



**NORTHERN WILL COUNTY**  
Special Recreation Association



# NWCSRA

Qualitative Research  
Study Report  
March 2022

**NWCSRA  
Qualitative Research Study Report**

**Completed For**

**Northern Will County Special Recreation Association**

**By**

**Campfire Concepts  
Champaign, IL**

**March 2022**

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# 1 Introduction

Recreation is essential for all. It cultivates hope and joy in difficult times. Recreation offers opportunities to be active, become fit, compete, reduce stress, create, learn, and grow. Recreation provides social connections that develop into important relationships. It is a vehicle that can turn isolated neighbors into close-knit families. Recreation is the bottom line. It is a foundation for individual and collective meaning, satisfaction, and well-being. In Illinois, recreation services are intended to be made available to all through local government provision, such as parks and recreation departments and park districts. For some, these options are the only opportunity

***Recreation provides social connections that develop into important relationships.***



that is available for their household to participate in recreation activities. However, gaps still exist. Recreation leaders who believe in the philosophy that recreation is essential for all worked together to address these gaps in services. They recognized that communities could work together by pooling their resources to provide recreation services specifically

for individuals with disabilities. In 1967, the first Special Recreation Association (SRA) formed to meet this charge; since then, numerous local parks and recreation providers in Illinois have partnered and established SRAs to better serve thousands of individuals with disabilities and their families throughout the state.



## 2 Purpose & Objective

Illinois park and recreation agencies continue to evolve to meet their resident's everchanging needs and desires more efficiently and effectively. Recently, one enhancement to the local recreation system involved the merger of the Lily Cache Special Recreation Association and Northern Will County Special Recreation Association. This merger has increased capacity, pooled resources, and made it possible to increase the quality and variety of recreation opportunities for individuals with disabilities within the region. The merger combined two SRAs with long-standing histories of high-quality programs, dedicated staff, and exceptional services to meet the following mission:

***“To provide meaningful recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities that enhance their overall quality of life.”***



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The Board of Directors and staff recognized that awareness and engagement were vital to the merger's success. To address these needs, staff engaged with Campfire Concepts to develop a project that will help NWCSRA meet its mission and enhance its crucial relationships.

Initially, rebranding was chosen as an important first step to support NWCSRA's marketing efforts and foster brand awareness. The rebranding process was also a useful tool to help unify the two SRA cultures, solidify the association's position within the regional recreation services market, and codify staff beliefs about the association's meaning and philosophies through its logo and brand.



The Board of Directors and staff determined the next step in the process related to engagement and conducted a qualitative research study to gather feedback and input from key stakeholders. The objectives of the study are highlighted in this report and outlined below:

- Review trends at the local, state, and national level.
- Better understand participant needs considering varying pandemic restrictions and comfort levels.
- Analyze internal and external factors that are impacting the SRA.
- Review the SRA's core offerings to leverage niche programming and identify gaps in service provision.
- Identify the SRA's current and future priorities.
- Foster collaborative efforts and raise awareness of the SRA's services with strategic partners.



# 3

## Methods

Four distinct groups were targeted by NWCSRA staff (staff) and the Campfire Concepts team for participation in this study. Contributors included: NWCSRA Board members (Board); staff; participants, care providers, and families; and current or potential partners. During each session, participants were notified that their responses would be kept confidential and that quotations would be utilized to support themes that had been organized from their combined responses. Research and recording methods varied per session and are outlined below.



During the week of October 25, 2021, the Campfire Concepts team conducted virtual, individual interviews with the Board members. The interviews did not utilize audio or video recording technology. The interview facilitator wrote field notes to capture meaningful quotes and organize themes for this report. Quotations are not to be considered verbatim because the sessions were not audio or video recorded. Board interviews were conducted through video conference technology and lasted for roughly one half of an hour. The interview questions are included in Appendix A.

The staff focus group was conducted via virtual conference call on Monday, November 15, 2021. A majority of the full-time staff members participated in the session. Staff reviewed the purpose and objectives of the

focus group and shared reasons why they valued their colleagues prior to providing feedback about NWCSRA's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, priorities, and their vision for NWCSRA's future. Staff were also asked to share what made their previous SRA successful prior to the recent merger and why it is essential to carry those pieces forward into the future of NWCSRA. The moderator collected field notes from the discussion to organize staff responses into salient themes. The facilitator did not utilize audio or video recording technology. Quotations from the staff focus groups are not to be considered verbatim due to this fact. The session lasted for one and a half hours. The staff focus group questions are included in Appendix A.

# 4

## Themes: Board Member Interviews

### **Introductory Question**

Interviews began by asking Board members to discuss agency projects that they are most proud of, specifically in their impact on better serving individuals with disabilities. Several interviewees discussed the installation of inclusive playgrounds, some that nearly achieve universal status. Others were proud of the long-term vision and dedicated capital investments that have allowed their agency to continue carrying out an ADA transition plan in their parks and facilities. The interview participants also referenced specific accomplishments such as the development of an ADA coordinator position or accommodations that allowed a child with a disability to experience a special event for the first time.

Overall, the interviewees were proud of the Board and staff's dedication to a successful merger of their two SRAs. Board members recognized the significant investment of time and resources to ensure a smooth transition to a more traditional SRA system, and they have been pleased with the positive reception and comments from their constituents.



