

# **Red Fox Recreation**

## **Experiences with the Leisure Access Card at Vancouver Park Board Facilities**



Report prepared for the Vancouver Park Board

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## 1. Summary

The Vancouver Park Board has a comprehensive Leisure Access Policy that is an excellent model for addressing the leisure access needs of low-income and disadvantaged citizens. Historically, however, the Vancouver Park Board has not leveraged the opportunities to promote its access policy to those citizens that are most in need of its leisure services.

Red Fox Healthy Living provided an opportunity for vulnerable populations (people on low incomes, people with physical, cognitive and mental health disabilities, Aboriginal people and new immigrants) to be introduced to the public recreation services provided by the Vancouver Park Board. Over a period of 6 months, more than 36 low-income youth and adults participated in a range of physically active programs at Vancouver Park Board ice rinks, parks and gardens, swimming pools, fitness and community centres.

Initially, participants were unaware of the publicly funded services and leisure access program that were administered by the Vancouver Park Board for the health and enjoyment of Vancouver citizens. Through Red Fox Fitness for Adults, Red Fox Gentle Fitness for Elders, and Red Fox YOUth Can Do It, low-income, adults, and youth were introduced to a range of services offered by the VPB. Program participants became aware of the range of leisure opportunities and subsidies available to them.

Overall, participants reported positive experiences at Vancouver Park Board facilities. The Park Board staff was uniformly friendly and helpful when Red Fox participants attended programs. This was particularly true of Strathcona, Mount Pleasant and Hillcrest Community Centres.

However at some association fitness facilities, there was considerable confusion and frustration that arose over where and when LAC cards were accepted. The decentralized Park Board and Association model of jointly run facilities has many strengths. However, our experiences show that it also has many weaknesses when it comes to fulfilling the mandate of the LAC program. The LAC program must be a uniformly accepted standard and the Vancouver Park Board need to show leadership to meet the recreation and fitness needs of vulnerable populations.

This study highlights the lack of effective promotion of the Park Board's Leisure Access Program (LAC). Current advertising is hidden in the back of program guides if it exists at all. This includes the VPB's printed brochure. Information on Leisure Access can be found on the VPB website; however the internet is not an effective medium to reach vulnerable populations. We strongly urge the VPB and the Community Associations to make changes to their marketing strategies immediately so that Leisure Access is promoted effectively to the people for whom the service is intended.



## 2. Background

Red Fox Recreation was created in 2006 at the request of the Vancouver Park Board, to fulfill its mandate to engage vulnerable, sedentary groups. It is a non-profit society that promotes and supports active healthy living and leadership within the Aboriginal and other vulnerable populations in Vancouver.

In November 2011, Kat Cureton joined the Red Fox team. Kat conducted extensive research on the Vancouver Park Board's Leisure Access Card program as part of her graduate studies at The University of British Columbia. She and Red Fox Recreation Executive Director, Emma Sutherland, share a passion for 'leisure access work', which involves linking low income people with public recreation services that will help improve their health, well-being and quality of life. This passion ultimately stemmed into three new Red Fox Recreation programs: Red Fox Fitness for Adults, Red Fox Gentle Fitness for Elders and Red Fox YOUth Can Do It.

## 3. Program Details

Red Fox Fitness for Adults and Red Fox Gentle Fitness for Elders were led by a certified fitness leader (Kat) and a recreation therapist. Leaders took small groups of participants to Vancouver Park Board facilities across Vancouver using an agency Leisure Access Card (LAC) for one hour of supervised exercise. It was important to keep group sizes relatively small (maximum 6 participants) so that leaders were able to provide one-on-one assistance and ensure all were exercising safely and in accordance to their individual needs and goals. Red Fox YOUth Can Do It is led by Aboriginal youth leaders who are role modeling healthy, active living to younger Aboriginal youth. Below are more details on each program.

