

*2020 CSAC Challenge Awards
Executive Summary*

County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation Virtual Recreation Center

Category: Government Finance, Administration & Technology

OVERVIEW: San Diego County’s Virtual Recreation Center provides activities for people of all ages, interests and abilities. Programs are interactive, accessible and engaging – drawing thousands.

CHALLENGE: In mid-March, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, we had to change way we engaged with our customers. Guided hikes, educational workshops and hands-on craft activities were no longer feasible. Group camping, weddings and other social engagements were put on hold or canceled. Amenities were closed. Customers were both confused and frustrated, which complicated our mission to share meaningful park experiences with them. Within the first week of the lockdown, we established a landing page on our website for all park-related COVID-19 information, and in another week launched a Virtual Recreation Center featuring existing assets like virtual hiking videos, 360-degree tour videos and an interactive park map. We also shared links to partner sites and assets, but it wasn’t enough; we needed more content to retain industry relevance, and to ensure we were doing our part to support a healthy, safe and thriving community. With limited resources, and with numerous restrictions in place, the team had to get creative; reprioritizing projects to continually refresh this integral web page.

SOLUTION: The County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation’s (DPR) marketing team researched what other agencies were doing, noting projects that were educational, entertaining and easy to replicate. We audited DPR’s calendar of events to see what could be transitioned to a web or social media platform. We tapped park rangers and other experts for written and recorded presentations. We brainstormed new ways to share park stories, explored new software, and tested new technology.

Partnerships became paramount, helping to make up for the lack of revenue caused by canceled classes, camping reservations and special events. The result is an ever-growing collection of stories, games, crafts, workshops and video tours.

INNOVATION: Inside the Virtual Recreation Center, opportunities have been posted for people of all ages, interests and abilities – embodying DPR’s commitment to accessibility, diversity and inclusivity. The Virtual Recreation Center is full of innovative materials, for example: Facebook Live site visits and how-to videos; a Facebook wildcrafting series with music special guests; ranger-led Zoom chats with

local school districts on topics like bugs, invasive species, the sun and San Diego's tree canopy; a printable activity book for teens to complement DPR's Energy Savings Adventure program; a Mental Health Month Mood Board/Coloring Kit designed to address COVID-19-related mental health concerns; a reimagined Summer Movies in the Park series – now Summer Movies at Home – with DIY recipes, crafts, games and prizes; a revamped San Diego/Safe Destination Nights program that entertains teens during critical hours that mixes fun with wellness; a growing catalogue of virtual hikes/rides and 360-video tours; and our first-ever Tour Our Trails Challenge highlighting 15 trails across San Diego. A list of social media channels where people can connect with us is provided, and this interwoven approach to marketing satisfies goals outlined in our most recent needs assessment survey that states residents want more information about parks and park offerings, more often, on more channels, and more customized than ever before. We ran a trivia campaign with Scott Turner, co-author of well-known hiking guide, *Afoot and Afield in San Diego*, reaching 14,533 people on Facebook with 229 likes/comments/shares and 1,346 post clicks. A May Photo Month picture challenge reached 47,052 people on Facebook and 20,017 people on Instagram. Earth Week brought virtual renditions of traditional park activities, like birds of prey demonstrations, and hiking safety tips. Now saved to the Virtual Recreation Center, the video recordings have entertained 5,000 people and counting.

RESULTS: Spring and summer 2020 have brought the highest web traffic in sdparcs.org history. Comparing March 2019 and 2020, page views were up 55.7% and total visitors jumped 41.7%. The Virtual Recreation Center page is among the most popular on the site, with thousands of customer clicks – many leading back to our social media channels, which have also experienced unprecedented growth. These numbers greatly surpass attendance at ranger-led events, which hovers between 10 and 50. In-person interactions might be limited, but our lines of communication remain open and have expanded far beyond business-as-usual, making park information more diverse and accessible than ever before. We are learning as we go and remain invigorated by the creativity that comes with virtual programming.

REPLICABILITY: When we launched our Virtual Recreation Center, we researched other parks and recreation agencies, gyms and fitness clubs, museums, nature centers, school districts – even restaurants – to see how businesses were working to retain their customer base. We shortlisted our favorite pieces of online entertainment, and then looked at our own virtual assets, in-house talent, equipment and strategic

partnerships to bring some of those ideas to life. We picked projects that synced with our individual and collective skillsets. This is a process that can be easily replicated with motivation, research, creativity and time. Costs are minimal, but the impact is huge; we are connecting with more people than ever before!

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OPTIONAL SUBMISSION:

<https://www.sdparks.org/content/sdparks/en/participate/VirtualRecreationCenter.html>