

# Our Social Places and Opportunities for Teens Program (Our SPOT) Evaluation

Final Report

September 2025





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# Introduction

Our Social Places and Opportunities for Teens (Our SPOT) is a year-round initiative offered at 16 of the 59 local and community regional parks across Los Angeles County. Designed and administered by the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, the program is funded by the Departments of Public Health, Probation, and Mental Health. The program continues to expand and, more recently, extended its hours to support county-wide youth diversion efforts. This expansion was made possible for FY 25-26 with the continued support from DPH, Probation, and their newest partner, the Department of Youth Development. Expanded services for FY 25-26 also include a year-round supper program, transportation, and a year-round sports program.

Our SPOT provides structured youth development programming for teens in grades 7–12 living in high-need communities. The program includes a variety of components such as recreation, leadership development, arts and culture, human relations, health education, and the cultivation of positive peer and adult relationships. It operates at parks that also host the Department of Economic Opportunity, Youth@Work program, expanding working opportunities for Our SPOT teens. The Youth@Work program places youth in employment opportunities to help prevent youth disconnection and emphasizes early career exploration.

The program is rooted in a health equity and social justice framework, particularly focused on serving unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County where disparities in resources, public safety, and socioeconomic opportunity persist. Park locations are selected based on criteria such as youth population size, school dropout rates, household poverty levels, and local crime indices.

Our SPOT aims to support the growth of emerging youth leaders through culturally and developmentally relevant programming. To assess the program's impact on positive youth development, the Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention has partnered with Harder+Company Community Research (Harder+Co) to conduct a comprehensive evaluation. The DPR team draws from evaluation findings to make continuous program improvements. Improvements include expanding opportunities for youth through a wide range of programs and services offered at all Our SPOT locations, such as mentoring, arts and culture, technology access, sports, and life-skills training. Signature empowerment events including the annual Girls Empowerment Conference, the Girls Empowerment Dinner, and the Teen Summit bring together thousands of youth each year to participate in educational workshops, leadership development sessions, and resource fairs that promote well-being, mental health, social-emotional learning, and positive youth development. These events, combined with daily programming, are designed to prevent youth disconnection by addressing barriers such as food insecurity, lack of transportation, and exposure to violence, while also creating safe spaces that foster resilience, confidence, and community belonging.

## Evaluation Goals

The Our SPOT program evaluation is designed to gather insights from both youth participants and program staff to ensure the initiative continues to meet its goals and evolves to better serve its communities. This year's evaluation aims to:

1. Monitor ongoing program implementation;
2. Identify key successes and challenges in delivering the program; and
3. Deepen understanding of the participant experience and the program's impact on youth development.

Harder+Company used a mixed-methods approach to capture both the breadth and depth of participant and stakeholder experiences. This methodology enabled a comprehensive and meaningful analysis of the program's implementation and its influence on youth outcomes.

# Key Findings

Our SPOT operated in 16 community parks across Los Angeles County which fall into three regions (Exhibit 1). The program draws from over 50 local feeder public schools in communities near each park. School districts represented include Los Angeles Unified School District, Duarte, Keppel, Wilsona, Pasadena, and Compton, among others.

## Exhibit 1. Our SPOT Program Sites by Region

Region	Our SPOT Park Sites
North	El Cariso; Loma Alta; Stephen Sorensen; Jackie Robinson Park
South	East Rancho Dominguez Park; Mayberry Park; Mona Park; Lennox Park; Franklin D Roosevelt Park; Earvin "Magic" Johnson Park
East	Belvedere Park; City Terrace; Pamela Park; San Angelo; Ruben F Salazar; Eugene A. Obregon Park

## Enrollment and Demographics

Across all 16 parks, there were 21,964 youth visits this year. Hispanic/Latino youth represent the largest racial group for all Our SPOT regions. Across all park locations, 1,048 youth were recorded as Hispanic/Latino (86%; 52% White), 9% Black, 4% race unknown or other, and 1% Asian. Over half of youth (63%) were logged as male and 37% were logged as female. The average age of youth who attend is 15 years old.



### The 5C's of Positive Youth Development

**Competence** | Being able to act effectively in school, social situations, and at work

**Confidence** | Believing in one's self

**Character** | Knowing what is right and wrong and how to do the right thing

**Connection** | Working collaboratively with others

**Caring** | Having a sense of compassion or social justice

**Contribution+** | Enacting behaviors indicative of the 5C's by contributing positively to self, family, community, and society

## Program Impact on Youth

**Overall, Our SPOT participants experienced positive change in key domains of social-emotional learning.** Harder+Co used a retrospective pre- and post-survey (known as the Positive Youth Development Sustainability Scale or PYDSS) to assess youths’ growth in areas related to social-emotional learning in the Our SPOT program.<sup>1</sup> The PYDSS<sup>2</sup> uses a five-point scale, and response options range from strongly disagree to strongly agree, as well as a “not applicable” option in cases where items do not apply to the respondent. The following tables show descriptive differences between how youth felt about each statement in retrospect, prior to participating in the program (“before program”), and at the time of assessment administration (“after program”).

**Exhibit 2. PYDSS Average Scores**

Subscale	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score**
Confidence	3.93	4.27	177	0.34*
Caring	3.97	4.34	176	0.36*
Connection	3.84	4.21	177	0.37*
Competence	3.84	4.32	177	0.47*
Character	3.87	4.30	178	0.43*
Contribution+	3.81	4.23	178	0.41*

\* $p < 0.001$

\*\*Figures may not sum precisely due to rounding adjustments



<sup>1</sup> The tool, developed by Sieng, Scott, and Irimata at Arizona State University, is a 26-item retrospective questionnaire developed for use with young people ages 8-18 years old in youth programs of various types.