### Red Fox Fitness

- Funded by Gaming, the BCRPA and the Positive Outlook Program of Vancouver Native Health Society
- Participants were adults and Elders from the Downtown Eastside who use the services at the Positive Outlook Program. Most participants were Aboriginal; all were challenged with serious health concerns (e.g. HIV, Hepatitis C), a history of drug use, and the possibility of mental illness. Some had limited mobility (e.g. wheelchair, scooter).
- Number of participants: 12
- All participants learned about the LAC and how to apply; 3 participants chose to apply and received their own cards thanks to Cindy Crapper, Access Services Coordinator at the VPB, who created a modified application that addressed the barriers our participants were facing with the streamline system (e.g. having an address, obtaining a stamp from Social Assistance). She also expedited the process so that our participants would get their cards quickly and avoid the wait period (which can be up to 6 weeks).
- Program ran from Nov. 12, 2010 – May 13, 2011 when funding was no longer available.

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### **Red Fox Elders Gentle Fitness**

- Funded by the BCRPA and Gaming.
- Participants were all Aboriginal Elders who use the services at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre
- Number of participants: 5, ranging from 56 to 80
- Most participants had one or more disability or chronic diseases, including partial deafness, arthritis, mobility impairments and mental health challenges.
- 3 Aboriginal youth were mentored as program leaders in this program
- All participants received their own Leisure Access Card with assistance from the program leader and from Cindy Crapper, Access Services Coordinator at the VPB, who asked our applications be sent directly to her so that our participants would get their cards quickly.
- Program ran from Feb. 8, 2011 – June 28, 2011 and may resume in Sept 2011, contingent on funding.

### **Red Fox YOUTH Can Do It**

- Funded by the Vancouver Foundation
- Participants are youth ages 10 – 24 who are Aboriginal and/or have disabilities.
- Number of participants: 16
- Participants visit VPB facilities using the Red Fox agency LAC card.
- Program is led by Red Fox youth leaders.
- Program began in November 2010 and is continuing to November 2011.

### **3a. Where We Went**

Over the course of six and a half months, we visited 17 different VPB facilities. We aimed to restrict our visits to the facilities that accept the LAC, as our budget was limited and our goal was to show the participants facilities that they can continue to patronize on their own, using their own LAC cards. Sometimes we went to a centre that we assumed accepted the LAC card, and we were surprised that they did not. For example, we went to Hastings Community Centre and were surprised to learn that they did not accept the LAC, given their location in east Vancouver and the Association's commitment to environmental health. When the front desk staff member found out that we were from Red Fox, he admitted us at no charge, however, it is doubtful that an individual from the Downtown Eastside would have been granted the same generosity.

It must be noted that it was difficult to explain to participants which facilities accepted our agency and individual LACs and which did not. Program leaders had to carefully research whether or not the LAC was accepted at a facility before they planned each session. Despite this, we still encountered unpleasant surprises, such as when we travelled the distance to Thunderbird Community Centre (including a steep uphill climb with a wheelchair and scooter), and were told upon arrival that the LAC was not accepted for day passes. This was confusing for our group because it states in the Leisure Guide that this community centre accepts the LAC.



There were also challenges when we visited partner agencies that accept the LAC: the Bloedel Conservatory and Van Dusen Gardens. At both places, there was resistance from the front desk volunteers who were admitting patrons at the facilities, to admit all our participants with the Red Fox LAC card. Red Fox YOUth Can Do It went to Van Dusen to experience the Festival of Lights. The volunteer told us that the LAC card would not be accepted for special events. Emma explained to him that this is not stated on the LAC card, and we have traveled and brought youth to the event, so he should let us in. Emma had to be quite assertive to gain access to the LAC site, and it is doubtful that a marginalized youth or adult attending on their own would be successful in gaining entry.