## Core Services & Previous Exceptional Services

Next, the Board was asked to define the core services for their SRA. A related question asked Board members to determine what exceptional qualities they would like to see the newly merged SRAs carry forward from their previous iterations.

On the surface, the interview participants focused on types of programming that the previous SRAs excelled at for individuals with disabilities. The adult day program, Special Olympics, sport, and special events were all mentioned as popular activities that are central to NWCSRA's mission. They also noted that Board members work well with each other and with staff, which they believed to be foundational to service development and implementation.

As the discussion continued with each Board member, the richness of their vision was revealed more deeply. Several concluded that the SRA may focus on recreation as a vehicle to serve individuals with disabilities, but the

most important aspect of its service is the social and relational aspects of care for individuals with disabilities and their families. They also noted that the previous SRAs had been exceptional at relationship-building activities. Individuals with disabilities and their families felt like they were part of the SRA family and network. Staff's abilities to offer individualized attention and special touches had established and grown a loyal user and participant base.

Additionally, the Board was reluctant to identify specific core services because they believed the SRA's strength was found in its adaptability:

"I'm not sure what their core service should be; it's obvious their primary focal point is inclusion and adaptability, but I don't want to pencil them in. If staff stay true to that focus, we will achieve our goal, no matter how leadership creatively evolves the core services over time."

## Trends in disability recreation.

Each interviewee was then asked if they noted recent trends in recreation for individuals with disabilities. Several design and structural elements were identified as trends that have improved access to playgrounds, benches, and ballfields. Sensory rooms were also seen as trending upgrades to recreation center infrastructure to better serve individuals with disabilities.

Many felt that areas of recent, rapid growth included requests for inclusion aide services, adaptive sport, and services/accommodations

for the aging population of individuals with disabilities and older adults.

Another Board member remarked that SRAs have always been leaders in inclusion, but they expressed curiosity about how SRAs will continue to respond to and serve the diversity and equity movement.

## National trends.

When asked to describe any local, state, or national trends that would impact NWCSRA in the coming months or years, staffing was by far the biggest concern. Parks and recreation agencies across the country have struggled to find employees,

especially part-time staff, and the interview participants felt this trend will acutely impact NWCSRA.

The pandemic also continues to have a lasting budgetary impact. Mitigation limits what staff can do and prevents some of their most important services such as one-on-one offerings. Inflation and supply chain issues also have significantly increased expenses. Issues related to staffing, the pandemic, and inflation have struck NWCSRA at a moment in its history when their merger grew their funding to support its needs, but also increased its service area.





## SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

### Challenges

At the outset of the situational analysis, Board members were asked to share their thoughts on external factors that might impact NWCSRA in the near future. The interview participants identified staffing, transportation, service area, and pandemic issues as the top challenges for NWCSRA.

The interview participants acknowledged that it is difficult to find qualified staff in the current job market. They believed this situation acutely impacts the services of NWCSRA, because its staff require specialized skills, even for part-time staff and drivers.

Transportation for individuals with disabilities was also noted to be a hurdle for care providers and family members of individuals with disabilities. Board members recognized that NWCSRA is working to provide alternative options for participants to attend programs and events; however, it has become difficult to find qualified drivers in the current workforce.

The Board members also shared that NWCSRA covers a large service area, and they believe it may take some time to adequately serve the entire region. They expressed slight concerns about residents' fear of change and their desire to stay close to home, and pondered how willing residents are to leave their neighborhoods due to the pandemic or increased driving distances. Despite these concerns, interviewees were optimistic that the pandemic may have shifted residents out of their normal routine, which has made them more open and willing to adapt to the new version of NWCSRA.

## Opportunities

In general, the interview participants were excited for what NWCSRA could accomplish when not encumbered by the pandemic. One Board member summarized the sentiments of the Board by stating, “We are eager to see what the SRA can do once we get back to normal. It feels like we have a brand-new car parked in the garage and we’ve only been able to sit in it. That’s still a great feeling, but the car is ready to do what it was meant to do!”

Other opportunities that were identified by the Board included the installation of an all-inclusive ballfield and the potential for collaboration with local school districts. Some noted that many residents are searching for, some might say desperate for, things to do and ways to connect. When offered in a safe manner, NWCSRA can and will provide traditional or modified programming options to meet this need.

## Weaknesses

Next, the Board members were asked to contemplate internal factors that might prevent NWCSRA from realizing its full potential. Interview participants identified aspects of the transition to a traditional SRA system as potential hurdles to overcome, such as merging teams, perspectives, and management/boardmanship styles.

Also, a common concern for member agencies of SRAs is finding and sharing adequate physical space for its SRA to provide programs and events. One interviewee commented that, “It is important for the member agencies to remember to include the SRA as part of our own program. We have to find them space when they need it!”



## Strengths

Indicative of internal satisfaction within the organization, the Board members spent less time discussing strengths and weaknesses, instead focusing on challenges and opportunities. Overall, interviewees felt that funding is “in a good place,” that staffing levels are sufficient, and that the NWCSRA team has been “very adaptable” throughout the transition and pandemic. Other expressions of strengths included: Board members working well together, transportation services, a centrally located headquarters, staff leadership, and member agency resources (i.e., indoor pool).

