

community recTM

Missoula Family YMCA

Immeasurable Spirit

How the single-branch **MISSOULA FAMILY YMCA** serves as the community backbone for **WESTERN MONTANA**. p.12

BRAND VOICE:

The story behind **Upace's** mission-driven platform.



cover

12

Immeasurable Spirit

How the single-branch Missoula Family YMCA serves as the community backbone for Western Montana.

“FOR OVER FIVE DECADES, WHEN A COMMUNITY NEED ARISES,
THE Y ANSWERS THE CALL TIME AND TIME AGAIN.”
MELANIE BROCK





26



22



32

Stay Social with Us!

 Community Rec Magazine

 @CommunityRecMag

 @CommunityRec

 Community Rec Magazine

the foundation

26 Building a Culture of Safety

From proactive staff training to advanced safety tools, leaders share best practices for ensuring secure and well-managed facilities.

32 How AI is Revolutionizing Community Recreation Centers

Community rec centers are leveraging AI to improve operations, protect members and optimize experiences.

the conversation

6 News + Notes

8 Ask The Expert

Q&A with Murphy Coville on the YMCA of Greater Boston's Healthy Habits program.

departments

5 From The Editor

10 Marketplace

Youth programming.

22 Brand Voice

Empowering community connections with Upace.

38 Pro Talk

42 Ad Index

42 The Last Word

Six questions with Todd Rockoff from the Tucson JCC.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

A Lesson From Sisyphus

Like most millennials, I'm often binge-watching whatever new TV show everyone is hyping up at the time. So, in keeping with my routine, I recently started the new hospital drama "The Pitt."

One moment in the show particularly stuck out to me. When the main character of the show is exhausted and depressed with the seemingly never-ending stream of patients with dire conditions, his assistant asks him if he's doing OK.

He responds by simply saying, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

As a refresher, in Greek mythology Sisyphus was known for his punishment in the underworld. His eternal task was to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down before he could reach the top. Sounds extremely bleak, right?

I always thought so as well until I heard

that line from "The Pitt" just a few days ago. Even though he can never get the boulder to the top of the hill, it's still his task to do so for the rest of eternity.

While there's no other choice, a positive read of this tale is he's able to push forward through his relentless determination, despite the futility of his efforts. This mindset speaks to the human capacity to persist in the face of insurmountable challenges.

And so, this moment in a TV show reminded me of the community recreation industry. The task of rec centers is to constantly find ways to better the lives of members and the surrounding community.

You don't need me to tell you this, but that task is also a never-ending one with seemingly infinite obstacles.

However, like Sisyphus leaders in this industry persist. The difference is they freely decide to make the world a better, healthier place every day.

If you don't believe that, read our cover story on the Missoula Family YMCA on page 12. Despite just being a single-branch Y, the team led by CEO Heather Foster still manages to serve one of the largest service areas in the country in Western Montana.

Then, check out our features on how to best build a culture of safety on page 26 and how AI is revolutionizing rec centers on page 32.

Hopefully, these stories and this issue will provide you with further tools and practices needed to be a force for good in your community.

Despite any new obstacles, continue to be like Sisyphus and roll the boulder up the mountain. And if you can, have a smile on your face while doing so.

Always choose hope,

JOHN REECER

editor

john@peakemedia.com



EDITORIAL

Editor

John Reecer

Managing Editor

Taylor Gabhart

Editor-in-Chief

Rachel Chonko

ART

Creative Director

Doug Hawley

Senior Graphic Designer

Hailey Hunter

Graphic Designer

Cassandra Bhagroo

SALES

VP of Media

Tim Adkins

National Media Consultants

Alex Lynch

Art Grant

PEAKE MEDIA

Publisher

Shawn McDonald

President

Rico Francis

Director of Events

Heather Hartmann

Administrative Assistants

Alia McDonald

Alyssa McDonald

ADVISORY BOARD

Jorge Perez, YMCA of Greater Cincinnati

Addie Goodman, JCC Chicago

Stephen Ives, YMCA of Greater Houston

Bertram L. Lawson II, YMCA of Greater Brandywine

Adam Shilling, Buckeye Valley Family YMCA

Jak Teel, Cottonwood Parks & Recreation

Laurie Goganzer, YMCA of Greater Monmouth County

Audrey Edwards, JCC Consultant

Sandy Wiedmeyer, Pleasant Prairie RecPlex

Keith Vinson, Kei Vision

Sabrina Smeltz, Wakeman Boys & Girls Club

THE conversation

FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

Crossroads YMCA, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana Build New Facility



▲ The future Tolleston Opportunity Campus is expected to boost the economy and well-being in Gary, Indiana.

Transformational Partnership

After years in the making, the city of Gary, Indiana, is being reimagined through a collaborative development project that will infuse \$30 million into the construction of the Tolleston Opportunity Campus. The project is a joint collaboration between the Crossroads YMCA, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana, Berglund Construction, Powers & Sons Construction, and Methodist Hospitals.

The new campus is expected to boost the economy and well-being of the community by being a cornerstone of irreplaceable resources.

“The success of the Tolleston Opportunity Campus is made possible through strategic partnerships with key community organizations,” said Jay Buckmaster, the CEO of the Crossroads YMCA. “These partners bring invaluable expertise and programs that will enhance the impact on the community. The Tolleston Opportunity Campus is not just a short-term project — it’s a long-term investment in the future of Gary, Indiana.”

The plan began in 2022 with a meeting between partners, each of which provides an area of expertise that’s beneficial to the community. They found collaborating in such a monumental way would make the community thrive. With the expected

opening date of fall 2026, the project is being made possible through generous supporters like the City of Gary, State of Indiana READI funds, and the Dean & Barbara White Family Foundation.

The central features of the new campus include:

- A multi-purpose gym for sports, fitness classes and community events.
- Zero-depth entry recreation pool and warm water/shallow pool for therapy.
- Classrooms and meeting spaces for educational workshops, job training and youth programs.
- A dedicated wellness center offering fitness equipment, group exercise classes and wellness coaching.
- A teaching kitchen for nutrition education and healthy cooking classes.
- Outdoor recreational spaces, including playgrounds and sports fields.
- And more.

Buckmaster said one hopeful benefit of the Tolleston Opportunity Campus is it will help reduce crime rates by providing safe, productive activities for youth. Also, the campus should improve health outcomes by increasing access to wellness programs and strengthen families by offering re-

sources that address their unique needs.

“In the next five to 10 years, we envision a Gary where children graduate at higher rates, families live healthier lives, and the community flourishes economically and socially,” said Buckmaster. “The Tolleston Opportunity Campus will be a central part of this transformation, providing a place where hope turns into action and dreams become reality. Designed with input from local residents, community leaders and strategic partners, the campus will be a cornerstone of positive change.”

Moving forward, Buckmaster said he’s looking forward to working with these partners, as it’s inspiring to collaborate with organizations to find ways to provide access and memorable experiences for kids, families, adults and seniors.

