Overview

In 2018, the City of Wilmington’s Department of Parks and Recreation, with funding from Christiana Care Health System, launched the Wilmington Play Streets Program.

Play Streets temporarily closes a neighborhood block to traffic and provides play equipment to create safe, fun, and healthy spaces for children, families and neighbors to connect and play right outside their doors. It gives kids of all ages more space to be active.

The Parks and Recreation Department delivers equipment like balls, jump ropes, hula hoops, portable basketball hoops, soccer goals, mini-golf tees, and badminton nets for unstructured play. Additional City departments and units including Public Works, Wilmington Police Dept., Community Outreach, Finance, Communications, the Mayor’s Office, and City Council work together with Parks and Recreation to help make the program happen.

Play Streets Wilmington is an innovative strategy that is reflective of Delaware’s broader efforts to transform healthcare. The idea to bring Play Streets to Wilmington was born during a meeting in the basement of the William “Hicks” Anderson Community Center in summer 2017, after months of planning by a Healthy Neighborhoods Task Force organized by the Delaware Center for Health Innovation. Healthcare leaders, community members, state and local government, community-based organizations, faith communities, and advocacy groups worked collaboratively across sectors to identify community strategies that could set the stage for health and wellness. The task force aimed to ensure that solutions were locally-tailored to neighborhoods most impacted by poor health outcomes, included the healthcare systems that serve them, and aligned with city priorities underway during the planning stages. Wilmington Parks and Recreation quickly emerged as the lead implementer.

To help evaluate the Play Streets program, information was gathered from seventeen events between June 11 and August 16, 2019. Volunteers counted participants and recorded their thoughts about successes and challenges. Additional information was gathered from program stakeholders during informal discussions. Evaluation activities were coordinated by the Partnership for Healthy Communities (PHC), a Community Engagement Initiative at the University of Delaware, and supported by faculty, staff and students across the university. On-site evaluation was led by PHC Play Streets Summer Fellow, Adaeze Ashiedu.

It is more than just having a fun time. It demonstrates the possibilities of what our communities could be like. I mean, what other event exists where you can play basketball with police officers?

State Senator Elizabeth Lockman
The increasingly popular program drew nearly 1,500 neighbors in 2019, when the roving summer playground was held twice a week at 20 locations across the city. Nearly half of the attendees were children and teens.

After participating in a Play Streets last summer, several neighborhoods got involved in the planning and organizing, some coordinating across several civic associations to help host a Play Streets in their part of the city again this year.

Teens also organized their own Play Streets event at “The Warehouse,” a teen-led co-working and service delivery space in the former Prestige Academy building on Thatcher Street that is part of the REACH Riverside community revitalization effort. The Warehouse aims to create a collaborative culture to revolutionize teen engagement in Wilmington with the vision of supporting confident, competent and courageous young adults ready to take the next step in their lives.

Play Street organizers understand that health is affected by conditions in communities where people live, work, learn and play. When people and neighbors feel safe, valued and connected, and when children have safe places to be active, healthy communities thrive.
By the numbers

In total, 1,472 people attended Playstreets 2019

- 36th&Jefferson: 59
- 24th&Tatnall: 45
- 22nd&Lamotte: 64
- LACC Hilltop: 75
- Stroud Street: 110
- 3rd&Clayton: 77
- Neighborhood House: 65
- Stapler Park: 71
- Bayard Blvd: 99
- 24th&Carter: 115
- 5th&Carter: 20
- 7th&N.Harrison: 103
- The Warehouse (Jul): 25
- Elm Street: 143
- 1800 N. VanBuren: 119
- 8th/7th&Monroe: 96
- The Warehouse (Aug): 186

- Very popular police and kids basketball game
- Rysheema showed off her Double Dutch skills
- Oops! No food available
- Popular bike race sponsored by Urban Bike Project
- Paint Night event indoors overlapped with PS
- Perfect weather, many engaged exhibitors
- Teens led this event
Over 20 community partners including community centers, churches, sports leagues, urban produce stands, non-profits, social services, youth-serving organizations, healthcare providers, schools and local businesses are coordinated to provide services (i.e. healthy meals, water, music, health screenings, EMT services, structured activity hubs, and volunteer support).

Some examples:

- **ShopRite** provided waters for 14 out of 17 Play Streets events; **Urban Acres Produce** distributed free produce at 8 events

- **29 volunteers** provided support at Play Streets events this summer which adds up to about 1,000 hours of service by community members and organizations

- **The Warehouse** spent countless hours on their events, produced their own flyers, hired their own DJ and promoted the event to their peers.

Wilmington police officers, EMTs, Parks and Recreation staff and volunteers, led Double Dutch, line danced, and played games with the families while encouraging residents to also take advantage of health screenings, free produce and offerings on display.

“People don’t need to be forced into being healthy, they need to be given the options to choose for themselves”

*Urban Acres Produce*
At a Fall 2019 debrief, community partners involved with Playstreets were asked:

**What was the most surprising thing about Playstreets?**

“The number of people that came out!”

“The huge increase in attendance! Great job!!”

**What are the most important components of Playstreets?**

**Exhibitors:** Such as Urban Acres Produce, Urban Bike Project, ChristianaCare, Parents as Teachers, Delaware Blue Coats, Division of Public Health, etc.

**Activities:** Dancing, music, tennis in the streets, blood pressure screenings, double dutch, relay races

**Involvement:** Volunteers and police involvement, social connection created by the events, “All of the neighbors working together to flyer and get people to come out”

“Wilmington is not really a tree-lined city where everything looks glorious and green all the time...there are very small backyards. So when it comes to play, we have to encourage it where we can. With the lack of green space to play in, communities lose a chance to interact in the most progressive way. However, through Play Streets, that interaction is attainable as people are empowered to meet and play with others in a positive, natural way.”

City Council Member, Yolanda McCoy
Suggestions for Playstreets 2020

After two years of successful Play Streets events, several lessons have been learned about what works and what can be improved:

- DJs continue to be a crucial element of Play Streets events. They facilitate a “party” feel, draw attention from local homes and businesses and allow for intergenerational activity (e.g. line dancing, dance contests).
- Expand the number and location of events (e.g. longer hours, weekends, more than one block)
- Additional planning and support for street closures is needed. This may include investing in dedicated Play Streets signage (rather than generic street closure signs) and/or dedicated street outreach team(s) to flier neighborhoods and encourage attendance from residents of the immediate area.
- Continue to develop the collaboration with The Warehouse to tailor the Play Streets approach to their needs.
- One or more additional support staff is desired to help facilitate the logistics of the events. This may include managing the food offered and ensuring there are healthy options available at all events.
- Continue to recruit young adult volunteers through relationships with high schools and universities.
- Use Play Streets to help connect participants to other Parks and Recreation programming (e.g. track and field, flag football) to extend the impact on children and families.
- Consider expanding the evaluation approaches to better track attendance and impact in communities.
- For 2020 and beyond, work toward a resident-led model while also continuing to utilize a health equity approach. Continue to provide coordination for Play Streets events to take place in neighborhoods with poor health outcomes and that may require more intensive supports, while also visiting different neighborhood and locations that have not been engaged in prior years so that all neighborhoods know they have access to the equipment and activity hubs, and can self-organize a Play Streets in their area or reach out to Parks and Recreation for assistance.