## Priorities

After the brief situational analysis, the Board members were asked to consider the information they had shared and determine what their top priority would be for NWCSRA moving forward. Most important priorities for interviewees included programming, outreach, communication, growth, relationships, supporting participants and their families, and the budget. The following quotes support the previously summarized points:

***“Programming and outreach are central to NWCSRA’s focus; they have ties to all other aspects. Programming and outreach are our connection points to participants and their families. It is where relationships are built and grow.”***

***“Relationships is our top priority. It is where we will grow.”***

***“NWC is poised to grow, and growth is our focus, and we have the capabilities and staff to do this with or without pandemic restrictions!”***

***“NWCSRA is a family to our families. Social support is so critical to them. I see how important the SRA is to participants and families when I attend their events and programs.”***

***“Communication is key, especially for our schools. We (member agency) don’t communicate well to all segments, even in our own [agency] let alone for our SRA.”***

***“NWCSRA is a family to our families. Social support is so critical to them. I see how important the SRA is to participants and families when I attend their events and programs.”***

***“First and foremost, we need to remain cognizant of our spending and budgetary needs. What alternative revenue sources should we consider? A Foundation appears to be an easy sell in the future after getting a few years under our belt.”***

## Future Visions

Finally, interviewees were asked to imagine a moment in the future, possibly five years from the present, in which they took the time to reflect on what NWCSRA had become or accomplished. Board members clearly displayed high expectations for the SRA. Words such as “model” and “powerhouse” were used to describe their vision for NWCSRA. Under ideal circumstances, the interview participants expect NWCSRA to grow. “NWCSRA has a solid foundation under it. The staff have the capabilities and good leadership.” “If we retain our personnel for the future, we have room to grow with this traditional SRA.”

Additionally, Board members focused their future visions on data analysis, potential partnerships, and niches. “I believe we can continue to reach more families. Fostering creativity will create an environment that will produce programs we haven’t even thought of.” “Who are we serving? Who do we need to serve that we are not currently? Veterans? Autism? Where are our participants coming from and what are their demographics? What is our target numbers? Who else is serving in these areas and how can we partner with them?”





## Other Comments & Thoughts

At the end of the interview, each Board member was asked if they had anything else they would like to share that was not covered during the conversation. Each interviewee chose to use this opportunity to address different, important points that are summarized in the quotations below:

“It’s important to keep our lines of communication open between the Board, staff, and our participants. We need to leverage the marketing departments of the member agencies and the SRA to help make the SRA visible.”

“I am eager to see where this goes once we get back to normal.”

“We have a lot of legacy participants and families. They want to be there. They want to participate. They want to be together. We’ve got a great core group of participants and staff that have gelled really well. It’s been a good move to merge and I’m proud of what we have done. Good things are ahead.”

“I’d like to see many things move forward, like Special Olympics and sensory rooms. It would be great to see data on participation and how we are promoting it. I’m looking for ways to leverage our return on investment. If people are using services, where can we add?”

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## Themes: Staff Focus Group

The staff focus group began with a mini team building exercise to introduce the moderator to NWCSRA's team in a unique way. Staff were asked to select a coworker that they would choose to start a new SRA with and why they would select that colleague. This technique was employed to encourage participation and increase comfort levels. After this exercise was complete, staff were notified about the standards and process for the remaining questions and were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions at any point when their colleagues were not speaking. Throughout the focus group, the facilitator also observed and noted verbal cues that expressed confirmation or disagreement with other's responses to factor as a component in coding the data.

## Changes in Demand

Next, focus group participants were asked to share the changes they have observed in demand over the last year. Staff agreed that the effects of the pandemic are deeper than the symptoms that are associated with the virus. They stated that some participants, especially in athletics, are desiring in-person activities due to their prolonged isolation and lack of social connection. One participant also received confirmation from the other focus group participants when they commented that NWCSRA users found “fun and whimsical” activities to be “very appealing.” The pandemic has been a dark time for many people, and staff felt that the individuals they serve were searching for activities that offered a moment of hope and joy to counterbalance their daily hardships.

Staff also noted increases in demand for day program services for older adults with disabilities, as evidenced by a growing wait list for this program.

## External Challenges or Threats

The next four questions were posed to staff to determine the internal and external factors that are impacting NWCSRA. First, staff focus group participants discussed external factors (challenges and opportunities) that may be outside of the control of staff but are important to identify for purposes of developing management or mitigation strategies. Staff responses about NWCSRA’s challenges or threats aligned with interview responses from the Board. Staff expressed concerns related to the pandemic, recruitment and retention of staff, inflation, programming space, hesitancy to return to in-person programming, political polarization, budget, and competition. The following quotes support the previously summarized themes:

“COVID! How will we grow? Or fully become a (traditional) SRA in a continuing pandemic? Is it going to become endemic?”

“Staffing is a real challenge right now. It’s hard to find and retain qualified staff.”



“Increases to our expenses impacts our own fees. Can people afford to send individuals with disabilities to programs in light of inflation?”

“Another challenge relates to having enough space. We work well with our member agencies, but their availability can be limited at times.”

“Families are not coming back - parents are hesitant to throw kids back into it. Some cannot come back because their child can't meet the mask requirements.”