“I believe success for the project will be combating all the issues within the community — such as obesity, chronic disease, health/wellness, lack of access to medical services, children without safe spaces after school — that’s been underserved for decades. This type of work is central to the Y’s mission: To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all. We believe this campus will do that and more for many years to come.” ★ by John Reecer



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

♦ The inaugural JCC Maccabi Games will be held August 3 to 8 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JCC MACCABI GAMES EXPAND WITH INAUGURAL CAMPUS GAMES

New Format Will Foster Inclusivity Among Jewish Teens

This summer, JCC Association will launch the inaugural JCC Maccabi Campus Games in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The games are a new continental pilot to enhance the JCC Maccabi Games' capacity to accommodate an over demand of participants.

Also in 2025, Tucson, Arizona, will host the JCC Maccabi Games and Access, providing an inclusive platform for participants with cognitive and developmental disabilities. Kansas City and Toronto have been selected as the host cities for 2026, exemplifying the program's significant and ongoing growth.

Samantha Cohen, the senior vice president and continental director of JCC Maccabi, said the games have been oversubscribed for several years. There are more young athletes who'd like to participate than the organization has space for.

"Our traditional model requires home hospitality and host families, which means there's always a cap on how a community is able to house the athletes," said Cohen. "The idea of piloting an additional complimentary model that would utilize dorms, hotels or other opportunities for housing potentially opens more capacity overall for the program."

Thanks to partnering with JCC of Greater Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh, the inaugural JCC Maccabi Campus Games will be held from August 3 to 8, 2025. Cohen said this will mark a significant step forward in JCC Maccabi's mission to foster Jewish pride and strengthen Jewish identity.

Campus Games Details

Cohen said the organization was looking for a community that had a strong JCC and Jewish identity, while also being able to create and leverage partnerships with the broader community. This is why Pittsburgh was an ideal choice for the first campus games.

"Between the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, the Jewish community, and the ethos and strong culture in Pittsburgh around sport, this became a perfect place to pilot the inaugural campus

games," said Cohen. "The alternative model of housing in partnership with a university opens a gateway for other communities to consider being a host. That's one of the beauties of the program that we have."

Athletes will compete in an Olympic village-style atmosphere that will include athletic competition, dormitory housing, social and educational programming, and dining.

This innovative model will bring over 2,000 Jewish teens and thousands of family members and community volunteers onto a university campus to celebrate Jewish life in a display of Jewish pride and unity.

Inclusivity and Allyship

In response to the rise of antisemitism on U.S. college campuses, Cohen said the JCC Maccabi Campus Games provide a unique opportunity to bring together Jewish teens and communities in a university environment. This offers colleges a meaningful platform to demonstrate their commitment to combat antisemitism and promote inclusivity and allyship.

"We don't really talk about the JCC Maccabi games as a sports event," said Cohen. "It's an Olympic-style program that uses Jewish values and gives Jewish teens an experience to connect to their heritage, community and obviously the values that drive the game. This new campus model opens the door to many other communities that might be able to experience the magic of hosting the games."

It's Cohen's hope that the event is poised for unparalleled growth and impact to achieve even greater reach and influence than ever before.

"We talk about JCC Maccabi as a transformative Jewish identity and community building experience," said Cohen. "I hope all our athletes come away from the experience having had just that — a transformative, safe experience where they've had a powerful opportunity to connect to JCC Maccabi and to make lifelong friends and connections to each other." ♦ **by**

John Reecer

YOUR QUESTIONS, ANSWERED

ask the expert



Murphy Coville

This issue we spoke with the association director of community health at the **YMCA of Greater Boston** about the Y's Healthy Habits program. **by JOHN REECER**

How did the idea of the Healthy Habits program first come about? **MC:** Healthy Habits was originally created when we realized many of the chronic illnesses on the rise in our country could be prevented by healthier lifestyle choices. This program allows us to help people create long-lasting change in their lives. We focus on teaching the necessary basics on fitness, nutrition, stress relief, sleep and social connection. We wanted to make sure it was well-rounded and focused on not just physical health but also mental. Just having the knowledge of what to do and how to do it can be life-changing for those who never received health education.

Why do you believe this program has been successful? What's the reaction from the community been like? **MC:** I feel like this program has been successful due to the community aspect of it. We really encourage the participants to share and learn from each other. We have wonderful trainers leading the classes, but we've always found camaraderie and being able to connect with people who have a similar goal is what keeps them coming back and motivated. We often see the groups continuing to meet and workout at our Y's

together long after their session has ended.

Detail how you hope this program grows in the future. **MC:** We hope to see this program grow not only in numbers but spread to new locations. This is something that anyone can attend and learn from. It's for people at all fitness levels and levels of health awareness. Since we run this at no cost, we hope to continue to serve communities that are lacking in resources and proper health education. These are the areas where we see much higher numbers of chronic illness like diabetes, hypertension, etc.

What should other industry leaders know about starting their own wellness program? **MC:** I think the most important thing to keep in mind when starting a wellness program is the mindset of the community you're serving. The big question is, "How can we help them?" But the smaller questions also matter, like: "How can we create lasting change in participants? What resources do they have once the program is over? Are the goals of this program feasible for them long term?" We always strive to make our programs accessible and truly useful to all. ✨



community rec SUMMIT

Experience the Summit

**THE 2026 COMMUNITY REC LEADERSHIP SUMMIT
WILL TAKE PLACE FEBRUARY 17-19 AT THE OMNI
AMELIA ISLAND RESORT IN FERNANDINA BEACH,
FLORIDA! 60 TOP YMCA, JCC, AND COMMUNITY
RECREATION PROFESSIONALS WILL GATHER FOR TWO
AND A HALF DAYS OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS,
NETWORKING AND UNIQUE EXPERIENCES!**

[PEAKEMEDIAEVENTS.COM/COSUMMIT](https://peakemediaevents.com/cosummit)

Interested in attending?

Email john@peakemedia.com for additional information.



Arly

Arly is the all-in-one youth management solution, simplifying registration and payments, offering flexible enrichment, math and literacy curriculum options, professional development resources, reporting and much more. Built with evidence-based tools, Arly empowers organizations to create high-quality experiences and lasting impact all year long.

arly.com :: sales@arly.com



CedarWorks

2&Over Indoor playsets provide endless play, no matter the weather. With a customizable modular design made of durable, kid-friendly hardwood posts and cabinet grade panels, indoor playsets specially created for children ages 2 and older can be the centerpiece of any size play area.

800.733.6711 :: commercial.cedarworks.com
sales@cedarworks.com



NinjaZone

Take your youth programming to the next level with NinjaZone. Easy to fit into any space, this ninja program is a turn-key solution to amplifying children's sports at your YMCA. With lesson plans, online coach training, marketing pieces, uniforms and equipment, NinjaZone has it all.

773.851.1546 :: the-ninja-zone.com/ymca
erica@theninjazone.com



USA Archery

Ignite a passion for archery in youth with USA Archery's programming and gear. Utilize your existing facilities to set up a range inside a gym or on a soccer field. Designed for safety and fun, our equipment kits include targets, bows, arrows and essential gear for easy maintenance.

