



## POLICY BRIEF: OUTDOOR RECREATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

States are increasingly exploring the intersection of health policy and outdoor recreation to better understand how these policy areas could be leveraged for the positive benefit of their constituents. While formal partnerships are still relatively novel, Governors have a variety of opportunities to engage with outdoor recreation and health agencies to create long-term benefits. This policy brief will examine these opportunities and highlight examples of innovative policy development from state and territory Governors.

On August 20, 2025, the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices hosted a one-day in-person event where Governors' health advisors, directors of state and territory offices of outdoor recreation, academics, and non-profit stakeholders discussed opportunities for state and territory innovation at the nexus of health and outdoor recreation policy. This roundtable was generously supported by the [Health Resources and Services Administration](#) (HRSA).

Public Health has long been a pillar of Governor Policy Teams and state-level policy. Health policy experts advise Governors on emerging health concerns, track infectious diseases, and help craft policies to prevent and address chronic diseases.

Compared with the long-established health policy arena, outdoor recreation is an emerging area of policy. The first Office of Outdoor Recreation was founded by former Utah Governor Gary Herbert in 2013. Since then, an additional 23 states have created a [state level office](#) of outdoor recreation. While the federal government plays an important role in outdoor recreation, much of the innovation and policy development has stemmed from state-level action and investment. Outdoor recreation is bipartisan, geographically diverse and contributes significantly to state economies. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis' most recent [report](#) finds that outdoor recreation contributed \$1.2 trillion of economic output to the U.S. economy annually.

Both health and outdoor recreation are flexible policy areas that can include aspects of the built and natural environment, food and nutrition, transportation access, local planning, workforce development, data sharing and analysis, and incentives for small businesses to address public challenges such as food deserts. While relatively unexplored on the national scale, the intersection of health and outdoor recreation represents a fruitful area for Governors to pioneer and expand state policy solutions and materially increase the quality of the lives of their constituents.

## Opportunities for Governors to Consider

**1. Provide Widespread Opportunities to Get Outdoors:** Outdoor recreation can improve population health outcomes within states by promoting physical activity, which in many cases reduces chronic disease, and by providing educational opportunities. However, these impacts will inevitably be limited without widespread opportunities to recreate and expand recreation assets.

Challenges to accessing outdoor recreation opportunities come in a variety of forms but may include skill-level, cost-prohibitive equipment or training, physical or mental disabilities, transportation, or even age. Likewise, barriers to developing outdoor recreation infrastructure are varied but can include land use practices, proper ownership, permitting regulations, funding for construction and maintenance, and local capacity constraints. Intentionally addressing some hurdles in the planning and development processes can increase public access to recreation and expand recreation assets, thereby allowing for broader impact on public health.

### **Examples could include:**

- Specialized infrastructure investments to accommodate individuals with physical disabilities.
  - These could include adaptive kayak launches, wheelchair friendly pathways and trails, and adult-sized changing tables for individuals with developmental disorders and/or physical disabilities.
  - Sensory gardens and/or specialized programming for neurodiverse populations.
- Create or expand partnerships to reduce cost barriers to outdoor recreation.
  - Coalitions of existing or novel groups, such as outdoor non-profits, state/territory agencies, Scouts, faith-based organizations, and existing recreational leagues could work to coordinate and pool resources to ease the burden of transportation, essential gear, and/or specialized training or guides.
- Work to address transportation hurdles proactively.
  - Situating outdoor recreation opportunities and infrastructure within existing active transportation corridors and/or within existing public transit system footprints can reduce transportation barriers and provide benefits to both the outdoor recreation and transportation sectors.
- Emphasizing accessibility as an essential component, especially for aging populations and those with disabilities.
  - Some great examples include [Vermont's Park Access Fund](#) and [Tennessee's Access 2030](#) initiative.

## 2. Create or Formalize Partnerships Between State Health and Outdoor Recreation Agencies:

Many informal or organic partnerships have begun to develop between state/territory health departments and outdoor recreation offices and other state agencies involved in developing and providing outdoor recreation. While these informal partnerships can be impactful, they may lack formal recognition, sufficient resources, and stakeholder buy-in. Governors can instruct their senior leaders to create or expand interagency collaborations and agreements that create formal relationships, establish shared priorities and goals, provide personnel and program resources, and offer a unified entity for stakeholders to engage.

### Examples of State Partnerships

- The Commonwealth of [Pennsylvania Department of Health](#) and [Department of Natural Resources](#) have developed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to enact their joint work related to active transportation to increase safe and accessible opportunities for physical activity to improve public health.
  - This MOU was signed by leadership from both state agencies and is designed to last for five years. After the five-year period, the MOU automatically comes up to be reevaluated and reworked as needed. This process allows for continued proactive buy-in from both agencies over time, even in the event of state or departmental staff and leadership changes.