“There is a diminishing trust of public agencies and governmental bodies. There has been a real erosion of trust that we have to work against, even if we are a trustworthy SRA. Everything is polarized.”

“We just have finite resources – only income from tax dollars – how do we keep a balanced budget?”

“More and more organizations are competing against us with similar programs to attempt to make a profit.”



## Key Areas of Untapped Potential

Staff’s opinions related to opportunities for NWCSRA were determined through competitive analysis and by asking focus group participants to identify key areas of untapped potential. In relation to key areas of untapped potential, staff were understandably focused on the effects of the pandemic. Staff contemplated the value of virtual and at-home activity boxes due to waning interest and the desire of NWCSRA’s users to find some semblance of a “return to normalcy” and/or “anything to bring back normal.” Staff struggled with feelings of untapped potential for NWCSRA in general due to pandemic restrictions. “I feel like we are birds in a cage. We want to fly, soar, but we are limited.”

Despite the pandemic, staff’s overarching vision for NWCSRA’s services are to provide safe and affordable options for individuals with disabilities. Under this umbrella, they found untapped potential in family style events, outreach, community partnerships including schools, and mental, social, and health and wellness programming. These concepts are supported by the following quotes from staff:

“Family events are so important; it might encourage people to return if they can safely interact with their child.”

“The mental health piece and social, (parents believe) my kid just needs to feel connected.”

“Outreach is few and far between. It’s hard to speak at events when they are not happening!”

“Connecting with community partners and the schools. We aren’t bringing together the region’s resources to the fullest extent.”

## Competitive Analysis

Staff were asked to share their opinions about programs or services offered by other SRAs that NWCSRA might consider adding in the future. In general, staff commented about the variety and volume of opportunities that were offered by other SRAs. It was recognized that the pandemic had hindered NWCSRA’s own in-person programming and that, if restrictions are lifted, the playing field would be leveled. The following quotes highlight the competitive analysis themes:

“There are so many options for participants, they can just pick and choose what they have time for as well as the financial part. The pandemic has changed everything. We’ve adapted well, but in-person programming just offers more options.”

Additionally, several focus group participants responded with ideas to leverage current programs, revisit previous programs which had closed, and also to consider a new area that is growing in popularity but would require training and connectivity with insurance providers and grant funding.

“Other SRAs may be serving more people with really involved physical disabilities. Sport may be an area we can really make an impact to match this need!”

“For instance, Park Districts and our member agencies offer after-school and before-school programs. We had these services at one point.”

### Internal Weaknesses

Next, staff were asked to reflect on internal weaknesses, such as deficiencies in resources or capabilities that may be hindering NWCSRA’s ability to accomplish its mission. Staff remarked that they had been in a constant state of flux for two years considering the merger, the pandemic, and other operational upgrades (i.e., software). Staff also identified the following internal factors as weakness:

- Space to program and space allocated for NWCSRA’s use at prime times are limited within member agency facilities
- The mental health of staff due to the day-to-day stress of their jobs and the pandemic
- NWCSRA’s own space may not be conducive to lead recreation programs within its facility

- “Do we have enough staff? Enough equipment? Are we settled on all of our needs and have accounted for everything after the merger?”

### Strengths

For the last question in the situational analysis, staff were posed the question, “What are the greatest strengths of NWCSRA that you can leverage?” Focus group participants identified NWCSRA’s member agencies, NWCSRA’s principles of management, and staff’s creativity, customer service, teamwork, and work ethic as NWCSRA’s top strengths. The following quotes emphasize these points:

“Our member agencies are well respected and have great relationships and partnerships!”

“We have a strong group of staff – they are talented, dedicated, want to be together and grow! Both part-time and full-time. It’s a dynamic team that comes from different backgrounds with different experiences that create a stronger whole.”

“We find our strength through our mission, vision, and values. They connect to the core of everything we do.”

“Our staff have a hard work ethic; they are willing to put in the time to see areas flourish. They have vision to expand services and what they are doing.”

## What do you want to be known for?

Next, staff were asked to consider what they want NWCSRA to be known for? Several themes emerged from this discussion to represent focus group participant's thoughts and feelings on this topic. Top items for which NWCSRA staff would prefer to be known would include a culture that exudes positivity, a trendsetting nature, and a fun, family-like atmosphere where cherished memories are made and built through staff's abilities to listen and respond with exceptional service outcomes. Additional items that staff would like to be known for include partnerships (i.e. police, fire, schools) trust, accommodation, and recognition throughout the communities NWCSRA serves.

In summary, NWCSRA staff might summarize their thoughts and feelings with the statement, "to know is to love." To know the needs and desires of NWCSRA's participants, families, and care providers may be the strongest indicator of love. And for its member agencies, communities, partners, and program participants and their families to know about, utilize, and advocate for NWCSRA's organization and staff is a strong indicator of love as well. Not only was this idea represented in their words throughout the focus group, but this vision also manifests itself through the ideation of NWCSRA's logo and organizational chart (i.e., heart).

## Most Important Priority

The moderator asked the focus group participants to review what had been shared during the session and consider what might be NWCSRA's most important priority from what they heard. Staff responded in agreement that they desired to be in concordance with one another, the Board, and the people they serve. Focus group participants yearned for continued movement toward unity, harmony, and growth from "heading in the same direction" and "being on the same page."