719.866.4576 :: usarchery.org
info@usarchery.org

STAY SOCIAL

 COMMUNITY REC MAGAZINE
 @COMMUNITYRECMAG
 COMMUNITY REC MAGAZINE

*We are on Pinterest
& Instagram, too!*

 @ COMMUNITY REC MAGAZINE
 @COMMUNITYRECMAG

.....
community rec



IMMEASURABLE *Spirit*

How the single-branch **Missoula Family YMCA** serves
as the community backbone for Western Montana.

Story by *John Reecer*

Photos by *Dennis Webber*



▲ **DYNAMIC DUO.** Heather Foster, the CEO of the Missoula Family YMCA (left), and Keri McHugh, the COO (right).



L

Despite being the fourth-largest state by land mass in the U.S., there are only six YMCAs in all of Montana.

With hundreds of square miles between these community rec centers, each organization must work tirelessly to support members across their large regions.

This is the case of the Missoula Family YMCA. With just one branch in its association, the Y's service area extends over 15 counties to support an estimated 15,000 Montanans.

What may seem like an insurmountable task is just the daily order of business for CEO Heather Foster and her team. The Y is currently thriving in this climate, as the organization is near the completion of a \$20 million capital campaign to construct an expanded campus, further maximizing the Y's gritty spirit.

"The task is to be all things to all people," said Foster. "When we think about how we bring a community of people together, we're constantly trying to figure out how do we serve a diverse group who typically doesn't intersect? The answer is we're small but mighty. We've been around our community for 55 years. Our Y's origins are very grassroots. We started in a donated little shack on a piece of county land."

▲ MOVING FORWARD.

(Left to right) The Phyllis Washington Early Child Care Center. Heather Foster and Keri McHugh tour the future site of the expanded YMCA campus.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Foster has worked at the YMCA for a little over 10 years, but when she first started as the HR director, she barely knew anything about the YMCA.

She was born and raised in Montana and

grew up in a small town with no recreation center close by. Foster previously worked at a for-profit resort just outside of Missoula, but the work failed to fill her soul. That's when the power of the YMCA stepped in.

"The HR job at the Y was available, so I interviewed, really liked the CEO and took the job," said Foster. "Probably two months in, he came in and said, 'You're hooked. You're never leaving. I can tell you love this place.'"

Nearly four years later, she was named the interim CEO in 2018 and had to lead the organization through several challenging periods. This included a national news story on a former employee's drug use at the Y, the COVID-19 pandemic and the beginning of an incredibly ambitious capital campaign.

"It was truly trial by fire," said Foster. "We



HOW TO LEAD A SUCCESSFUL CAPITAL CAMPAIGN

By Heather Foster

just tried to keep things moving. We were in the limelight in not a great way for a long time. It was a terrifying leadership experience. So, we had a lot of dialogue around what does drug use and abuse look like in our community? How do we train everybody to look for red flags so we can intervene earlier? We kind of went from that to around six months of stability, and then COVID-19 hit. We got through all of that and we knew we could keep this going strong.”

While the beginning of Foster’s tenure was filled with tribulations, it showed the Y what type of leader she was at one of the largest employers in the county.

“To serve over 15,000 unique individuals, it takes an incredible leader like Heather Foster,” said Melanie Brock, a YMCA board member. “Heather’s enthusiasm for the Y’s mission to

create a safe, welcoming space where everyone can thrive is contagious and inspires the hundreds of Y volunteers to pitch in. She’s built an incredible team of dedicated staff who roll up their sleeves and tackle every task with a smile on their faces. Under Heather’s leadership, the Missoula Y staff and board truly have evolved into a family and a community backbone.”

DREAM IT, BUILD IT

With the right leader and team in place, it was time to complete one of the biggest capital campaigns in Missoula’s history.

Foster said the organization had been talking about a capital campaign for at least 15 years. Before she arrived there were nearly a dozen different iterations of plans. The previous childcare center’s space was too small for

“There must be some genuine, hopeful optimism in leading a capital campaign. You must surround yourself by the movers and the shakers in your community — the people who have influence and access. If you can’t get them aligned with where you’re going, you’re never going anywhere. They were critical for us. Communicate often and as much as possible with people, especially when members are working out in spaces where there’s a jackhammer going in the background. You need to make people feel like they’re a part of something by sticking with you through construction and let them feel like they’re part of the end vision.”

“

BECAUSE THE MISSOULA Y STEPS UP FOR MISSOULA AT EVERY TURN, MISSOULA STEPPED UP FOR THE Y WHEN WE OUTGREW OUR AGING MAIN CAMPUS BUILDING AND NEEDED A MAJOR CAPITAL CAMPAIGN TO BETTER SERVE MISSOULA.”

Melanie Brock





◀ ALL HANDS ON DECK.

The leadership team at the Missoula Family YMCA.

▲ STAYING ENGAGED.

(Clockwise from top left) The YMCA ensures services are available for the entire community which includes group fitness classes, fitness trainers and childcare.

a growing community, creating a very large waiting list for the Y's services.

"Missoula, and Montana overall, has experienced a period of rapid growth since 2020, resulting in a shortage of attainable housing and affordable childcare," said Brock. "Because the Missoula Y steps up for Missoula at every turn, Missoula stepped up for the Y when we outgrew our aging main campus building and needed a major capital campaign to better serve Missoula. We set out to make the Y better equipped to accommodate the additional 20,000-plus new residents who're projected to move here."

Along the way, the community asked for vital pieces to be added to the project, including an all-abilities playground and free water feature that were value-engineered into the \$20 million project.

The outcome is a record-breaking capital campaign almost entirely raised from private philanthropists and foundations.

"We kept pushing and got together an in-

fluent group of people in our community," said Foster. "A lot of them were involved in building the original Y, and they came back to the table and said, 'Let's set this place up for the next 50 years. It's time for this Y to evolve. It's time for it to be able to serve more people as we were busting at the seams in all spaces.' There was a time where many thought there's no way we're going to pull this off. It feels pretty good to be where we're at. We're looking at a September 2025 grand reopening."

POURING INTO YOUTH

When the expanded YMCA campus opens, Foster is looking forward to the new features that will appeal to children ages 7 through 12. She said the Y has heard from the community while there's many things for kids to do when they're very little, they're not coming into the health and wellness spaces until around middle school age.

"We had a gap in services for kids ages 7 to 12," said Foster. "There weren't places in our



MIDDLE SCHOOLERS GET MOVING WITH ACTIVE 6

"We created an amazing program called Active 6, which is in year 14 of offering free memberships to all 6th graders in Missoula County," said Keri McHugh. "Active 6 was formed in response to a study initiated by the Community Medical Center and University of Montana Health and Human Performance professor, Dr. Steven Gaskill. The research done by Dr. Gaskill and his team indicated many middle-school children experience a radical drop-off in moderate to vigorous physical activity. Their research suggested keeping sixth graders engaged in physical activity and giving them the tools and education needed to lead active lives will positively impact their health over the course of a lifetime. The program seeks to teach lifetime activities they can continue to participate in regardless of age or access to resources. They left the program having experienced more exercise and increased self-confidence and self-efficacy."