<sup>2</sup> Sieng, M, Cloutier, S. & Irimata, K. (2018). Positive youth development sustainability scale (PYDSS): The development of an assessment tool. *Journal of Social Change, 10*, 81-97.

Pre-post analysis showed that youth reported significantly higher scores after the program compared with their retrospective ratings before participation. This pattern held across all six youth asset domains, indicating positive change in these internal assets. The average difference score was also significant for each individual item. Although this analysis did not include a control group and therefore cannot conclusively attribute all changes to the program, it is likely that *at least some* improvements are a result of participation in Our SPOT. Among all domains, the Competence and Character scales demonstrated the largest average increases, suggesting that the Our SPOT program is supporting youth in learning to do what is right and in contributing to their families and communities (Exhibit 3).

**Overall, Our SPOT participants reported relatively meaningful improvements in social-emotional learning domains.** We also conducted *effect size analysis* to determine the meaningfulness of the change in PYDSS scores, beyond statistical significance. As a general rule, in social science and educational research, effect sizes of .2 or less are considered small, those around .5 are considered medium, and those around .8 and above are considered large. Medium to large effect sizes indicate that the difference is more meaningful whereas small effect sizes indicate the difference may not be meaningful, even if statistically significant. As can be seen in Exhibit 3, the effect sizes for five of six scales of the PYDSS were in the medium range, while the domain *Competence* yielded a large effect size. Taken together with statistical significance, we can be more confident in concluding that the differences detected by the PYDSS represent meaningful change in youth’s social emotional learning skills and are not likely due to chance.



**Exhibit 3. PYDSS Effect Size Analysis**

Subscale	Average Difference Score	Cohen’s d <sup>3</sup> Effect Size	N
Confidence	0.34	0.63	177
Caring	0.36	0.63	176
Connection	0.37	0.65	177
Competence	0.47	0.87	177
Character	0.43	0.77	178
Contribution+	0.41	0.65	178

Exhibits 5-10 include scores for each item within the six scales of the PYDSS. The difference between before and after scores was significant for all items. The items are organized in descending order, from the item with the largest average difference score to the lowest.

Results of the Confidence scale (Exhibit 4) indicate that youth are gaining self-worth through their time in the program and are happy in the program. Though still a positive change, the item with the least change is about their happiness at school, indicating that there are other factors in the school environment that impact their confidence and happiness that the program may want to understand further to help support.

<sup>3</sup> There were only minimal differences between Cohen’s d and Hedges correction, we’ve reported Cohen’s d for ease of explanation.

**Exhibit 4. Confidence | Believing in oneself and one’s ability**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
I feel like I am worth something	3.90	4.33	174	0.43
I am happy at school	3.68	4.04	175	0.36
I am happy in this program	4.07	4.41	176	0.34
I am happy with the people in my life	3.97	4.31	175	0.34
I am happy at home	3.95	4.26	175	0.31
I am satisfied with life	4.00	4.29	176	0.29
<b>Confidence Subscale Average</b>	<b>3.93</b>	<b>4.27</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>0.34</b>

Results of the Caring scale (Exhibit 5) indicate that youth are learning and building their sense of empathy, yet it may still be a struggle for them, as shown by the lowest “After” score for the second item and the lowest change in the last item.

**Exhibit 5. Caring | Having a sense of compassion or social justice**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
When others need help, I help them	3.97	4.35	175	0.38
It is easy for me to know how others feel	3.83	4.21	175	0.38
I try to encourage others when they are not as good at something as me	3.95	4.33	176	0.38
I care about the feelings of my friends	4.13	4.48	174	0.35
I can be counted on to help if someone needs me	4.01	4.33	175	0.32
<b>Caring Subscale Average</b>	<b>3.97</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>0.36</b>

The Connection scale (Exhibit 6) indicates that youth are identifying and connecting with mentors and people they look to and admire during their time in the Our SPOT program. Given the importance of caring adults during adolescence, this finding indicates Our SPOT is supporting the development of essential connections that may not otherwise be available to its young participants.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/topics/item/5-fast-facts-about-the-importance-of-caring-adults-during-our-adolescent-years#:~:text=Secure%20and%20supportive%20relationships%20with,sense%20of%20self%20and%20identity.>

**Exhibit 6. Connection | Working collaboratively with parents, peers, siblings, teachers, coaches, or other community members**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
I have many different types of friends	3.82	4.30	174	0.49
My friends care about me	3.90	4.28	176	0.38
I feel connected to my friends	3.93	4.29	174	0.36
I have people in my life I look to and admire	3.89	4.24	175	0.35
I feel connected to my teachers	3.66	3.94	173	0.28
<b>Connection Subscale average</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>4.21</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>0.37</b>

Although there are only two items in the Competence scale (Exhibit 7), both indicate that youth in Our SPOT are increasing their interest in their future and have better clarity of what they want their future to look like.

**Exhibit 7. Competence | Being able to act effectively in school, in social situations, and at work**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
I know what I want to be when I grow up	3.80	4.30	176	0.51
I have goals in my life	3.90	4.35	176	0.45
<b>Competence Subscale Average</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>4.32</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>0.47</b>

The Character scale (Exhibit 8) shows the largest average difference of all the subscales and indicates that youth in Our SPOT are honing their sense of right and wrong, as well as their capacity to choose to do the right thing and be dependable and accountable to themselves and others.