At Bloedel, Emma perceived negative judgements from the volunteer when she presented the LAC card to admit Red Fox Fitness participants. The volunteer expressed judgement that we were not financially supporting Bloedel, and she was volunteering her time, so we should also contribute more to the financial well-being of the Conservatory. It should also be noted that we visited Bloedel in the winter and there is no transit access to the conservatory. The steep hills pose challenges to people with mobility impairments and chronic health problems, especially when the sidewalks are icy or wet.

On a more positive note, Red Fox program participants felt very welcome at Strathcona, Mount Pleasant and Hillcrest centres. At all three centres, the participants reported that they felt very accepted by the centre staff. They stated their intentions to return to the centres, and this increased their motivation to achieve their health and fitness goals.

Below is the list of facilities visited and the nature of our visit. The asterisk (\*) indicates places we visited more than once.

- \*Aquatic Centre at Hillcrest Park, fitness centre
- Hastings Community Centre, fitness centre
- Thunderbird CC, fitness centre
- Vancouver Aquatic Centre, fitness centre
- \*Creekside CC, fitness centre
- Kensington CC, fitness centre
- \*Mt Pleasant CC, fitness centre
- West End CC, fitness centre
- Douglas Park CC, fitness centre
- \*Ray Cam Co-operative Centre, fitness centre
- \*Britannia CC, fitness centre
- \*Strathcona CC, fitness centre
- Trout Lake CC, skating rink
- Roundhouse CC, self-guided tour of art gallery
- Coal Harbour CC, self-guided tour
- Bloedel Conservatory, self-guided tour
- Van Dusen Gardens, self-guided tour



### 3b. Feedback from Program Participants

Each exercise session was followed by a debriefing discussion (accompanied by a nutritious snack). Gathering feedback from program participants was integral to the development of our programs. Debriefing sessions were led by an experienced researcher (Kat) and followed a standard focus group format where a question guide was used for structure but participants were encouraged to converse freely about their experiences (the question guide is included in Appendix A). Over the six and a half month period, we created many notes and collected an extensive amount of feedback from participants. For this report we have included a small selection of that information and some of the poignant quotes that capture themes in our overall experiences.

*Note: Debrief sessions were neither audio-recorded nor transcribed verbatim. The quotes below were recorded by hand during the debrief sessions and notes were taken immediately following each session by Kat Cureton.*

#### How would you describe your experience today?

- Feb 25/11 – Ray Cam *“Positive. It’s always positive.” (Participant O)*  
*“Any time you workout it’s positive! Exceeded my goal so I’m happy!” (Participant I)*
- Jan 14/11 – Britannia *“I loved it! I don’t want to quit moving. I have a natural high from the endorphins.” (Participant D1)*
- Dec 9/10 – Van Dusen *“This is so exciting! I’ve been wanting to come to this Festival for years, but I couldn’t afford it” (Youth of Red Fox YOUTH Can Do It)*

#### Why did you decide to come with us today?

- Feb 8/11 – Britannia *“I’ve never done anything like this before!” (Elder A)*
- Feb 11/11 – Creekside *“[I was] motivated to come out. I couldn’t wait until Friday. It’s part of my weekly routine now.” (Participant C)*
- Feb 25/11 – Ray Cam *“Out of sheer boredom. That and I’m trying to get myself back into working out. Beats hanging out on the street!” (Participant N; first time participant)*

#### Describe how you feel now compared to how you felt before exercise?

- Jan 21/11 – VAC *“Energetic, awake, and motivated.” (Participant I)*
- Feb 25/11 – Ray Cam *“More relaxed; got my tension and frustration out.” (Participant N)*

#### Did you feel welcomed here? Why or why not?

- Dec 3/11 – Trout Lake *Kat’s notes: Participant G said coming to Trout Lake for skating was a strange experience for him today because it was civilized and he was respected and he didn’t stand out. Participant I agreed. They said this is much different than how they are used to being treated in the DTES.*
- Dec 10/11 – Mnt. Plst *Kat’s notes: Participant D commented that the reception from the front desk staff makes a huge difference in how you feel in a facility; “It puts your faith back in humankind.” He talked about the stigma in the DTES and not being treated well there.*