▲ **SPREADING JOY.** (Clockwise from top left) A play area at The Phyllis Washington Early Child Care Center. A front desk worker at the Y greets visitors. McHugh talks with a community member.

building designed for them. So, we worked with our university here to create an esports gaming space and a podcast music mixing sound booth, and a maker space that will have everything from Legos to robotics."

This commitment to youth is nothing new for the Y. In fact, Foster described her organization as being heavy on youth development with well over half of those 15,000 serviced Montanans being under the age of 18.

Keri McHugh, the COO at the Missoula Family YMCA, said the primary reason why their childcare model is so strong is because it's designed to support the entire family unit.

"As we all know, one of the biggest barriers to quality child care is the expense," said McHugh. "In addition to having YMCA financial assistance available, our centers are also licensed. This allows families in need to access additional scholarships through our state. We strive to ensure children are kindergarten-ready when they leave our centers. A couple additional elements that make

us unique, and are really the cherry on top: we provide homemade breakfast, lunch and snacks — including formula for babies — to all our families."

This level of commitment is one of the main reasons why Foster said the association continues to be well-positioned to meet the community's projected growth. Currently, the Missoula Family YMCA is the single largest childcare provider in the state and the largest employer of teens in Western Montana.

"We're quick to adjust to what our community says they need from us," said Foster. "Childcare is something we put at the forefront of our capital campaign because we have a desert. Our board and team are pretty intentional about saying we need to be a sustainable organization, but if we're really going to serve our community, we need to look for the gaps. We need to stand in them. Childcare is one of those gaps, and we subsidize our early childcare programs because they're integral to the Y's mission."



30 YEARS OF **TRUSTED REC CENTER FLOORING**

**Expert Guidance.
Proven Solutions.
No Guesswork.**

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR SPACE

800 428.5306 • fitnessfloors.com
contact@fitnessfloors.com



TIRED OF PAPER CUTS? SO ARE YOUR STAFF!

Operate Fit

Operate Fit: Digitizing YMCA Operations

Your YMCA deserves better than filing cabinets and band-aids. Operate Fit transforms paper-heavy processes into streamlined digital workflows—from incident reporting to audits, quick checks, and more.

Join forward-thinking YMCAs saving time, reducing errors, and keeping staff fingers band-aid free.



**See it in action: Schedule a
demo at <https://operate.fit/>**





NEW FEATURES COMING TO THE MISSOULA YMCA

1. Airnasium. Covered outdoor space where members can play basketball, pickleball and other activities.

2. Second Group Exercise Studio. More room to create a community of members who carry each other through the week through physical activity and connection.

3. Youth Innovation Center. This center will teach skills, digital arts and computer coding to teens who want to learn and play in community. With mental health of younger generations suffering from isolation, this will be a safe space for so many to play, explore, move and grow.



▲ **FOCUSED ON FITNESS.** (Clockwise from top left) The Y's focus on health and wellness includes spacious group fitness classes, equipment from Hammer Strength and individual sessions.

EVERYWHERE, EVERYONE

The Missoula Family YMCA's robust youth programming came out of communicating regularly with the community to seek those possible blind spots.

Foster said the organization made sure not to get tied up in what its vision looks like. Instead, they got real feedback from the community of what was needed.

"I think that was really important for us and helped us be successful," said Foster. "If we wouldn't have had the group of people who could make the phone calls to connect us to people in our community with means to support our ideas like our capital campaign, we would've never been able to do anything."

It's through that campaign the Y will be able to offer even more community gathering space that will continue to bring Western

Montanans together. While the small association is at the heart of the community, it will soon offer even more intentional programming and a wider variety of services.

"For over five decades, when a community need arises the Y answers the call time and time again," said Brock. "It's been exciting to see the Y evolve to meet the needs of all ages and stages of all our residents, providing a real sense of belonging. We've grown well beyond the borders of the main campus. We bus kids from rural schools to participate in our SPLASH! program that teaches swimming and water safety to all third graders. The Y also partners with numerous nonprofits to ensure everyone has access. Collaboration, leadership and intentionality to meet people where they exist is how Y engagement has — and will continue to be — successful." *

EXCELLENT POOL DESIGN DOESN'T STOP AT THE ACCESS POINTS.

Custom Colors
Variety of Pool Lift Models
Above & Below Ground Applications
Easy Specs
Best Industry Warranties
Family Owned & Operated
Made in Montana, USA


Aqua Creek Products

aquacreek.com

888-687-3552



CEDARWORKS
COMMERCIAL OUTDOOR PLAY



Beautiful, sustainably crafted playsets made from Northern White Cedar designed to meet commercial safety standards and ADA requirements.



cedarworks.com | (800) 733-6711

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: THE STORY BEHIND UPACE'S MISSION-DRIVEN PLATFORM

How Upace helps centers embrace innovation while staying true to their mission of bringing people together. By John Reecer

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH UPACE



The local JCC was a second home for Rachel Koretsky during her formative years. Summer camp, the J's programs and friendships made there became part of her family.

But when this cherished community space closed during college, it brought into focus what she always understood: these spaces are essential. As the center's absence echoed through the community, she saw firsthand what happens when they can't evolve with technology and the changing fitness and wellness market.

She faced more frustrations with her campus rec center at college due to paper sign-ups, long lines and inefficient systems. This further struck a chord when she saw peers leaving the

facility for other options.

Inspired to solve these challenges, Koretsky created Upace, a robust reservations, mobile app, admin and member engagement platform for community rec centers.

"The lightbulb moment came when I realized I could connect my entrepreneurship studies with the very real problems I experienced," said Koretsky. "I wanted to create technology that would help community rec centers not just survive, but thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape. I had a clear vision this industry deserved better tools. What truly cemented my commitment was the validation from industry professionals. When I showed early prototypes to rec center staff, their faces

lit up with relief."

One memorable moment for Koretsky after creating Upace was at a startup event where she pitched her company to a large audience. Afterward, a YMCA member approached her and told her the need for this product at their Y.

"Within weeks of that chance encounter, we signed our very first YMCA client — the YMCA of Greater Brandywine. It was a pivotal moment that confirmed we were solving a real problem," said Koretsky. "Despite having safer career options after graduation, the enthusiasm from these early adopters made my decision to pursue Upace full-time very clear."

The early momentum continues today. Upace serves hundreds of centers through custom-branded mobile apps and turnkey solutions like My Y, My J, My Parks & Rec and Kroc Connect, alongside admin tools enhancing experiences for hundreds of thousands of members in North America.

Most recently, Koretsky and her team launched Upace Connect for instructors and trainers to better focus on staff needs and help transform member experience.

"We're helping strengthen the connections that make community recreation centers so special," said



“

These community spaces are more vital than ever. In our increasingly isolated digital world, physical spaces where people connect and belong are essential.”

— **Rachel Koretsky**

The Upace team works with the Bender JCC of Greater Washington.

(From left) Matt Pilla, the VP of customer success and sales at Upace, and Rachel Koretsky, the CEO.

(From left) Matt Pilla and Rachel Koretsky.



Koretsky. “Each of these turning points has shaped not just our company, but my understanding of what technology can do when it’s truly aligned with mission and community. What’s remained constant is my commitment to really understanding what recreation professionals need. Through building genuine relationships with our clients, we’ve created something that does more than manage reservations or offer mobile apps.”