**Exhibit 8. Character | Knowing what is right or wrong and how to do the right thing**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
I like to learn new things	3.73	4.24	175	0.51
It is important for me to do the right thing	3.93	4.38	175	0.46
If I promise to do something I can be counted on to do it	3.95	4.29	175	0.34
<b>Character Subscale Average</b>	<b>3.87</b>	<b>4.30</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>0.43</b>

As a culmination of all other subscales, the Contribution scale (Exhibit 9) shows how the increases in confidence, caring, connection, competence and character result in youth wanting to make a difference and be active contributors to their communities.

**Exhibit 9. Contribution | Enact behaviors indicative of the 5C's by contributing positively to self, family, community, and ultimately society**

Item	Before Program	After Program	N	Average Difference Score
I take an active role in my community	3.69	4.23	175	0.54
It is important for me to try to make a difference	3.80	4.28	177	0.48
I have things that I can offer to others	3.85	4.20	174	0.35
I like to work with others to solve problems	3.90	4.24	174	0.34
I am someone who gives to benefit others	3.89	4.21	174	0.33
<b>Contribution Subscale Average</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>4.23</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>0.41</b>



**Generally, Our SPOT participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the program.** An 11-item scale was included near the end of the youth assessment to understand youth’s level of satisfaction with the program and how they perceived different aspects of the program experience. The analysis shows that youth reported having *overall positive program experiences* – both in terms of general satisfaction and specific program aspects (on a five-point agreement scale). The largest percentages of participants agreed with statements related to the friendliness and knowledge of program staff.

**Exhibit 10. Program Satisfaction Results (% of respondents who agreed, N=171-176)**



**Program satisfaction had some minor variation across demographic groups, such as age group, gender, and race/ethnicity.** Generally, the percentage of youth who “liked participating in the program” gets larger as age increases. More young men reported agreeing than young women, and

Hispanic/Latino youth had the highest percentage of youth agree with this statement.

**Exhibit 11. Program Satisfaction by Demographic Characteristics\***

"I liked participating in the program."	% Agree	N
12 years or younger	80%	15
13-14 years old	87%	24
15-18 years old	93%	113
Woman/Young Woman	89%	62
Man/Young Man	94%	97
Black or African American	87%	16
Hispanic/Latino	93%	121
White	90%	10

\*We only report statistics for demographic groups with at least 10 responses.

**Substance Use Screening**

**Overall, Our SPOT participants have not engaged with substances or risky behavior associated with substance use in the last year.** The youth assessment tool also included the CRAFFT, a well-validated substance use screening tool for adolescents aged 12-21. As shown in Exhibit 13, the majority of Our SPOT youth do not report engaging in substance use. Ninety-seven percent or more of youth reported not drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, using nicotine or vapes or any other drugs.

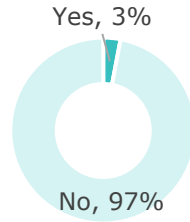
**Exhibit 12. CRAFFT Substance Use Results**

How many days have you used the following in the past 12 months?	Not Used (0 days)	Used (1+ days)	N
Alcohol	98%	2%	178
Marijuana	97%	3%	178
Other Drugs	100%	0%	178
Nicotine Or Vape	99%	1%	178

A small percentage of youth (7%) reported having ever ridden in a car driven by someone (including themselves) who was high or had been using alcohol or drugs (Exhibit 13). Despite the confidentiality of the survey, it is likely that this data may be underreported due to recall or social desirability bias or fear of getting in trouble.

### Exhibit 13. CRAFTT Risky Behavior Results

Have you ever ridden in a car driven by someone who was high or had been using alcohol or drugs? (N=172)



### Perceptions of Impact from Qualitative Data Collection

From the **youth** perspective

**Overall, youth have had positive experiences in Our SPOT this year.** Many youth focus group participants expressed satisfaction with the activities and appreciated what they learned from the program. One youth participant said, “I like how they support us and what we want. They help us try to reach our goals.”

**Our SPOT has helped youth learn to communicate and build relationships with others.** Many youth participants reported the positive social impact the program has had on them and their friendships and relationships with peers and other adults, for example, one youth shared, “I learned how to talk to people.” Another youth shared, “You’re more comfortable if you’re used to just being in this friend group and other people are different but still be around them.” Youth value Our SPOT for bringing them spaces where they can meet and connect with peers and staff.

**Our SPOT supports youth in building valuable skills and knowledge for their future.** Participants shared that they’ve gained exposure to different careers, learned how to create resumes, explored life on college campuses, and received guidance on staying focused in school. One youth reflected, “I learned how to play guitar here. They taught me, and I got better with musical engineering.” Another shared, “I started with photography—I became a photographer here.” Many also highlighted college campus visits as a key experience: “We even have our own tours. We’ve gone to CSU Riverside, Cal State LA, and UCLA.”



From the **parent** perspective

**Overall, parents expressed strong satisfaction with the Our SPOT program, highlighting its positive impact on their children’s growth and development.** One parent shared, “I think one of the main reasons I wanted my children to join is because kids nowadays tend to spend a lot of time on their electronics, shut down from reality. I like my kids to be out, interacting with people, and being creative with their minds. The sky is the limit.”