- Jan 14/11 – Strathcona *“I felt treated with respect. (Participant S)*



Jan 21/11 – VAC            *“There was no prejudice. We obviously look like Downtown Eastsidiers. The cashier didn’t judge me, or at least I didn’t feel it.”(Participant I)*

Feb 4/11 – Britannia    *“I felt welcomed because no one looked down on me. I’m in a wheelchair and people just let me do what I could. [I felt they] respected me.” (Participant D2)*

**What was your impression of the facility when we first got here?**

Feb 11/11-Creekside    *“I think the wheelchair access was kinda crappy.” (Participant O)*

*Kat’s notes: From the east side of the building the wheelchair ramp was a little bit hidden, we didn’t see it at first. To get to the ramp you had to go across gravel (not easy on a wheelchair). Participant O pushed Participant D2 and his wheelchair through the gravel. When we were entering the building Participant D2 said, “What? They don’t want cripples here??” There was a wheel chair button (automatic door opener) for the east entrance door but it was right on the door frame; I think it’s more helpful if the button is further back from the door so when it’s pressed you’re not in the way of the door opening and you don’t have to back up. Later we saw that the main entrance was better built for wheelchair accessibility but there is **no signage** outside to indicate this... **the door into the fitness centre is not wheelchair accessible**. Participant D2 and Participant L would have had difficulty getting in to the facility with their wheelchair and scooter if they had come on their own.*

**Notes reflecting unawareness about VPB facilities**

Dec 3/11 – Trout Lake: *Kat’s notes: On the drive there, as soon as we were east of Main, south of 2<sup>nd</sup> ave, Participant G asked: “Are we in Burnaby?” This was very interesting because it’s an example of how some residents in the DTES rarely get out of that area and explore the rest of Vancouver. He was very surprised when he arrived at that park to know that this park is in the middle of Vancouver. Participant G told me he wants to get out of the DTES. He says he can’t trust anyone there.*

Dec 10/11 – M.Plst:    *Kat’s notes: Participants were very excited about the library connected to the Mnt Pleasant Community Centre, they did not know it existed even though it is quite close to where they live. Participant C and Participant D are both planning to come back to the library.*

**Comments demonstrating benefits of these programs:**

Feb 4/11 – Britannia    *“I’m going to stay sober today!” (Elder C)*  
*Kat’s notes: Elder C told me that she is doing drugs less now that she is part of our exercise group. She is making positive changes in her life; spending less money on drugs and slowly getting out of debt.*

Feb 11/11 – Creekside    *Question: Does anyone else see a difference in drug use since their participation in this program?*



*"I'm not using as much" (Participant I)*

*"[The exercise] is a natural high!" (Participant O)*

*"Every Tuesday and Friday I look forward to because I'm going to do something healthy for my body instead of putting crap in my body. My mind is occupied. I'm not doing as much drugs and Red Fox has something to do with it!"*

*(Participant D1)*

#### **Comments Reflecting the Important Role of these Programs:**

*Nov 12/11 – Hillcrest Kat's notes: Participant L use to get regular exercise for his hip through a funded rehab/physiotherapy program but now the funding has run out. This is where Red Fox is able to fill a gap in service.*

*Feb 11/11 – Creekside "I like [the Red Fox Fitness program] because it gets me out of the downtown core. My dealer, the dealer is right outside my door!" (Participant C)*

*Feb 15/11 – Ray Cam "Doctor said I should be doing exercise but I didn't know where to go. I never did exercise like this before". (Elder A)*

#### **Example of Some Participants' Goals**

*Nov 12/11 – Hillcrest*

- *Participant D3: Get a regular exercise routine that suits his lifestyle and makes him feel better.*
- *Participant I: Learn and understand how to become more physically fit through fitness*
- *Participant C: Continue to come to each Hometown Tourist session so long as she's not sick*
- *Participant D1: Get a regular exercise regime; buy weights when he gets his next cheque so he can workout at home; stay off drugs; eventually come on his own to the fitness centre*
- *Participant L: Come to the fitness centre one a week on his own*



