Best Practice: Parks Inspection Program

REPORT UPDATED: MARCH 29, 2013

CITY: NEW YORK CITY **POLICY AREAS: ENVIRONMENT; PARKS & GREEN SPACES**

BEST PRACTICE

The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation **Parks Inspection Program** is a rigorous performance management system that measures the condition and quality of New York City's parks.

ISSUE

The Parks Inspection Program (PIP) serves a fundamental purpose: to help ensure that the agency provides New Yorkers and visitors with clean, green, and safe parks. Employing state-of-the-art handheld computers and digital cameras to document conditions and collect data, a team of trained inspectors performs nearly 5,000 inspections each year. Each inspected park is given a rating for Overall Condition and Cleanliness, which includes as many as 17 ratable park features. These ratings are based on a set of comprehensive, sophisticated, and objective standards as set forth in the 91-page Parks Inspection Program manual, which clearly defines and details all aspects of the inspection process. Inspection data is disseminated to the boroughs through the Parks' Intranet on a daily basis, so that management can react and rectify problems as quickly as possible.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

PIP ratings provide parks and recreation management, elected officials, and the general public with a broad indicator of the condition of New York City parks. In doing so, the ratings serve as one of the agency's key performance measures. Using the ratings, the agency holds itself accountable to a specific set of standards focused on cleanliness, safety, and structural conditions. PIP ratings also include detailed information on specific parks and park features, which help the agency effectively use its resources to target problem-areas.

IMPLEMENTATION

A team of trained inspectors performs 205 park inspections during each inspection round, which typically lasts two weeks. These sites represent a random, stratified sample of the universe of properties within the parks system. Inspectors rate each site for up to 17 park features in three broad categories: cleanliness, structural, and landscape. Park features are as follows:

CLEANLINESS	STRUCTURAL	LANDSCAPE
Glass	Benches	Athletic Fields
Graffiti	Fences	Horticultural Areas
Ice	Paved Surfaces	Lawns
Litter	Play Equipment	Trails
Weeds	Safety Surface	Trees
	Sidewalks	Water Bodies

Based on the performance of these features, each park is assigned a rating of "Acceptable" (A) or "Unacceptable" (U) for Overall Condition and Cleanliness, the program's two key performance indicators. Inspectors also track whether various park elements, such as drinking fountains and spray showers, are operational while in season, and note whether signs and flags are present and in good condition. Additionally, inspectors verify and update each park's site information to ensure that the agency's inventory of rated properties is accurate.
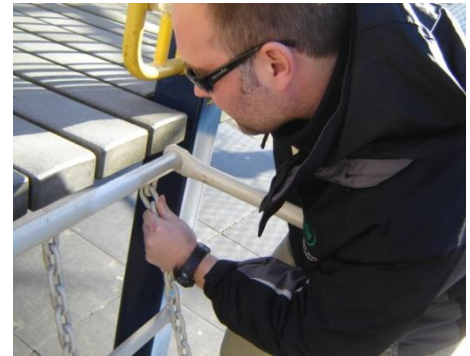
Best Practice: Parks Inspection Program

After each inspection round, summary data is presented to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, Borough Commissioners, Chiefs of Operations, and other key agency personnel. Through analysis of inspection data, the agency can identify trends, evaluate field staff, assign promotions, and identify specific capital and expense needs at the citywide and district level. At periodic meetings, inspection data is used to facilitate discussion regarding best practices and solutions to park maintenance challenges. Data from PIP is also employed at several agency recognition events, such as Employee of the Month and Best of Parks award ceremonies.   These events often recognize specific district crews for their outstanding efforts in maintaining their parks.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

PIP has been one of the agency's major initiatives since 1994. Citywide, the overall condition rating has risen from 36% acceptable in 1994 to 82% acceptable in 2012. The citywide cleanliness rating has also risen from 73% acceptable in 1994 to 88% acceptable in 2012.

A Park Inspector checking play equipment.