**Parents consistently noted that Our SPOT has helped their children build key life skills, including interpersonal communication, responsibility, and independence.** As one parent explained, “Our SPOT teaches children responsibility. If they say they’re going to help with a program, they follow through. A lot of times, they’ll help with events like the winter carnival. It’s commitment—it teaches them to be accountable.”

**In addition to skill-building, parents praised the program’s role in keeping youth engaged and off the streets by offering structured, meaningful activities in a safe and welcoming environment.** A major benefit, they noted, is the camaraderie their children experience—with both staff and peers, including youth from different schools. These interactions help broaden their social circles and increase openness to diversity.

“I think the program has helped my children be more open to diversity,” one parent shared. “They’re getting to know kids they might not normally hang out with at school or in sports.” Another parent offered a deeply personal perspective: “My child is transgender and identifies as male but presents more feminine. The staff are incredibly respectful; they use his chosen pronouns, acknowledge his identity, and talk to him with real understanding. It’s very heartwarming. The other kids follow that example, and it means so much to us.”

**Parents also observed meaningful growth in their children’s independence, sense of community, and environmental awareness.** “My kids are much more aware now—they’re cautious about not littering, picking up trash, and being mindful of the environment,” said one parent. “And they’ve really embraced philanthropy—doing things for others and helping their community. That’s where

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**“I think the program has helped my children be more open to diversity.”**

**– Our SPOT Parent**

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I've seen the biggest change."



From the **staff** perspective

**According to program staff, one of the most valuable aspects of Our SPOT is that it offers youth a safe, welcoming space they can truly call their own.** "Many of the kids from our area come in shy or hesitant," one staff member shared. "But as they join activities or go on outings—and especially when they recognize familiar faces from school—they begin to open up. They start having fun, building friendships, and genuinely wanting to return."

**Staff consistently described Our SPOT as a place where growth happens—socially, emotionally, and even professionally.** One staff member reflected on a teen's journey: "When she first joined, she was shy, quiet, and anxious in group settings. But through gardening, field trips, and other group activities, she began to come out of her shell. While she still has moments of retreat, the transformation over the past year has been remarkable. It's a real testament to the impact of consistent, supportive programming."

Another staff member highlighted how the program can lead to lasting opportunities: "A real highlight for me is seeing teens move from participants to employees. Some start off just joining in activities, but through the LA County Youth@Work initiative, they've landed jobs right here at the park. They already feel a sense of belonging here, and to see them transition into paid roles—and even become recreation leaders—is something we're incredibly proud of."

Our SPOT is more than just a place for fun—it's a space for protection, confidence, and personal growth. It offers an alternative to negative influences and encourages youth to express themselves, try new things, and embrace who they are. Whether it's sharing a talent like skateboarding —landing tricks or not—or simply showing up and engaging, youth are met with encouragement and support. That willingness to try, to connect, and to grow is what Our SPOT is all about.

**Youth@Work** offers paid work experience, job training, and support services to LA County residents ages 14–24. Priority is given to youth from underserved communities, including foster, probation, low-income, homeless, LGBTQIA+, parenting, and disabled youth. Participants gain hands-on training, build leadership and teamwork skills, and receive resume and interview support to prepare for careers in high-growth industries. Currently, there are an average of 2-3 Our SPOT teens per site who are hired Youth Workers within the department.



## Perceptions of Our SPOT Program Delivery

This section highlights key reflections about the quality of Our SPOT program implementation.

**There are opportunities for increased visibility.** Many staff reported the need for more advertisement and visibility for Our SPOT. It was noted that something as simple as branded t-shirts or gear could make a big difference. For example, a staff member commented, "One of our younger participants wore their Our SPOT shirt for school picture day. That says a lot about how much these items mean to them. Having access to branded materials—whether it's t-shirts, hats, or other items—can help with marketing and make the program more recognizable in the community. It's not about "sportswear" in a traditional sense—it's about youth-friendly, promotional items that spark interest and build connection".

Parents mimicked this sentiment sharing that Our SPOT can do more to outreach to families to inform them about the program. According to one parent, "Using Instagram is great, but I suggest they continue to post flyers in high schools and to do joint events with other parks in the area to advertise the program."

Many youth participants said they learned about the program through friends, family, or others in their community. Referrals from loved ones were common—for instance, one participant shared, "I got recommended by a family friend." Others heard about Our SPOT through local park staff. As one youth explained, "I've been coming to this park basically my whole life and knew the staff even before joining the program. They encouraged me to sign up and told me about the field trips and opportunities. I've really enjoyed it overall."

**Feedback on the registration process was mixed.** While some parents found it easy to complete, those same parents acknowledged being relatively tech-savvy and expressed concern that others—especially those less familiar with technology—might struggle.

Staff echoed these concerns, noting that many participants live with grandparents

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**"I've been coming to this park basically my whole life and knew the staff even before joining the program. They encouraged me to sign up and told me about the field trips and opportunities. I've really enjoyed it overall."**

**– Our SPOT Youth**

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or caregivers who aren't comfortable navigating digital systems. "They'll bring their phones to us and ask for help," one staff member explained. "But with limited staff capacity, we don't always have the time to walk them through every step. Sometimes, families leave before completing registration out of frustration."

► **DPR Response.** *DPR has addressed this concern by adding a third staff member at each location.*

Another staff member pointed to the complexity of the current two-step system, which requires families to complete both an online registration through ActiveNet and a separate paper or PDF form. "It's confusing and overwhelming for many families, particularly in communities with limited or inconsistent access to technology. We often hear the same complaint: 'I already filled this out online—why am I doing it again?'"