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## Future Visions

Staff were asked to envision a future celebration related to their success. Then, interview participants were asked to think about how they would encourage themselves and each other to achieve said future goal. Typically, focus group participants from park and recreation agencies will respond to this question with specificity related to capital projects, budgetary concerns, and other types of visionary topics for their agency. Many practitioners desire to grow their organizations, construct a legacy through facilities, or change lives through recreation programming. However, many fall short of these goals because of a variety of obstacles, some of which include a lack of collective focus that is driven through positivity and grace. NWCSRA's staff responses were indicative of these inspirational qualities that are necessary to lay the foundation to achieve their goals.

“I'd tell us to remember to always be kind.”

“It all begins and ends in your mind. Remind ourselves we are the first two SRAs that have ever merged. Let's give ourselves credit and extend each other grace.”

“When blending together things will go wrong. When they do, keep picking each other up.”

“It's okay to ask for help to help yourself! You can trust your team members.”

“We can laugh, or we can cry. Life is about which one are you going to choose!”

“Crisis plus time equals humor.”

## Vital Elements from Previous SRAs

Focus group participants were then asked if they had any additional questions that they would like to pose to the group. One staff member asked, “What's one thing that is vital that we need to make sure we bring on our journey from our previous agencies and experiences that we don't forget about to bring with us?”

Responses to this question varied and are represented below:

“Maintain the family feel. We can lean on and move forward with each other and our participants and their families.”

“Staff development is vital. The emphasis for this needs to be on part-time staff.”

“We are on the cusp of innovative programs – serving participants with autism and mental health diagnoses. Exploring programs such as Friday friends and fine arts programs.”

“Our energy and humor are vital. Good vibes and the ability to laugh at ourselves should be brought with us.”

# 6

## Themes: Participant, Care Providers, and Family Members

Two focus groups were conducted for participants and their family members. The first focus group, conducted on Saturday, January 22, 2022, included six family members, and it was conducted at the NWCSRA building in Romeoville. The second focus group, conducted on Monday, January 31, 2022, included seven family members plus one participant, and it was held virtually via Zoom. Each focus group began with an introduction by NWCSRA staff before they departed the space, and then the focus group facilitator took over to run the session. The facilitator began by explaining the overall purpose behind collecting this information via focus group. Participants were encouraged to offer their candid opinions and ideas to help the agency continue to improve. Participants were reminded to be respectful of one another, including feeling free to share differing opinions if they came up. No issues of conflict or difficulty among participants arose during either of the sessions.

The focus groups did not utilize audio or video recording technology to produce exact transcripts. The focus group facilitator wrote field notes to capture meaningful quotes and organize themes for this report; quotations are not to be considered verbatim.

## Introduction

The first question asked participants to take 30 seconds to introduce themselves. A few participants gave a short and direct answer, but many followed up their personal introduction with a major point they wanted to make during the focus group. These major points, that were often reflected throughout the focus groups, included concerns about availability of programs in Plainfield, concerns that the merger will result in fewer programs or fewer spots within programs, a lack of consistency with programs, and a strong interest in new and longer programs. A few such statements included:

“I live in Plainfield and I haven’t always felt represented. I’ve just had to do a lot of driving because there’s not as much in my area.”

“My biggest issue with the merger is I don’t want to see programs suffer. Some, like basketball, have large numbers of participants. But what about other programs? Will they be there after the pandemic?”

“The adult day program is great; without it there would be nothing to do. But they never settled on a consistent program [e.g., daily schedule]. I know it’s been difficult with the pandemic, but I would like to see them set a standard and stick to it.”

To be fair, a focus group member in a different focus group provided a contrasting view to this last point. This person noted that they love how detailed the camp schedule is, but this same person went on to minorly critique the staff for Friday Fundays, noting that they had to repeatedly ask the staff for information about food because their child had dietary restrictions. They noted that, ultimately, the staff proactively responded to their needs by reaching out at the beginning of the week because they knew to expect their request.

Next, focus group members were asked what services they would like to see developed if they oversaw the SRA. Participants responded with a multitude of options. Some members noted they would like to see longer programs; for many parents, due to the drive from home to the facility, they spend more time driving than their participant actually spends in the program. Thus, they would like to see a sampling of five-to-six-hour programs that incorporate cooking, dinner, and a movie, or even field trips. A greater variety of programs was a consistent request of focus group members, including programs that focus on life skills. As a few members put it:

“It is so important for kids to have these skills: cooking, making beds, social interaction. They need planned house activities that will help them adapt in real life.”

“My daughter’s disability means she’s always in a segregated group. I understand that groups are divided by ability level, but her group has gotten smaller and very quiet. She is very social, and I would like to see her be more included with other, more vocal groups (even if she’s not vocal).”

A few members noted that some of the former iterations of the SRA offered field trips, including overnight trips. Several people commented that after the pandemic they would like to see those kinds of opportunities to return. One family member noted:

“I would like to see more field trips for adults. My child sees their [non-SRA] peers getting these kinds of trips and so should they.”

Other focus group members noted the importance of the start time of programs. They explained that a 7pm start is too late for their participant because they need to be home early enough to get plenty of rest.