#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Through Red Fox Fitness for Adults, Red Fox Gentle Fitness for Elders, and Red Fox YOUTH Can Do It, over thirty-six Elders, adults, and youth have been introduced to the services offered by the VPB. Beforehand, participants were unaware that these publically-funded services exist for their health and enjoyment. We believe this is due in large part to the lack of effective promotion of the LAC program. Current advertising is hidden in the back of program guides if it exists at all. This includes the VPB's printed brochure. Information on Leisure Access can be found on the VPB website; however the internet is not an effective medium to reach low income people. **We strongly urge the VPB and the Community Associations to make changes to their marketing strategies immediately so that Leisure Access is made known to the people for whom the service is intended. A description of the Leisure Access Program and how vulnerable populations can use it should be included whenever fees are listed in VPB promotional materials.**

It is not simple to navigate the current LAC program as there are inconsistencies in its acceptance across the city. This is confusing for the public. We found it challenging to explain to participants where and when they could and could not go with their personal LAC, and they felt excluded when they found out that certain centres wouldn't welcome them back with their LAC cards. The participants noticed the difference at facilities that did not accept LAC: they noticed that no low income individuals were in the centre and they felt like they stood out too much. **It is urgent that the Park Board system become consistent and that the LAC be accepted at each and every VPB facility.**

Everyone benefits when marginalized individuals become healthier and more socially engaged. The LAC program provides ideal opportunities for individuals and groups to sustain fitness and social activities. The facilities also provide marginalized individuals and groups with opportunities to expand their awareness and have new experiences that they may otherwise not get to have. The participants of Red Fox Fitness were enriched by their experiences at Bloedel Conservatory: none of them have ever been, or expect to be, in tropical climates, and they were amazed by seeing and feeling a tropical environment, including seeing and hearing tropical birds.

The youth of Red Fox YOUTH Can Do It experienced new feelings of being part of society, rather than on the margins, by enjoying the exciting displays of Van Dusen's Festival of Lights with the crowds of mainstream Vancouver individuals and families. Such social engagement decreases the chances that these at-risk youth will become involved in criminal activity.

Overall, participants report positive experiences in VPB facilities. Red Fox Recreation has been successful in engaging individuals and families from the Aboriginal and Downtown Eastside community since its inception in 2006 when the VPB requested help in fulfilling its mandate. We look forward to working closely with the Park Board to assist in redesigning the LAC communication delivery and better reach downtown eastside residents and other vulnerable populations. **It is recommended that a partnership form between Red Fox Recreation and the VPB to continue important programs like Red Fox Fitness for Adults and further explore the best means of introducing low-income residents to the benefits of the Park Board services.**



## APPENDIX A

### RED FOX RECREATION

#### Guide for Debrief Questions

Purpose of debrief:

- Get constructive feedback from program participants about their experiences
- Determine how participants feel about the particular facility
- Note people's progress from week to week

Goals of debrief:

- Hear from everyone
- Ask open-ended questions (often beginning with 'How' or 'Why') vs. yes or no questions
- Try to ask questions in a focus-group format (to the whole group) to try and get discussions going and to also keep people's attention

Example questions:

1. How would you describe your experience today?
2. Describe how you feel now compared to before exercise?
  - a. Probe – how does your body feel?
3. What was your favourite part about today and why?
4. What was your least favourite part about today and why?
5. What was your impression of the facility when we first got here?
6. How do you feel about this facility compared to other places we've been?
7. Did you feel welcomed here? Why or why not?
  - a. If not – what would make you feel more welcomed?
8. Would you come back here on your own or with a friend? Why or why not?
9. Are there any follow-up comments from last week?
  - a. Probe - were you sore/tired/energized later that day or the next day?