Staff emphasized that simplifying the registration process would significantly improve access and participation. Suggestions included allowing families to complete a single paper form or submit emergency contact cards that staff could later scan and upload. "Our community responds well to in-person, pen-and-paper interactions," one staff member noted. "We're not against using technology—we just need systems that are accessible, efficient, and practical for the families we serve."

### Expansion of Safe Passages

In FY 2025–26, DPR expanded the Safe Passages program from select parks to a total of 23 DPR sites, now co-located at all 16 Our SPOT teen center locations, up from just 3-sites in 2019. This expansion was supported by continued Parks Safe Passage funding through Probation JJCPA and the Department of Mental Health (DMH), furthering DPR's commitment to community safety and access to programs in areas most impacted by violence. Safe Passages is a proven, evidence-based violence intervention strategy that utilizes trained CVI professionals with a License to Operate (LTO), enabling them to mediate conflict, prevent retaliation, and foster safety in and around parks. Their presence has been instrumental in increasing youth participation, reducing barriers to engagement, and building community trust in areas historically affected by systemic inequities and community violence. As one CVI ambassador stated, "Our purpose in this right here is to try and heal the community, but it's not only about healing the community, it also heals us too because it gives us an opportunity to be somebody." The ability to staff Safe Passages with trusted local leaders has further strengthened the community centered approach of Our SPOT programs.

**Transportation continues to be a need.** Transportation remains a consistent challenge, especially when it comes to participation in cross-park activities or regular attendance. There may be an opportunity to coordinate or pool resources across parks to support transportation needs more effectively. In addition, staff noted that with parents at work and limited public transit options, providing transportation from schools to the park could be a game-changer. Without it, some youth take detours or head home after school instead of joining the program—especially when large events at nearby venues like SoFi Stadium increase traffic and congestion. For instance, "on days like today when there's a major concert (e.g., Beyoncé), we expect lower attendance because families don't want to deal with the hassle of navigating the area," communicated one staff.

► **DPR Response.** *DPR has addressed this need by applying for and securing grant funding, enabling the purchase of vans. A total of seven vans were acquired in FY 2024–2025, with nine additional vans scheduled for purchase in FY 2025–2026. These vans, along with an increase in bus allocations, will significantly enhance their transportation capacity.*

**Safety and space are ongoing challenges.** Safety and infrastructure challenges remain a concern at several Our SPOT locations, particularly in the areas surrounding some facilities. One staff member described a recent incident: “During a tournament, about seven cars were parked illegally, with groups of individuals loitering nearby—something we see regularly.” These issues contribute to a sense of insecurity, especially during after-school and weekend hours.

Another staff member pointed out the lack of a nearby high school within safe walking distance. “Students have to cross railroad tracks to get here, and many parents understandably aren’t comfortable with that,” they explained.

Environmental conditions also present significant barriers to consistent programming. One site, for example, lacks adequate shade outdoors, which makes it difficult to run activities during extreme heat. Compounding the issue, the indoor facility has neither air conditioning nor heating. “We often have to run programs outside, even when the weather isn’t ideal,” a staff member shared. “We try to find shaded areas in the park, but those are sometimes occupied by local gang members. When that happens, we’re forced to cancel or reschedule at the last minute, which is frustrating for both staff and youth.”

Facility space limitations also impact programming quality. “Our building has a gym and a multipurpose room with a staff computer, but there’s no space dedicated specifically to Our SPOT,” one staff member explained. “When it rains or when other programs—especially those serving younger children—are running, Our SPOT participants often lose access to those shared areas. Having a designated space for teens would significantly improve the consistency and quality of our programming.”



► **DPR Response.** *To help meet these challenges, DPR, with \$15 million in support from the Department of Mental Health (DMH), is redesigning projects at 14 parks that host Our SPOT programs. They are creating Wellbeing Lounges and reimagining park spaces to address the lack of dedicated teen areas. These lounges will be safe, youth-focused spaces designed specifically for teens, with physical improvements to support consistent programming. Activities will include meditation, yoga, guest speakers, nutrition classes, and arts and culture events—giving Our SPOT participants reliable spaces to gather, learn, and grow.*

Restroom access is another challenge. At some park sites, the Our SPOT building does not have its own restroom, requiring youth to walk to the main facility. “The public restrooms outside are sometimes locked due to park events or safety concerns,” a staff member noted. “In those cases, we have to escort teens to the main building, which disrupts programming and adds logistical complications.”

These challenges highlight the need for improved infrastructure, dedicated space for youth, and safety measures to support the long-term success of OurSPOT programming. Simultaneously, safety remains a top concern—especially if the county is considering extended hours for Our SPOT. Many of the youth walk home,

and some live far from the park. A staff member reiterated, "As soon as it gets dark, I start sending kids home because I don't feel comfortable letting them leave alone in unsafe conditions. In some areas, especially those impacted by wildfires, there are very few families left nearby, making the park feel isolated in the evenings."

While extended hours could be valuable, they must be implemented with safety in mind. A compromise might be to only offer longer hours during community-supported events like Parks After Dark, when families and staff are more present. It was noted that staff see great participation during those events, and kids often feel safer staying late in a well-attended environment.