Focus group members were then asked about their expectations for NWCSRA in the next year. Members were understanding about the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but many hoped that the organization was ready with a plan for when the pandemic ends. One suggestion that was discussed at length was the registration process. Several members said that it was past time for an online registration system because the current in-person registration was not feasible for everyone. It was also stated that an online system would help address any potential program overlap when people were trying to register for programs. One participant added that there never used to be program overlap because the coordinators worked together to schedule programs.



Members also noted that sometimes the program and activity list was not sent out far enough in advance of the registration date. As a result, several families did not have enough time to review the schedule with their participant in advance. This left them scrambling to make sure they got their participant in the programs they wanted, but they were worried about missing out on things or being placed on a wait list. As noted earlier, members again expressed concern about the merger resulting in fewer rather than more available spots in programs.

One member commented that they felt NWCSRA's safety procedures were "spot on" and that they hoped to see that continue.

The next question asked focus group members about whom the SRA serves and who might have been overlooked. Overall, family members were extremely positive about NWCSRA's service and attempts to reach current and potential participants. Members detailed the SRA's dedicated care and professionalism at length. Family members felt that the SRA staff were well prepared to handle the daily aspects of the job. Several members noted the need for something like an adult summer camp. One member stated:

"I would love to see an adult summer camp. Couldn't we utilize the college student population? One of my child's summer camp counselors showed up at his basketball game over the Christmas break. That was so nice



to see.”

“Summer camp and social club are great. My child’s joy and confidence are through the roof when he participates, and his anxiety is almost non-existent. The counselors are especially great – they are close to his age so they’re his buddies.”

“A lot of the counselors are siblings of individuals with disabilities. They just get it. They’re prepared to work with this population. Plus there’s the high school buddy programs that demonstrate this line of work as a potential career path.”

Amid this positivity, family members still had suggestions for improvement. One major concern related to canceled programs. A family member explained that one of their participant’s gymnastics programs was canceled. She noted that staff found a solution at another agency and she appreciated that effort but did not take the offer because the drive was too far to the other agency. Other focus group members asked if they could be involved in helping with programs that might be canceled due to low enrollment. Comments about program cancellation included:

“I was contacted about a low enrolled program for my participant. They said the class needed six and we only had three. I contacted the other two families, and we were all willing to pay double to make the program run, but they said no.”





“I wish there was a way they would contact me if my participant was in a low enrolled program. If you gave me some time maybe I could help drum up interest with other families to get them to sign up their participants. Then more people could enjoy it, and the agency would benefit from the added registration.”

Some concerns were shared about the availability of programs as their participants got older. Several family members, who noted their children were in their 30’s, worried that as their participants aged there would be less available. Another focus group member chimed in and said their participant, in their 50s, still participated in many programs, but their involvement was different because they were not able to be as physically active.

Lastly, in terms of who

might be overlooked, focus group members stated that NWCSRA does a great job of serving those with cognitive disabilities, but more could be done for those with physical disabilities. Several members noted the importance of serving individuals who use wheelchairs, but they admitted they were not that knowledgeable on the prevalence or interest in services from the wheelchair-using population.

Focus group members were then asked about other services and unmet needs for their participants as well as all individuals with disabilities in their area. Members shared some similar things from previous answers about online registration and services for individuals who use wheelchairs. Members were largely complimentary of NWCSRA for transportation, online program offerings (“nice to have that option but we realize it’s not for everyone”), and overall meeting their family’s needs. One member stated:

“The transportation is wonderful. Getting picked up at different locations is great. I hope this only expands after the pandemic ends.”

However, another member noted that the absence of the shuttle service during the pandemic has been hard. They realized the pandemic changed things, but they hope the shuttle services resume soon.

The next question focused on programs/activities and facilities/spaces that are needed but not currently available. Most of the responses to this question focused on members’ frustrations that more programs and services were not offered in Plainfield. A few members acknowledged that with the COVID-19 pandemic they were not utilizing as many services in Plainfield as they used to, but they hoped they were not squeezed out in the future. Other members expressed frustration



about space availability in Plainfield. As a few people stated:

“We feel like we have to beg [for space in Plainfield]. We are always the ones who lose out.”

“When they built PARC in Plainfield, they said it would include individuals with disabilities. But once it was built it all changed. What happened to ‘serving the whole community?’”

The focus group facilitator asked NWCSRA Executive Director Mike Selep to briefly join the call when these comments were brought up. Selep stated that facility scheduling was a tricky issue due to the varied demands on limited space. Selep noted that the SRA currently utilizes the most space in Romeoville and the least in Plainfield. Romeoville has the most facility space per capita and Plainfield the least.



6

The last question asked focus group members about their top priorities and final thoughts. Members shared many different points, including:

“Maintain what you are doing – the staff and facilities.”

“Need to add more programs, including longer ones on the weekend.”

“After COVID, how do you help NWCSRA grow? We hope the popularity of programs will explode.”



“I think the merger was phenomenal. There has been very little staff turnover.”

“I would like to see a quarterly newsletter from NWCSRA with goals for the upcoming period.”

Another final thought related to communication about programs. A few members stated it would be nice to have the ability to add multiple email addresses to program notifications. For instance, in some cases participants have parents who are divorced, and it would be nice for both parents to receive program updates. In other cases, participants may have one parent drop them off and another pick them up from a program. Email communication that went to both parents would help save them the extra step of always having to forward the email to the other parent.