By creating those authentic connections with industry leaders, Upace has built a solution that addresses the nuanced challenges that only become apparent when companies are truly engaged with clients.

Rather than relying solely on market research or industry trends, Koretsky said the team maintains regular, ongoing conversations with those using their platform every day.

“A fundamental key to our success is how deeply we listen to our customers and build with them, not just for them,” said Koretsky. “Our development process is genuinely collaborative. We work directly with clients to understand their challenges and co-create solutions. This approach extends to our exceptional onboarding process and ongoing support. The level of care our team provides is truly unique in the industry.”

One such customer is Valley of the Sun JCC, which revolutionized its fitness programming using Upace. Since implementing the platform, the JCC nearly tripled group exercise participation and completely transformed their Pilates studio. Reservations skyrocketed from 2,280 in

2023 to over 4,900 in 2024, and the JCC is on track to double that figure in 2025.

Then there’s the YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles, which achieved impressive digital engagement through their YMCA LA app built by Upace. It’s essential for operations, handling 100% of member interactions including class reservations, pool bookings, barcode check-ins, notifications and schedule management.

These examples highlight Upace’s mission: to empower YMCAs, JCCs and other community centers with technology that not only streamlines their operations, but enhances the human connections making these spaces so essential.

“We’re committed to ensuring these organizations have the advanced technology they need in today’s competitive fitness and wellness industry,” said Koretsky. “This is crucial as they face challenges from both low-cost gyms and virtual fitness options.”

While technology still plays a crucial role in rec centers staying competitive, Koretsky said its purpose should be to enhance the in-person experience, not replace it.

In fact, using digital tools like Upace should make it easier for members to engage with physical spaces and the people within them.

“We’re seeing the most successful centers use technology strategically to highlight and strengthen their community advantage,” said Koretsky. “They’re leveraging digital tools to improve communication, streamline operations and create more meaningful touchpoints with members. In this hybrid world, the community

UPACE PLATFORM FEATURES

Branded Mobile Apps • Organizations can choose from fully custom-branded options.

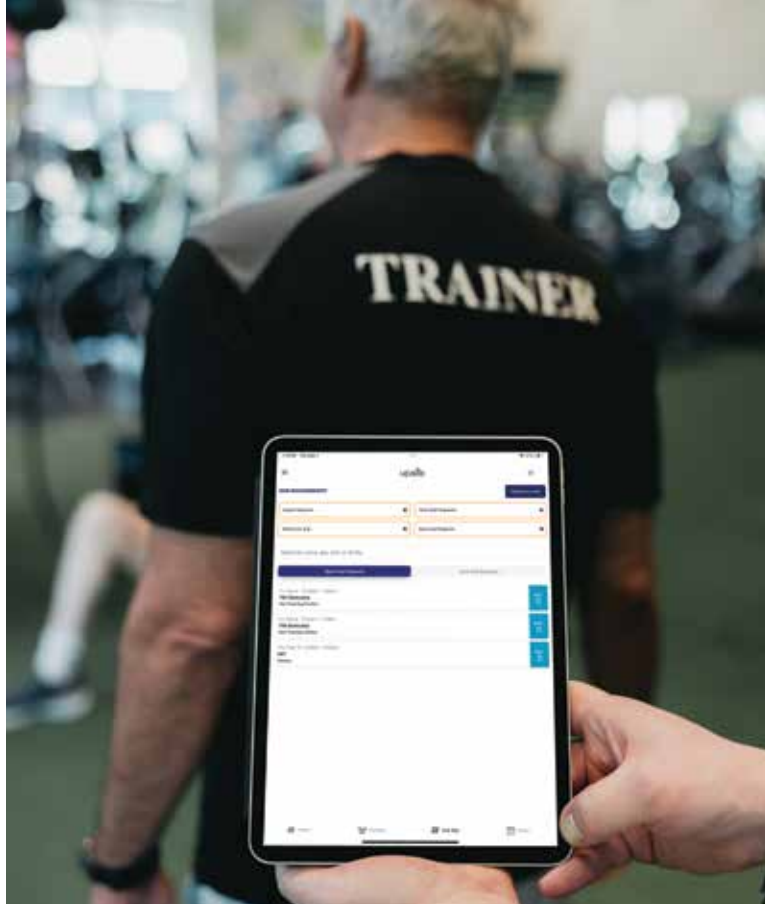
Admin Portal • Provides a single place to manage all reservations and scheduling, with changes automatically pushing to the mobile app and website embeds.

Reservation Suite • Tailored to each center's specific needs. Platform also handles appointments for services.

Upace Connect App • Real-time class check-in helps instructors and trainers keep track of important member data, reducing administrative headaches.

Substitute Management • This feature streamlines the process of finding substitutes when instructors can't make their scheduled classes.

Website Integrations • These allow centers to embed Upace's functionality directly into their existing websites.



▲ Upace's interface allows rec center staff to manage schedules for trainers.



▲ Rachel Koretsky first started Upace after her childhood JCC was forced to close.

rec centers that thrive will be those who embrace technology as an enabler of human connection."

However, what makes Upace standout goes beyond the technology. With the company's specialized alignment with community rec, it's the trustworthy relationships they create with centers that makes them unique.

This human-centered approach stems from Koretsky's belief that authentic connections create lasting community impact.

"Beyond being the founder and CEO of Upace, I'm also a wife and mother to two young boys and a golden retriever puppy," said Koretsky. "Having a family has further influenced my perspective on what community rec centers provide: spaces where families like mine can connect, grow and thrive together."

For Koretsky, the most fulfilling aspect of Upace's journey has been watching the platform evolve alongside clients' needs.

"When we first started, we had a vision for what Upace could be," she said. "But it's grown into some-

thing far more impactful. We don't just solve today's challenges. We're constantly exploring how emerging technology can address evolving pain points, ensuring our clients stay ahead of the curve."

This innovative mindset is on display in 2025. Upace will soon be rolling out a complete refresh of its admin portal, making the platform even more intuitive and engaging for staff.

Also, Upace is refining its visual identity and introducing game-changing AI functionality to help community rec centers better understand and serve their members.

These upcoming advancements will continue to enhance how centers connect with their communities while making operations more efficient.

"What makes me most excited about these developments is how they'll further our mission of helping community rec centers strengthen the connections that make them so essential," said Koretsky. "The future is incredibly bright, both for Upace and for the communities we serve." ■

PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH UPACE

For more information, visit upaceapp.com or email either hello@upaceapp.com or matt@upaceapp.com.



The #1 mobile engagement & reservations platform that community rec centers depend on.

MEMBER MOBILE APP

Connect with your members anywhere, anytime. Direct reservations, class schedules, appointments, real-time alerts, and updates keep members engaged—creating community loyalty that lasts.