► **DPR Response.** *DPR has extended both its operating hours and the hours for the Safe Passages program at all 16 locations. Additionally, the new vans will improve transportation for youth, helping ensure they travel to and from programs more safely.*

**There has been high praise for Our SPOT field trips.** Parents, staff and youth continue to name field trips as a key highlight. A staff member said, "We took the teens to a Kings hockey game, and it was an unforgettable experience. Many had never left the Lennox area, let alone attended a professional sporting event. Visiting downtown L.A. and seeing a new environment opened their eyes to a world beyond their immediate community. Experiences like these leave lasting impressions and inspire continued participation." Another staff member reported, "We've taken youth to events like concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. These outings expose them to different music genres and audiences, sparking new interests and broadening their cultural awareness".

Several trips were mentioned by youth participants as being fun, but also sometimes informational and educational. One youth shared, "We went to Hollywood Rose Bowl." Another youth shared, "[We] went to Six flags. I also went camping and kayaking too." In most instances, field trips gave youth an opportunity for fun and recreation that they might not otherwise have access to.

**Collaborative events are valued.** Collaborations with other parks were reported as always well-received, especially when tied to fun or physical activities. "We recently held a soccer tournament, funded through the Department of Mental Health, and invited another park to join. The teens had a great time engaging in friendly competition and building community across locations. Movie nights also continue to be a highlight, providing a relaxed but social space for youth to unwind", noted a staff member.

**Strong appreciation and recognition of the staff's efforts.** Parents recognize staff for creating an inclusive, welcoming environment and for providing consistent communication and support to families—something parents, particularly single parents, deeply appreciate. "The kids see the staff like idols in a way. They think they're cool, and they see how dedicated and passionate they are for the kids, and it just makes them feel good, so it makes them want to try harder. It's just giving them guidance and having good role models around," stated one parent.

Youth consistently expressed appreciation for the Our SPOT staff. The most common theme was how staff make them feel welcomed and supported, which motivates them to keep attending. One participant shared, "I like the staff. They're friendly. They're not much older than us." Another added, "Yeah, they don't really judge us... They'll be there to help us." Youth also noted that staff are genuinely invested in their growth and development. As one put it, "They help you. They always teach you. They help you learn in the future. That makes you feel comfortable."

**Engagement with parents/guardians varies.** Staff noted that some parents are highly involved—joining sports days, attending parent-child events, or participating in Mother’s and Father’s Day activities. Others are less present, often due to work schedules or personal circumstances. Still, they do their best to keep parents informed. For example, A staff member stated, “I walk kids out to their cars, introduce myself, and share program updates when parents stay in the vehicle. Another staff added, “I send emails and try to provide consistent face-to-face communication when possible. But this walk-in/walk-out structure means we don’t see all parents regularly, so our outreach needs to be intentional and consistent.”

Interviewed parents reiterate that they feel well-informed through permission slips and announcements. They have not had issues and shared that staff share things in a timely manner.

Language access is also crucial. Having bilingual staff has been incredibly helpful in communicating with parents. “We strive to always have team members who speak both English and Spanish, but staffing can be a challenge. If one of the bilingual staff calls out, we sometimes struggle to maintain effective communication with families. We’ve begun translating flyers and forms into Spanish, but we’re still working to streamline that process”, not a staff member.

**Training needs were identified.** Staff request a need for more hands-on training around real-world issues impacting youth. “While we’ve received some trauma-informed care training, it’s often not enough to address what these teens are going through before they even walk through our doors,” said a staff member. Another staff noted, “There’s a large family in the community known to be gang-affiliated. Tragically, they’ve experienced three deaths in just two weeks. As staff, we’re left to navigate the emotional impact of these losses with little structured support. Much of what we do in these moments is on the fly—trying to find resources, reaching out to those with more experience, and doing our best to be there for the teens.”

► **DPR Response.** *In response to staff feedback, the Department has strengthened its Training Academy to better prepare frontline staff for the real-life challenges faced by youth and families. With a \$200,000 grant from the Office of Violence Prevention, they launched this effort last fiscal year to expand and formalize trainings that directly address the situations staff encounter in the field.*

*The Training Academy now offers hands-on, scenario-based workshops on topics like trauma-informed care, grief and loss, suicide prevention, professional wellness, conflict resolution, and restorative practices. These sessions use real-world case studies and interactive exercises to help staff feel confident and prepared to handle sensitive situations with care and consistency.*

*This approach moves away from “on-the-fly” problem-solving, replacing it with structured, practical training and department-supported strategies. Staff are no longer alone in managing crises—they are equipped with the tools and support needed to protect, support, and empower our youth and families.*

*All Our SPOT staff were invited to participate in these trainings, in addition to the four annual professional development sessions that cover Positive Youth Development (PYD), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Trauma-Informed Care (TIC), and more.*

Immigration is another major issue in these communities, especially in areas with a

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**“We’re not just park staff—we’re mentors, first responders, role models, and trusted adults in the lives of these youth. We want to continue to serve them in the best way possible, but we need the right tools, training, and support to do so.”**

**– Our SPOT Park Staff**

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large Hispanic population. A staff member mentioned, “We’ve received no formal training or guidance on how to handle immigration-related situations. I’ve had parents express fear of sending their kids to the park after reports of ICE in the neighborhood—specifically at the only entrance in and out of our site. When I raised these concerns, I was told to “remember you’re a county employee.” While I understand protocol, I’m also here to serve and protect our community. We need clear, compassionate training and protocols that address the realities our families face.”