# 7

## Themes: Stakeholder Focus Group

The final focus group, conducted on Thursday, February 3, 2022, included individuals representing various stakeholder groups in the community. These stakeholder groups included: Bolingbrook Arts Council, Valley View School District, Bolingbrook Knights of Columbus, Plainfield School District, Lockport School District, Romeoville Police Department, Angelic Kindness, Bolingbrook Police Department, American Legion - Romeoville, Homer Glen Abilities Awareness Group, Legacy Ranch, and Will & Grundy County Child and Family Connections. Focus group members were asked to spend 30 seconds introducing themselves, their agencies, and their connection to NWCSRA. The focus group questions that were employed for the first two groups largely centered on individuals who utilized the SRAs services. Thus, the questions for this group were slightly adapted to ensure the proper fit and relevance. The group was engaged and had many relevant comments and ideas. Members shared several important points that coalesced into a few main themes.

The first main theme related to the need for better communication. One of the main obstacles, several people noted, was the lack of understanding and education about the programs and services that exist for individuals with disabilities in the area. Some members stated that they did not know about the types of services the other agencies on the call offered; the SRA seemed to be the common factor connecting many of these groups. Other members noted the frustration in dealing with some public agencies about the SRAs services, with one person saying:

“I called and it took me like 20 transfers before I found the right person to talk to. Most people just said ‘We don’t do that’ but I knew that they did. They need to train their staff better to know about the SRA and what it offers.”

The second theme focused on the need for better part-



nerships. This was the topic that the group spent most of the time discussing during the focus group. There was strong interest in better partnerships among those on the call. These individuals could see the overlap and connections not just with the SRA but with each other as well. Many individuals shared contact information through the Zoom chat, and they asked that the SRA follow up with them as well. There was a strong interest in making this kind

of meeting a regular gathering to share information, ideas, and resources. During a debrief after the call the focus group facilitator shared this information with the NWCSRA staff who said they would connect the group via email.

A few members focused on creating a shared virtual space for listing upcoming events:

“It would be great to have a directory or calendar that

has everyone on this call's events on it. It's a struggle to go to each individual website to update things."

"A shared calendar would be great. It doesn't have to be all put on the SRA, either. Each organization could have its own log in to be able to share information on the site."

"Many of our organizations already have Facebook pages. We could try to share between our groups so that we reach more people."

Related to partnerships, many agencies talked about the importance of cross-promotion at their programs and events. It sounds like the opportunities are already there, but it will take more coordination to make it happen. Fortunately, members noted the infrastructure already exists in some places:

"We had a great opportunity to talk with parents through our special needs PTA. And the biggest audience was always when they had a guest

speaker. There was lots of information sharing at these events."

"When we do fairs and events we try to make space for groups working with individuals with disabilities. And we make sure to focus not just on the individual but the family as well."

"It would be nice to host some roundtable events where we can talk about accessibility for our first responders and businesses."



A third main theme focused on the need to think broadly about NWCSRA's services. Focus group members wanted to see more services for disabled veterans as well as senior citizens. It was noted that these groups, particularly veterans, can be difficult to connect with. But through the types of partnerships listed above it was hoped that the SRA could learn more to best serve these populations.

The fourth theme dealt with transportation. Several members mentioned the importance of transportation services to ensure continued participation in programs. One member specifically noted that they used to work for Tri-County and knows they had shuttle services that were really helped. But the shuttle services are not the same anymore, and Dial-a-Ride services do not work for individuals who live too far away. This member further added:

"The most recent cohort of students in our school was heavily involved in the SRA.

But the new cohort is much less involved. It's a huge drop off. And I worry it's because of transportation."

Lastly, focus group members shared several different thoughts about the priorities they would like to see going forward for NWCSRA:

"More advertising of the services you offer."

"Better transportation for students and families."

"Collaboration. Both sides need to reach out."

"Interagency networking. A forum for this group would be excellent."

"Contact villages and senior centers to put a link for people to get about the various services available to them."

# A Appendix





## NWCSRA | Board Interviews

### Standard Questions for Board Members

1. Introduce Campfire Concepts team and reason for meeting if needed.
2. Board member introduction if needed: Career path and how long have they been with their agency.

We would like to hear your thoughts and comments on these general areas.

1. In your opinion, what should be the core services of NWCSRA?
2. What current trends in accessibility or inclusion are you currently following?
  - a. Other local, state, or national trends that will impact NWCSRA?
3. At your agency, what accessibility/inclusivity project(s) or program(s) are you most proud of?
4. In the merger of the two SRAs, what did your previous SRA excel at that is essential for NWCSRA to excel at as well?
5. Are there areas of concern or challenges NWCSRA faces in the merger?
6. Are there opportunities NWCSRA should consider exploring?
7. Are there special recreation programs/activities or a facility/space needed in your community that are not currently available?
8. In your opinion, what is the most important priority for NWCSRA?
9. Where would you like to see NWCSRA in five years?
10. Do you have any thoughts you would like to express that have not been discussed in this conversation?



## NWCSRA | STAFF DISCUSSION INFORMATION & QUESTIONS

1. Welcome and introduction of moderator(s)
2. Report will present salient themes with every attempt to limit personal identifiers.