The Parks Inspection Program has clearly served as an important management tool for achieving improved conditions. Park inspection data helps management to identify performance trends in specific parks, districts, or boroughs and make well informed decisions on the most efficient way to deploy personnel and distribute resources. PIP data is also used to help determine which parks to refurbish and which equipment and materials will last the longest. The benefit becomes twofold: the agency benefits from increased productivity and the public benefits from an improvement in the agency's delivery of services.

Furthermore, the public now enjoys greater access to park information thanks to the technological advances that PIP has undergone in recent years. A myriad of park inspection data, including the Overall Condition and Cleanliness ratings, are published yearly in the Mayor's Management Report (MMR) and posted through the Citywide Performance Reporting (CPR) tool. Both are accessible to elected officials, advocacy groups, and the general public. Additionally, ratings information for the five boroughs or individual parks can be found on the Parks Department's website.

LESSONS LEARNED

The concept of a parks inspection program originated with former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, who at the time wanted to evaluate the success of the Neighborhood Parks Restoration Program (NPR). NPR assigned in-house crews with the responsibility of restoring and refurbishing neighborhood parks and playgrounds. This initial program, while important in the development of the contemporary inspection program, was vague in its application, did not embrace a fully developed set of ratings standards, covered a small percentage of total parkland, and was a paper system with very slow turn-around time, leaving management incapable of reacting quickly to identify problems.

PIP has undergone significant change. First, the program has expanded with the introduction of large parks and Green Streets (horticultural installations at street intersections and medians). This is in addition to the inspection of small parks and playgrounds, which comprised the nucleus of sites initially rated under PIP. Today, PIP inspects more than 85% of the City's total parkland.

Second, Parks continues to harness state-of-the-art technology, which has helped to significantly increase the number of inspections the agency conducts per year. By replacing handwritten inspection notes with handheld PC tablets and Polaroid's with digital photographs, park inspectors can spend more time in the field than at their desks producing inspection reports. As a result, turn-around time is virtually instantaneous. At the end of each day, inspectors upload inspection data to a centralized database and post their photos to an intranet-based photo management system.

Best Practice: Parks Inspection Program

Third, PIP data has become increasingly accessible to both agency staff and the general public. Managers and field staff can access inspection information internally through the "Parks Property Search" on the agency's intranet system. Additionally field managers can access any safety hazards that inspectors noted earlier in the day through the "Daily Immediate Attentions" section of the intranet. They are required to resolve these issues and provide documentation using the same system, thus increasing efficiency and accountability.

In order to improve performance and increase ratings, field supervisors must manage their parks through the lens of the Parks Inspection Program. They must incorporate PIP standards when inspecting their parks and facilities and adopt technologies similar to PIP that will help them identify trends and correct problematic conditions at the local level. The agency is working to overcome this challenge through a new Enterprise Asset Management System, whereby supervisors use handheld computers and upload inspection data via a web-based application. Furthermore, new and existing field staff are fully trained in all aspects of the program and understand that it is a key piece of the agency's culture.

TRANSFERABILITY

Parks has implemented several inspection programs, modeled after PIP, to better reflect the breadth of services that the agency provides to the public. These inspection programs include the Comfort Station Inspection Program, the Recreation Evaluation and Center Assessment Program (RECAP), and the Golf Inspection Program. PIP standards are also used to evaluate publicly-accessible private properties, including many waterfront esplanades that have a maintenance agreement with the City.

PIP has been a model for other city and state governments that are interested in implementing performance management initiatives. Recently, the City of San Francisco requested information and manuals on PIP to help revise its own inspection program. PIP has also had a global reach. Several countries from Argentina to the Netherlands, have expressed interest in establishing performance management systems similar to PIP in their park systems, and have requested assistance in benchmarking.

Within the City of New York, the Department of Education has incorporated several elements of PIP in its public school facilities inspection program.

CONTACTS

Jun Lee
Director
Office of Operations and Management Planning (OMP)
Jun.Lee@parks.nyc.gov

New York City Department of Parks & Recreation
The Arsenal
Central Park
New York, NY 10065
212-360-8234
www.nycgovparks.org