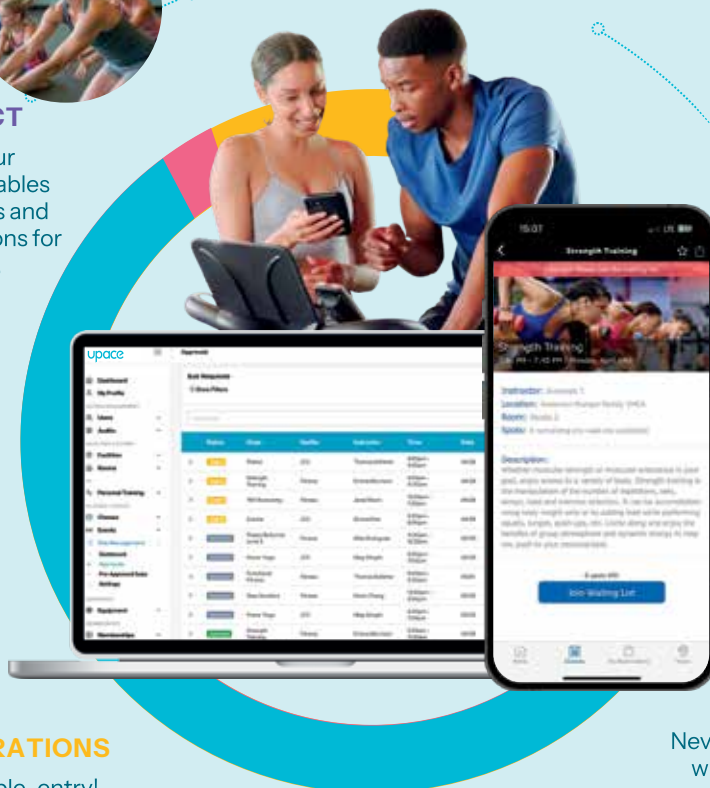
UPACE CONNECT

Mobile app just for your instructors & trainers. Enables quick, accurate check-ins and deeper member connections for your front-line team.



ADMIN PORTAL

Powerful simplicity at your fingertips. Manage schedules and operations with a portal designed for real people—driving member engagement and retention.



WEBSITE INTEGRATIONS

Say goodbye to double-entry! Update class schedules, equipment, reservations, on your mobile app and website simultaneously.



SUB MANAGEMENT

Never cancel a class again! Substitutes without the scramble: one-tap sub requests, automated or direct approvals saving your team hours of scheduling headaches each week.

Better tools. Deeper connections. Greater impact.

At community rec centers, simplified processes create space for meaningful moments. Upace transforms routine tasks into opportunities for connection, empowering your team to craft experiences that turn first-time visitors into lifetime members. Discover how Upace elevates your operations, enhances member engagement, and strengthens your community impact.



Book a call with Upace
Scan the code

Learn more about us
hello@upaceapp.com | www.upaceapp.com

THE foundation



▲ The Wave Aquatics and Fitness Center ensures staff are adequately trained so they can lead swimming lessons.



Building a Culture of Safety

From proactive staff training to advanced safety tools, industry leaders share best practices for ensuring secure and well-managed facilities.

by TRINITY REA

Recreation centers act as a hub of a community, creating a space for people to engage in sports, fitness and various wellness programs. The benefits provided by these facilities can't come without safety procedures and risk management strategies.

Maintaining a safe environment is key to rec centers running smoothly and successfully. By taking advantage of new technology, monitoring facilities and prioritizing staff training, recreation leaders need to develop and maintain key industry safety practices.

Creating a culture of safety starts by managing risk at facilities. Anne Reif, the

senior vice president of operations and COO of the Buffalo Niagara YMCA, helps create this culture at her Y by organizing and working with a safety committee.

Comprised of full and part-time staff, the committee works together to identify and evaluate risks, develop mitigation strategies, and then ensure the center adheres to the best practices. Additionally, Reif's staff completes daily walkthroughs in and outside their facilities, following a checklist to proactively identify potential safety and risk issues.

"These efforts allow staff to address hazards promptly and implement the best



▲ (Left to right) Patron counts are conducted every 30 minutes at the The Wave Aquatics and Fitness Center to identify any safety issues. Staff at the The Wave are unafraid to promote safety during swim lessons.

course of action to maintain a safe environment for everyone,” said Reif.

Reif makes sure safety is discussed monthly at staff meetings, reviewing best practices and reinforcing them. Regularly, her staff performs fire drills and invites experts into the facility to conduct workshops focusing on specific safety topics that apply to the center. The Y has multiple safety buttons installed throughout the center that call the local fire department, 911 and initiate a lockdown.

By going beyond just stressing the importance of reactive responses, Reif’s rec center embeds safety and risk prevention into daily operations. She said reaching this level starts by addressing immediate and manageable concerns first.

“Gradually build a robust risk management program that addresses broader challenges,” said Reif. “Collaborate with your insurance providers to identify your biggest risks and prioritize them. Don’t hesitate to seek help or guidance from experts or other organizations to strengthen

safety efforts.”

Tiffany Gould, the aquatics manager at The Wave Aquatics and Fitness Center, also employs a daily check system at her facility. On top of this, her team conducts patron counts every 30 minutes to track usage patterns and identify overcrowding or safety issues. From these counts, her team is able to strengthen their proactive risk management efforts.

Gould makes sure her recreation staff conducts annual and biannual training with American Red Cross certification and workplace-specific safety equipment training. Completing this training is essential as around the center there’s strategically placed equipment specific to the facility like diabetic shock kits, breathing barriers and first aid kits.

These kits improve the ability to respond to emergencies. To take it a step further, there are emergency pull stations installed in two designated pool areas. These stations immediately alert staff and emergency services during an accident,



HELPFUL PARTNERS

which can ensure a quick and efficient response.

Gould placed each of these risk management features thoughtfully by recognizing the unique challenges at the facility like lifeguards on duty, drowning prevention, water quality and more. Being unafraid to enforce strict policies — and back them up with access to reduced or free swim lessons — helps promote safety and proficiency.

“We strive to maintain our pools as free from contaminants as possible while ensuring help is readily available in emergencies,” said Gould. “This includes distributing educational materials on water safety, conducting frequent safety briefings, and fostering a proactive culture of awareness among staff and patrons within every part of our facility.”

Achieving this level of success while managing risk is a testament to prioritizing staff training — something she called a cornerstone of risk management and essential to recognize and achieve.

“Cultivating a culture of safety aware-

ness among staff will empower them to identify hazards proactively and respond effectively, ultimately safeguarding patrons and enhancing overall safety in the facility,” said Gould.

Tammy Como, the executive director of aquatics and risk management at the YMCA of Montclair, similarly focuses on her facility’s unique aspects, addressing risk and safety in the areas that make the Y stand out. In her 100,000-square-foot building which spans five floors, Como recognized there are many places to hide, opting to have staff monitoring and checking on facilities regularly during open hours. The local police department came into the facility to conduct a risk assessment of the building, which helped Y employees determine the best areas to monitor to keep members safe.

Como also focuses heavily on abuse prevention, ensuring staff attend training on the topic after being hired and renew their training through each individual department orientation shortly after.

TIFFANY GOULD collaborates with the Association of Aquatic Professionals, which has provided lifejacket grants to enhance safety during her team’s swim lessons. Additionally, they utilize resources from the American Red Cross for training and educational materials. This ensures their staff stays informed about best practices in aquatics safety and effective emergency response.