► **DPR Response.** *In response to the increase in immigration raids, DPR implemented safety protocols and assigned Immigration Ambassadors to park locations to support affected communities. As a precaution, large-scale events were also canceled to help ensure the safety and well-being of participants.*

**There are requests for an updated curriculum.** One area that could use improvement is the RISE curriculum. While staff understand it’s a required component, it often feels outdated and too similar to a traditional school setting. As a result, it’s difficult to fully engage the teens. “Our staff does their best to supplement it with activities and open conversations about real-world issues and current events, but there’s definitely room for a more relevant and youth-centered approach. Updating the curriculum to reflect what’s happening now in their lives and communities would make a significant difference in engagement and impact”, communicated a staff member.

► **DPR Response.** *DPR recognizes the feedback regarding the RISE curriculum and have secured funding to roll out enhancements in FY 25–26. One example is the Belief Program, which uses gamified social-emotional learning, virtual reality role-playing, and virtual human training agents to build youth skills in self-awareness, conflict resolution, and workforce readiness. Moving forward, they will continue to invest in socially relevant curricula that are designed specifically for after-school programming and better reflect the real-world experiences of our youth.*

**Community partners value their collaboration with Our SPOT**, recognizing it as a powerful way to expand the reach of their own programs and empower youth through hands-on learning and education. They highlighted the strong alignment between Our SPOT’s mission and their own organizational goals—particularly in centering youth voices and equipping young people to lead change within their communities. As one partner shared, “We create space for young people to lead and shape their own growth journeys.” Another added, “The Our SPOT site—and the model we use—has become a place where youth grow in health, wealth, fitness, self-actualization, and sustainability. Our goal is to foster independent thinkers.” Partners expressed interest in deepening their collaboration by expanding offerings at Our SPOT, such as financial literacy workshops and tutoring sessions.

At the same time, community partners noted several challenges related to coordination and outreach. One partner explained, “We’ve faced ongoing communication challenges when it comes to scheduling and coordinating with Our SPOT staff on the ground. It’s crucial that our team knows in advance which days staff will be present at the park site. While updated staff contact lists have helped, delays in communication can be disruptive. For instance, if we’re told someone will follow up by the end of the day but it takes a week, that delay can significantly impact our operations—especially since we serve multiple communities across the state, not just one.”

Another partner pointed to gaps in program promotion: “Many youth simply aren’t aware of the opportunities we’re offering. A flyer was created, but we haven’t seen

broad distribution. We've requested that flyers be sent to nearby schools and mailed to households within a five-mile radius, but this level of outreach hasn't been implemented yet."

Overall, while partners remain enthusiastic about their work with Our SPOT, they expressed a clear desire for improved communication and increased outreach to maximize their collective impact.

► **DPR Response.** *The Recreation and Community Services Division (RCSD) provides strategic leadership and day-to-day oversight for DPR's nine flagship programs, including Our SPOT Teen Centers. The division ensures that services across Los Angeles County are high-quality, culturally relevant, and trauma-informed. RCSD develops program policies, standards, and curricula; manages permits, procurement, budgets, and grants; and leads major events like the Girls Empowerment Conference, Teen Summit, and Senior Resource Fair.*

*RCSD also drives community engagement by building partnerships with schools and organizations, coordinating outreach and marketing, and representing DPR on Countywide councils and committees. At the park level, the division supports site operations, staff supervision, safety, and Youth@Work, while ensuring consistent programming and youth outreach.*

*In addition, RCSD oversees professional development through the Training Academy, offering core and compliance trainings that build staff capacity and support continuous quality improvement across all program sites. The Recreation and Community Services Division (RCSD) provides strategic leadership and operational oversight for DPR's nine flagship programs including Our SPOT Teen Centers ensuring high-quality, culturally relevant, and trauma-informed services across Los Angeles County. The division develops program policies, standards, and curricula; oversees permits, procurement, budgets, and grants; and leads major events such as the Girls Empowerment Conference, Teen Summit, and Senior Resource Fair. RCSD also manages community engagement by building school and partner relationships, coordinating outreach and marketing, and representing DPR on Countywide councils and committees. At the park level, the division supports site management, staff supervision, safety, and Youth@Work, while ensuring consistent program implementation, activity planning, and youth outreach. Finally, RCSD oversees professional development through the Training Academy, delivering core and compliance trainings to build staff capacity and maintain quality improvement across all program sites.*

**Opportunity to engage younger youth as a prevention strategy.** Staff identified that they're seeing a gap when it comes to reaching youth early enough. "By the time some teens come into the program, they're already involved in activities outside the park that aren't always positive. That's why we've been opening the door to younger youth, and it's making a difference", said a staff member. There's a real opportunity to strengthen the long-term impact of Our SPOT by intentionally engaging younger participants and creating a positive pipeline that keeps them involved as they grow.

