to achieve include:**

- **Make programming more community driven.**
- **Provide more physical activity opportunities during PAD** and link participants with year-round physical activities to maximize the impact on chronic disease.

- **Use the park as a hub** to link at-risk youth and families with needed services through strategic partnerships.
- **Build infrastructure** for innovative program implementation and evaluation through partnerships or dedicated staffing with expertise across PAD's goals.
- **Encourage the continued engagement of Deputy Sheriffs** at the parks both during PAD and throughout the year.
- **Identify a sustainable funding source** for PAD by further engaging sectors that experience potential cost savings from PAD, such as health care and criminal justice.

**For more detailed data and analysis, see *Parks After Dark Evaluation Report, July 2018.***

## Data Sources

Data sources for this report included PAD participant surveys, LASD and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) crime data, program implementation data from DPR, U.S. Census data, photos and stories provided by park staff and PAD participants, and a key informant interview with the PAD Coordinator.

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## PAD Partners



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