TAMMY COMO had her full-time staff visited by a team from Louisiana State University’s EMA’s National Training and Education Division to provide training on Surviving an Active Threat: Run. Hide. Fight.

In a large facility, it can be hard to monitor all areas effectively and locate where to exit when the time comes. Providing training on active threats is a key part of promoting risk management and safety.



▲ (Clockwise from top left) A member swims at The Wave Aquatics and Fitness Center. Pools at The Wave are as free from contaminants as possible so both experienced and inexperienced swimmers can enjoy the water. One of the indoor aquatics spaces at The Wave.



In addition, each non-member or vendor who enters the Y must provide their government-issued ID to be checked for a match in the National Abuse Registry before entering the facility. Como's staff also uses a toolkit provided by Praesidium for compliance with child protection policies.

The YMCA of Montclair achieved Praesidium Accreditation in October 2023, the highest industry standard in safety and abuse prevention. The accreditation is valid for three years, something Como said will ensure her team upholds organization values, and implements and follows safety practices that protect patrons from abuse. She said monitoring the building by checking bathrooms and locker rooms is documented and an important routine to uphold in all recreation centers.

"Administrators, department heads,

and every employee in the Y is responsible for reporting and documenting any red flag behaviors," said Como. "The motto is it's everyone's responsibility to ensure the safety of the youth in our care."

Como recommends having an independent assessor and insurance companies visit the facility and make recommendations. To properly assess risk and provide recommendations to improve, Como said outside eyes are important.

By integrating structured risk management strategies, staff education and advanced safety tools, recreation centers can maintain secure facilities while optimizing daily operations. Prioritizing safety not only protects members and employees but also enhances the overall experience, ensuring that recreation remains welcoming and well-managed for years to come. *

PUBLIC • FORUM

Additional Insights from Professionals
on **RISK MANAGEMENT**

JAYSON SCOTT of
Players Health

Jayson Scott is the director of business development, U.S. Brokerage at Players Health. For more information, email jayson.scott@playershealth.com, visit playershealth.com or call 513.429.9366.

How We Can Help

Community recreation centers face unique risks due to their range of activities. Here are three insurance tips to reduce liability:

1. Review your liability coverage. Ensure your general liability covers all activities — including abuse and molestation — especially if you serve minors or vulnerable populations.
2. Implement risk management protocols. Document staff training, inspections, and incident reporting to minimize claims and reduce liability.
3. Continually review risk. The risk landscape changes, so regularly review coverage to stay proactive in managing new threats. Proactive coverage and safety practices help protect your center's operations.

More From Players Health

At Players Health, we specialize in tailored insurance solutions for community recreation centers, YMCAs, health clubs and fitness studios. We offer comprehensive coverage including general liability, property, cyber and directors/officers liability, addressing your unique risks. Our policy reviews ensure your coverage remains up to date as your programs grow and evolve, identifying any gaps and adjusting your policy as needed. We also provide risk management resources to help prevent incidents and support a safe environment. Partner with Players Health to ensure you have the right coverage to protect your facility, staff and members.

**IN CASE YOU
MISSED IT**

2024 BUYER'S GUIDE
available at
CommunityRecMag.com



HOW AI IS REVOLUTIONIZING COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTERS

By utilizing AI, YMCA of Greater Dayton's call center can better centralize incoming phone calls.

Community rec centers are leveraging AI to improve operations, protect members and optimize experiences.

by TRINITY REA

Artificial intelligence (AI) is helping revolutionize different industries and their processes — including community recreation centers.

Across the country, rec centers are utilizing AI to improve center efficiency, enhance safety procedures and overall create a better experience for their members. This once-futuristic concept is now reshaping community rec center operations, without requiring major overhauls.

James Highsmith, the president and CEO of the Ann Arbor YMCA, has been taking advantage of AI through a partnership with the aquatics safety company Lynxight. The company has integrated its software into the Y's CCTV cameras in pool areas, using AI to detect and analyze the swimmers. Through this data, the software uses machine learning from over 600 pools across the globe to determine if swimmers are in distress, in high-risk swim areas or have entered the pool on accident. When the software detects an incident, lifeguards are alerted immediately through a smart-watch which provides the exact location of the incident.

Based on where most incidents occur and other data like where the pool is commonly overcrowded, when swimmers tend to be in the pool, etc., AI can alert lifeguards to potential hazards allowing for additional safety measures to be put in place. This real-time drowning prevention is something Highsmith says ties into the Y's commitment to making water activities as safe as possible.

"Lynxight has certainly enhanced the safety of our natatorium," said Highsmith. "Beyond the real-time drowning prevention tools, the technology provides a comprehensive administrative dashboard related



▲ (Clockwise from top left) YMCA of Greater Dayton employees get fast solutions by using AI chatbots. Cameras in the aquatics space at the Ann Arbor YMCA use AI to determine if swimmers are in distress.

to aquatics safety. We're able to make data-informed decisions on scanning zones, program scheduling and guarding rotations based on data the system provides."

While the commitment to the center was undeniable, the community publicity, interest and support came quickly as well. By making it clear to all involved — staff, volunteers and community members alike — that the tool is not meant to be a replacement for lifeguards but rather a technologically provocative effort, Highsmith said local support has been tremendous.

"By investing in the software, it was a clear message to our community that our Y takes aquatics safety seriously and we made an intentional investment into keeping families as safe as possible when participating in water-based activities and exercise," said Highsmith.

While the support is there, rolling out plans and software like this need to be measured and held up by a strategic plan. All in all, Highsmith said operations need to be sustainable with the new system,

noting that he took a year to implement the system after acquiring it. During that time, he took time to train staff and roll out communications to ensure trust and knowledge in the software.

Pamela Flatter, the senior operations and membership support director at the YMCA of Greater Dayton, also incorporated AI in her Y by starting small and training staff to use AI tools that align with the organization. Flatter began automating basic tasks before expanding their focus. She said doing this improved efficiency while maintaining a human touch.

Fully embracing AI has helped Flatter improve her daily operations by partnering with Capacity, an AI-driven platform that helps automate tasks and self-service capabilities for patrons. Capacity has provided Flatter's employees and members with fast and accurate solutions through chatbots and public sites. Members can find answers day or night and can sign up for membership, register for programs and inquire about childcare seamlessly.

Why ROR?

We are a data-driven, AI-integrated, performance marketing company that services land-based businesses, including healthy, active, and lifestyle brands.

25-50%
REDUCTION
ATTRIBUTED COST PER
NEW MEMBER ACQUIRED

Actively Serviced Brands

120+
ACTIVE LIFESTYLE AND
LOCATION-BASED BRANDS

8k
LOCATIONS

35M+
MEMBERS IN THE HEALTH AND
ACTIVE LIFESTYLE SECTOR

*Leveraging data to
drive exceptional
results for YMCAs
and JCCs*





“Our employees benefit from Capacity as well,” said Flatter. “Our call center centralizes calls, freeing up front desk staff to assist members in person. However, this also keeps our call center busy. Capacity serves as the centralized source for information, both external and internal, allowing our call center employees to assist members more quickly and with fewer transfers or hold times.”

