



HEALTH OFFICER  
GUIDANCE FOR PARKS  
AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
April 8, 2020

East Bay Regional Park District  
Dear Board President, Director Ellen Corbett

The Association of Bay Area Health Officers together with their legal County Counsels, have acknowledged the “essential” role of parks during the COVID-19 pandemic and included specific legal language in the shelter-in-place order to allow for the public to engage in the health benefits of parks while still following physical distancing measures to decrease community transmission of the novel coronavirus. This also means that park staff are disaster service workers that would be requested to continue their essential work or possibly be reassigned to different essential work (e.g. childcare for health care workers like in San Francisco or other emergent needs). As local public health experts, we feel it is important to continue providing guidance to all essential sectors of society supporting the public’s wellbeing during this prolonged emergency that is likely to continue for months to years.

While we understand that different counties and park districts may place varied restrictions to decrease crowding, in Contra Costa County in close partnership with Alameda County’s Interim Health Officer Dr. Erica Pan, we aim to continue working in close coordination with the East Bay Regional Parks District (EBRPD) to ensure parks stay open with the dual goals of:

1. Minimizing transmission of communicable disease to staff and the public
2. Safeguarding essential activities that are crucial for the mental, emotional, and physical health of community members

We have and will continue to provide guidance, trainings, and protocols to all sectors (e.g. education, transportation, parks). Over the past few weeks we have provided such guidance to EBRPD management. Restroom and trash maintenance should be continued for essential services to promote hygiene and sanitation. There is no additional risk to these everyday tasks for other venues (restroom and trash maintenance at grocery stores, pharmacies etc.). The same personal protective and disinfecting measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control are sufficient.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

There is a national shortage of some PPE (personal protective equipment) that must be reserved for higher risk, longer duration, closer proximity interactions (e.g. health care workers doing procedures with COVID-19 positive individuals). Disposable gloves, access to soap and water or hand sanitizer, washable clothing (coveralls, outdoor suits, or gowns) and cloth face covers are sufficient for park staff engaging in restroom and trash maintenance or brief engagements with the public. We do not recommend requiring N95 masks or other highly specialized PPE for park staff although individuals may choose to personally acquire and utilize additional PPE. We have provided similar guidance to full-time trash collectors and sanitation workers in our county that continue to provide these essential services to the public.





Closing parks come at some cost. Never before in human history has a call for prolonged shelter in place overlapped with our 21st century industrialized world reality: most people spend 90% of their lifetime in enclosed spaces.<sup>1</sup> Social distancing strategies may worsen the mental health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among the least economically and socially stable.<sup>2</sup> Social distancing measures have in the past exacerbated issues of personal conflict, domestic violence, and even child abuse.<sup>3</sup> We are unfortunately already seeing a rise in domestic violence.

Parks have always been a community-based resource to alleviate these types of stressors. Exposure to nature has been shown in adults to improve adaptation to stress in cross-sectional and experimental studies. Nearby nature can buffer the effect of poverty on cardiovascular disease and mortality in adults, an effect postulated to be through stress relief over the lifespan.<sup>4</sup> In children, even when adjusted for income, stressors have a smaller deleterious effect on mental health when children live in more green and natural settings supporting the development of important protective strategies that enhance resilience. Parks can be an antidote to excessive screen time and sedentariness which worsen obesity and chronic disease. Parks promote physical activity, which can be key to the long-term mental and physical health of youth and elderly populations. Parks allow for outdoor time, which may allow people to feel less isolated, even if they are not outdoors to socialize.

Like other elements of the built environment, access to the outdoors, and to nature, is not equitably distributed in the United States. Low-income and minority neighborhoods often have less tree cover and fewer parks near their homes. While affluent populations have access to the nature found in their homes or neighborhoods, low-income populations are less likely to, which only exacerbates the impact park closures will have on health equity. While we support messaging around no destination recreation (stay within your county, go to your local parks) we are not recommending a mileage limit within our county.

As public health professionals who fully support the necessity of shelter-in-place orders in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we also believe that access to nature is an essential component of modern life. We seek to strike a balance between park access over the short and long run and the physical distancing currently necessary to stop transmission. Pursuant to § 120175\* of the California Health and Safety Code, the Health Officer of Contra Costa County in our March 31<sup>st</sup> order included clear guidelines about which park components are not allow for social distancing - playgrounds, dog parks, public picnic areas, and similar recreational areas must be closed to public use. Use of shared public recreational facilities such as golf courses, tennis and basketball courts, pools, and rock walls must be closed for recreational use. Sports requiring people to share a ball or other equipment must be limited to people in the same household.

<https://cchealth.org/coronavirus/pdf/2020-0331-Health-Officer-Order-COVID19.pdf>

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\* **H&S Code § 120175, et seq. (2001), *Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Act.*** Each health officer knowing or having reason to believe that any case of the diseases made reportable by regulation of the department, or any other contagious, infectious or communicable disease exists, or has recently existed, within the territory under his or her jurisdiction, shall take measures as may be necessary to prevent the spread of the disease or occurrence of additional cases.





However, we intentionally maintained general use of parks and trails as an essential service. We have worked with EBRPD management to create a menu of strategies to further limit crowding which can be strengthened and loosened over time (e.g. informational awareness, parking modifications, staggered access).

We hope to continue our partnership to make healthy parks for healthy people part of our pandemic response.

Sincerely,

CHRIS FARNITANO M.D.

Health Officer

ROHAN RADHAKRISHNA M.D.

Deputy Health Officer

4/8/2020

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Date

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