**3. Foster Data Sharing and Interoperability Between State Systems:** To better understand the interplay between health outcomes, state initiatives, and outdoor recreation development and programming, states can pioneer or expand interagency data sharing agreements and processes. Although state agencies collect significant data on public health, outdoor recreation, economic indicators, and community data, many of these datasets are siloed and/or not compatible across distinct agency

systems. Governors can direct their cabinet officials to explore opportunities for multiple departments to have standardized systems and access. As relevant new data is collected and added to state systems, state staff can categorize data across shared systems to better understand health and outdoor recreation program impacts. Participants emphasized the need to break down silos between public health, transportation, education and recreation agencies:

**Examples Could Include:**

- Merging or creating new data sets from cross-agency data collection; this can be accomplished through formal agreements, joint system procurement, or mutual system access and management that can work to de-silo data systems and reinforce agency collaboration.
  - State/territorial health and outdoor recreation agency data are just as important to understanding trends and their broader impacts as data sets from departments of transportation, departments of education, state/territory economic development authorities, institutions of higher education, and Governors' constituent services offices.
- Combining existing data systems across state/territory agencies may highlight information gaps, allowing agencies to reapproach their data collection, analysis and sharing processes to improve overall efficiency and data integrity.
  - Expanded data sharing and collection may be possible through existing reporting structures. Minnesota recently published their [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#) (SCORP). This plan included data collection around user-sentiment but also included a novel calculation on the economic impact of outdoor recreation in every county of the state.
  - [Arkansas' Office of Outdoor Recreation](#) partnered with [Heartland Forward](#) to create a [state-level calculation](#) on the impact of outdoor recreation spending for different regions of the state.
- Governors can call for expanded federal health and outdoor recreation data collection and sharing around the intersection of health and outdoor recreation.
  - The Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) issues an annual report detailing the total economic impact of outdoor recreation by state and sector. While this information is crucial to state decision makers, it is limited to state level reporting and does not perform sub-state or regional calculations that could provide invaluable insight to states.
  - Currently, there is no cross-sector health and outdoor recreation model to calculate outcomes. One promising model, the [Oregon Outdoor Recreation Health Impacts Estimator Tool](#), demonstrates the value of tracking health data from outdoor recreation activities. Expanded and refined models derived from a shared methodology could maximize data collection and standardization.

**4. Improve Youth Engagement and Stewardship:** Children today have more access to digital options for education, social connection and entertainment than any previous generation. While not inherently bad, these options can have significant negative impacts on childhood development, reinforcing the need to offer a counterbalance and create opportunities to disconnect and be outdoors. Areas where children and youth already congregate, such as schools and community centers, can be connected via outdoor recreation infrastructure and active transportation corridors. Governors can tailor state and territory health and outdoor recreation programming to encourage children to get outside and can also work to instill a sense of stewardship that will ideally grow into a life-long love of health habits and the outdoors.

**Some Points to Consider:**

- Opportunities for young people to [get outside](#) can be developed through volunteerism and civic engagement lenses as pathways to revitalize community health and resilience.
- Addressing screen time and promoting outdoor alternatives through schools and community hubs.
- State and territory advisors can propose evidence-based standards, such as the High-Impact Obesity Prevention Standards to limit screen time, and promoting outdoor alternatives through early childhood education, K-12 schools, and community hubs and before and after-school programming when developing related policy and regulations.
- Investing in outdoor recreation-specific built environment.



**5. Work with Local Communities to Design and Own Programming and Resources:**

Before outdoor recreation resources and programs can produce lasting positive health impacts, they must be planned and developed. States and territories should proactively partner with communities and community-based organizations to develop resources reflective of target populations in the area to alleviate any potential negative impacts on communities. Communities are often eager to develop new outdoor recreation opportunities but may have reservations about possible displacement from large-scale development, increased tourism and traffic, and/or financial burdens related to the ownership and maintenance of assets. States can take a variety of actions that will help maximize the positive impacts while reducing negative outcomes.

**Some Considerations:**

- States can develop programs and resources that integrate outdoor recreation into daily activities like commuting, attending school and connecting neighborhoods with each other.
  - The [Washington and Old Dominion Trail](#) is a 100-foot-wide park that extends 45 miles across northern Virginia. This corridor park began its life as a railroad in the mid-19th century. By the late 1960s, the railroad stopped operations, and Dominion Power, the major electric utility in the area, purchased the right-of-way to host energy infrastructure. Trail advocates quickly saw the potential and worked with the utility to coordinate a paved linear pathway, connecting communities across northern Virginia.
  - The [Lamoille Valley Rail Trail](#) is a 94-mile ADA compliant trail in Northern Vermont that connects 18 communities. The trail can be used all four seasons for multi-purpose recreation and transportation, including walking, hiking, cycling, horseback riding, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, dogsledding and snowmobiling.
- States and territories can partner with community-based organizations and constituents to co-develop programming and opportunities that are valued by the community. Developing misaligned resources may turn community members away and foster disinterest or distrust toward state actions.
- Local programs and outcomes may look different than originally designed. When possible, state agencies should let local communities take the lead in developing resources and programming that are distinct to their community and uniquely interesting to locals.
- States can empower local and regional administrative structures like trail and recreation authorities, as well as expanding resources to support management and maintenance of recreation resources, to help mitigate local capacity challenges imposed by outdoor recreation infrastructure.

## Conclusions

As this expert’s roundtable clearly demonstrates, there is growing appreciation of and enthusiasm for policy development at the nexus of health and outdoor recreation. Governors have a variety of opportunities to explore and formalize multi-disciplinary policy relationships within their own states. While many of these programs and opportunities are currently in their pilot or initial phases, initial results are highly encouraging. States, as laboratories of policy innovation, can experiment and shape this emerging discourse into durable programs that increase the health and well-being of their neighbors.