### I. Questions

1. Please tell us your name, job title, and one reason why you work for an SRA.
2. What external challenges or threats does NWCSRA face?
  - a. What are other SRAs or recreation service providers offering that NWCSRA is not?
3. What changes in demand have you noticed in the last year?
  - a. What are some key areas of untapped potential?
4. What are the internal weaknesses that may be hindering the organization's ability to accomplish its mission?
  - a. What deficiencies in resources or capabilities impact the organization?
5. What are the greatest strengths of NWCSRA that you can leverage?
  - a. What do you want to be known for?
6. What recreation programs, activities, or services are needed in the communities you serve that are not currently available?
7. In your opinion, what is the most important priority for NWCSRA?
8. Where would you like to see NWCSRA in five years?
9. Do you have any thoughts you would like to express that have not been discussed in this conversation?

## NWCSRA Focus Group Protocol & Questions

### 1. Housekeeping

- a. Thank everyone for coming. Share food and restroom locations. Verify disclaimer was received by all participants and note that we are recording to review, affirm, and identify themes. Do our best to keep confidential – will remove all identifiers. There is some degree of lack of anonymity due to sharing in a group setting with your peers present.
- b. Introduce Andrew Kerins, EIU and staff member(s), NWCSRA.
- c. Explain the purpose of the focus groups. Stress that everyone's opinions are important, and we want to hear *each* person's thoughts about *each* topic.
- d. Briefly review the merger of the two SRAs into NWCSRA.

### 2. Questions

- a. Participant introductions: Will each of you take about 30 seconds to introduce yourself to the group? Please tell us how you used or currently use the services of the previous SRA or NWCSRA programs, events, and activities.
- b. In some ways, NWCSRA has a clean slate! If you were in charge of an SRA what services would you develop and offer?
- c. Taking into consideration the recent merger and pandemic, what are your expectations for NWCSRA in the next year?
- d. The term “individuals with disabilities” encompasses many populations. In your opinion, what specific populations or groups does an SRA currently serve?
  - i. What groups have been overlooked? Or is there growing demand in any group that NWCSRA should consider developing programs and services?
- e. What other SRA services are valuable to your household?
  - i. What SRA services have been valuable to your household during the pandemic?
- f. Are there opportunities for NWCSRA to address unmet recreation needs for individuals with disabilities in your area?
  - i. Are there special recreation programs/activities or a facility/space needed in your community that are not currently available?



### NWSRA Strategic Plan Regional Focus Group Protocol & Questions

#### I. Housekeeping

- i. Thank everyone for coming. Verify consent form was received by all participants and note that we are recording to review, affirm, and identify themes.
- ii. We assume you all know each other very well, but in case you don't know us:
  - i. Introduce Andrew Kerins, EIU, Jarrod Scheunemann, Campfire Concepts,

#### II. Questions

1. How would you define disability?
  - a. What disabilities do you see in people you serve?
2. Have you ever heard of a Special Recreation Association (SRA)?
  - a. If yes, what do you believe an SRA does?
  - b. If yes, are you aware of any way that your agency has collaborated with an SRA?
3. Now that we are all on the same page and/or you've learned more about what an SRA offers, do any immediate ideas that come to mind on how your organization could (further) collaborate with NWCSRA?
  - a. Are there tools or resources that you would need to make your idea successful?
4. If you were creating a brand-new organization that would serve the recreation needs of individuals with disabilities, what services would you offer?
5. We'd like to take a moment to understand your own pressing issues and priorities to determine if NWCSRA can help in any way. What is your top priority for your position in the next year?
6. Beyond what we have discussed so far today, what do you believe NWCSRA should prioritize?

## NWCSRA Study Consent Form

This focus group is part of a research study examining the Northern Will County Special Recreation Association (NWCSRA). As such, we are required to share that participation is voluntary. You may cease your participation at any time. Additionally, this consent form will explain the purpose of the research and the potential benefits and risks of your cooperation. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have at any time.

**Lead Researcher:** Jarrod Scheunemann  
**Research Firm:** Campfire Concepts  
**Contact:** jarrod@wearecampfireconcepts.com  
217-390-5857

### *Purpose of participation.*

You and/or members of your household have been identified as valued patrons of the Northern Will County Special Recreation Association (NWCSRA). Your opinion matters to the Special Recreation Association. The NWCSRA board of directors and staff would like to know how they can best meet your needs.

Participation in this focus group is of your own free-will and volition. Your participation will not positively or negatively affect your relationships and standing with the NWCSRA. You are free to leave a focus group or decline to answer any questions at any time. The research firm reserves the right to ask anyone to leave a focus group if it is within the best interests of the study.

Several focus groups will be conducted to solicit opinions of various NWCSRA stakeholders.

### *Purpose of this study.*

The purpose of the focus groups is to explore NWCSRA resident and user opinions, interests, needs, desires, and value of the NWCSRA's program and service. The results will be compiled and presented to the NWCSRA board, staff, and the participants. Focus group attendees will also be invited to participate in future discussions about the results from the focus groups and potential strategies for the future in light of current constraints and resident needs.

### *Study methods and procedures.*

The dates, times, and locations of the focus groups will be predetermined by the NWCSRA. The focus groups will be audio-recorded and will last between one and two hours. Audio-recording is mandatory.

*We know parks & recreation in Illinois.*

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