► **DPR Response.** *Introduced Every Body Plays, a free after-school drop-in program for youth ages 7-17, offered at 60 parks across LA County's North, South, and East regions. Open Monday-Friday from 2:30-6:00 PM, the program is led by trained DPR staff and provides safe, supervised spaces for physical activity, creative expression, and social connection. Activities include homework help, sports, STEM, arts, cultural experiences,*

*and field trips. By promoting confidence, teamwork, and positive peer relationships, the program supports healthy development and serves as a pathway to teen-focused programs like Our SPOT.*

**Continue to increase and expand inclusivity and safety at Our SPOT teen center locations.** In FY 2025–26, DPR expanded the Safe Passages program from select parks to a total of 23 DPR sites, now co-located at all 16 Our SPOT teen center locations, up from just 3-sites in 2019. This expansion was supported by continued Parks Safe Passage funding through Probation JJCPA and the Department of Mental Health (DMH), furthering DPR’s commitment to community safety and access to programs in areas most impacted by violence. Safe Passages is a proven, evidence-based violence intervention strategy that utilizes trained CVI professionals with a License to Operate (LTO), enabling them to mediate conflict, prevent retaliation, and foster safety in and around parks. Their presence has been instrumental in increasing youth participation, reducing barriers to engagement, and building community trust in areas historically affected by systemic inequities and community violence. As one CVI ambassador stated, "Our purpose in this right here is to try and heal the community, but it's not only about healing the community, it also heals us too because it gives us an opportunity to be somebody." The ability to staff Safe Passages with trusted local leaders has further strengthened the community centered approach of Our SPOT programs.

# Conclusion

The Our SPOT program provides a meaningful space for teens to unwind, connect, and grow after school. Designed as a safe and welcoming environment, it offers enriching activities that allow youth to relax, recharge, and form strong peer relationships. Beyond recreation, Our SPOT fosters trusted connections between youth and caring adult mentors, helping teens develop confidence, communication skills, and a strong sense of identity and social responsibility. Through both structured and informal experiences, the program builds life skills and internal assets that empower youth to make healthy choices and navigate life's challenges.

## Program Highlights

**Staff Training & Support:** Each Our SPOT site is staffed by a Permanent Part-Time Recreation Services Leader, providing stability and fostering long-term relationships with youth and the surrounding community. Staff members receive over 60 hours of annual training focused on youth development, safety, inclusion, trauma-informed care, communication, leadership, and program planning—ensuring high-quality, consistent support across all locations.

**Year-Round Programming:** Teens enjoy a variety of structured activities throughout the year, including sports leagues (kickball, flag football, basketball, soccer, volleyball, dodgeball, and e-sports), leadership development, field trips, cultural celebrations, and creative arts programming.

**Special Events:** Seasonal events bring added excitement to Our SPOT, with highlights like:

- Haunted Houses
- Teens-Giving
- Winter Bash (Winter Formal)
- Cultural heritage celebrations
- March Madness Basketball Tournament (featuring 14 teams)
- Girls Empowerment events (including a Conference and Dinner)
- The annual Teen Summit

**Girls Empowerment Conference:** This annual signature event brings teen girls together for a day of workshops, speakers, and self-care activities focused on leadership, confidence, and personal growth.

**Expanded Opportunities:** This year, teens participated in summer trips to iconic cultural venues like the Hollywood Bowl and Ford Theater—broadening their experiences and exposure to the arts.

**Creative Collaborations:** In partnership with Music Changing Lives, teens worked alongside professional muralists to design and paint original murals in their Our SPOT rooms. Every location now features a mural that was fully curated and created by the teens themselves—adding pride and identity to their shared space.



**Financial Literacy & Scholarships:** Through workshops led by Youth Investors Corp, teens learned essential finance and investment skills. In August, a special ceremony honored 16 Our SPOT participants with \$500 scholarships each, celebrating their achievements and encouraging future success.

**A Proposal for the Future: Park-Based Town Hall Meetings**

Staff communicated that they would love to explore something like Our SPOT Town Hall Meetings, where each park holds regular sessions with staff and youth to share ideas, challenges, and suggestions. These meetings could provide valuable insight, promote transparency, and make youth feel even more empowered in their spaces. It's a small change that could lead to better communication and more informed decisions across the board.

# Appendix A: Evaluation Questions and Methods

## Evaluation Questions

To guide this evaluation, the following research questions have been developed:

1. Program Implementation
  - How is Our SPOT being implemented across sites?
  - What successes and challenges are emerging during implementation?
  - What strategies do staff identify as most effective for engaging youth?
2. Youth Participant Experience
  - How do youth describe their overall experience in the program?
  - How satisfied are they with various program components?
  - What are their perceptions of and interactions with program staff?
3. Stakeholder Perspectives
  - What are the views of key stakeholders—including partner agencies and parents—regarding program delivery and outcomes?
  - What suggestions do they have for future program improvement?
4. Program Impact on Youth
  - How is participation in Our SPOT influencing youth development?
  - To what extent are youth building internal assets such as positive identity, confidence, communication skills, and collaboration?

## Methods Overview

This section details the rationale and methodology for each proposed method.

- **Our SPOT implementation data.** Harder+Co worked with program staff to secure program implementation data, which included youth demographics and attendance by park.
  - **Youth outcome retrospective assessment.** Harder+Co, as part of the LADPH Positive Youth Development evaluation, recently identified the Positive Youth Development Sustainability Scale (PYDSS) as the assessment tool to measure PYD outcomes across a variety of youth serving programs delivered by different agencies across LA County. The PYDSS is a retrospective post assessment tool. This assessment also included an 11-item program satisfaction scale and the CRAFFT, a well-validated substance use screening tool for adolescents aged 12-21.
  - **Youth, parent and staff focus groups.** Focus groups (one each) were conducted with participating youth and their parents and staff to understand program impact on youth in various domains, successes, challenges and areas of opportunity, and surface recommendations to inform ongoing program improvements.
  - **Community Partner Interviews.** Interviews were conducted with 2 community partners to obtain perspective and attitudes about program implementation and impact.
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