Flatter also said that her Y uses ChatGPT to frequently assist in consistent and efficient communication across the organization. Fundraise, an AI-powered fundraising platform, is also used to help enhance donor engagement and to optimize donation processes. By leveraging AI, Flatter said rec centers can save time, reduce errors, and focus more on delivering high-quality programming and services to their communities and patrons.

Amanda Loveland, the chief marketing officer at the Peninsula JCC (PJCC), and her team also use AI that helps with member management, communication and marketing automation. Loveland takes advantage of industry-standard tools like Salesforce for CRM and Adobe tools but has begun to introduce special applications such as Team AI. This service has been a

game changer for her team, as she’s customized the service to fit the team’s specific needs directly.

In 2023, Loveland and the team at the PJCC recognized how AI was going to impact their recreation center and decided to jump ahead of the curve by implementing an AI usage policy. The JCC was the first to do so.

“This policy guides our use of technology to ensure it enhances rather than replaces human interaction, maintaining our commitment to a people-first philosophy,” said Loveland. “By integrating technology thoughtfully, we aim to create an environment where staff and members alike benefit from the efficiencies and capabilities that modern solutions provide.”

Through the use of AI, PJCC has prioritized data collection and statistics to directly enhance member satisfaction and operational effectiveness. With data such as attendance and participation rates, resource utilization and operational efficiency, and member feedback, AI is able to automatically adjust and highlight different patterns in the center.

Over the next decade, Loveland sees AI continuing to revolutionize the community recreation center landscape through

▲ (Clockwise from top left) YMCA of Greater Dayton’s call center uses an AI-driven platform called Capacity to automate tasks. Other areas of Ann Arbor YMCA’s aquatics space that are monitored by AI. Using AI helps YMCA of Greater Dayton staff respond to members faster.



analytics and automation of routine tasks. Regardless of the benefits of AI adoption, Loveland said it could come with challenges if not implemented correctly. She recommends ensuring robust cybersecurity measures are in place, and that ethical use and member transparency are at the top of recreation centers' minds when implementing this technology.

"This longstanding integration of AI capabilities enables us to be proactive rather than reactive in our approach to community management," said Loveland. "As we continue to advance our technology stack, our focus remains on how these tools can enrich the community experience, ensuring our use of AI reinforces, rather than replaces, the human connections that form the core of our mission."

AI can significantly enhance community recreation, making it adaptable and responsive for community members. Recognizing where AI fits in your recreation center is no longer a glimpse into the future, but a current reality reshaping operations and benefiting everyone. Embracing this movement and technology with intentionality will deliver safer, smarter and more engaging member experience for years to come. *

PUBLIC • FORUM

Additional Insights from Professionals on
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



STEVE AYERS of



How We Can Help

Harness Predictive Analytics for Targeted Acquisition Campaigns. Use predictive analytics to forecast membership trends and identify high-value prospects.

Smarter Marketing with AI-Driven Precision. Our AI-driven marketing platforms are designed to help you maximize every dollar of your advertising budget. Our AI ensures your ads are delivered to the right audience at the right time.

Personalize Your Messaging with Data Insights. Use data to segment your audience and deliver personalized offers that speak directly to individual needs.

Leverage Automation for Continuous Optimization. With machine learning and AI, your campaigns can continuously optimize themselves. Automation ensures your marketing strategies evolve based on performance data.

Measure Everything and Make Data-Driven Decisions. Regularly analyze your campaigns' performance metrics and adjust your strategies accordingly.

More From ROR

We harness the power of data-driven generative AI to help clients unlock new levels of efficiency, creativity and impact in their marketing efforts. Our proprietary AI platforms develop highly life-like digital models, customized to reflect each brand's unique identity and customer personas. These models can be seamlessly adapted across countless modes, settings, activities and campaigns — delivering unmatched versatility.

By replacing the need for traditional photo and video shoots, our AI solutions dramatically reduce production costs while accelerating time to market. Whether it's creating hyper-realistic visuals for social, digital or broadcast, or building full campaign assets from scratch, ROR's AI-driven approach offers limitless creative possibilities at a fraction of the cost. With ROR, brands can scale their content with precision, consistency and innovation, while staying rooted in strategy and storytelling that resonates.

Steve Ayers is the SVP of business development at ROR. For more information, email steve.ayers@rorpartners.com or call 386.316.9579.

FROM ARLY

Telling Your Story of Impact

Why program and activity providers must plan for data.



Your program is making a difference, but how do you prove it? More importantly, how do you use that proof to inspire action, build trust and sustain momentum?

Data isn't just for funders or annual reports. It's the foundation of your story and highlights how your program supports participants and strengthens your community.

Why Your Story Matters

Data helps you do more than evaluate success — it empowers you to:

- Mobilize public and private resources.
- Build trust with families, funders and community partners.
- Recruit and retain top-notch staff and volunteers.
- Advocate for the value of your program.

To get there, you need to move beyond anecdotal evidence and into measurable, concrete outcomes. That starts with intentional planning.

Plan Before You Launch

Before your next program begins, carve out time to:

- Identify key stakeholders and include their perspectives.
- Create a list of meaningful metrics to collect such as attendance rates, stakeholder survey outcomes, meals provided or family engagement activities. Focus on what matters to your program.
- Set up systems to capture outputs and outcomes.
- Begin drafting your data report and developing a communications plan.

With a clear preprogram strategy, you're not scrambling to tell your story — you're building it in real time.

During and After the Program

As your program runs, monitor data collection systems, encourage staff and stakeholder engagement, and refine your reporting strategy. Once your program wraps, analyze your data, reflect on the results and finalize your report.

Don't forget the "feels." Photos, quotes and real-world snapshots breathe life into your metrics.

Measure What Matters

Understanding your program's impact means looking at the full picture on participants, staff, families and the broader community. It means capturing not only how many youth you served or hours you offered, but also the outcomes achieved and the stories lived.

When you measure what matters, you don't just evaluate — you elevate. You position your program as an essential community asset, worthy of investment, celebration and growth.

👉 **Carrie Underwood serves as senior evaluation consultant with Arly, analyzing and interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, developing evaluation tools and authoring papers and research briefs. Underwood's long history of working in education research and policy at all levels informs her understanding of the unique roles various stakeholders play in supporting youth development. You can reach her at cunderwood@bellxcel.org.**

FROM OPERATE FIT

Ditching Paper, Empowering Rec Staff

Learn how digitizing operations is beneficial for your center.



Community rec centers need to modernize their operations, and digital tools are the answer. Here's why going digital matters and how to make it happen without significant headaches.

Why digitize? For starters, your staff expects it. Younger employees have grown up with technology and get frustrated with paper forms and manual tracking. They want systems that make sense and save time. Plus, paper creates major inefficiencies. Staff waste hours searching for information instead of helping members. Finally, you miss seeing important patterns across your programs and locations when everything's on paper.

Getting started is simpler than you might think. Begin by taking inventory of all your paper processes. Gather your team and list every form, checklist and report currently used. Figure out which ones consume the most time or cause the most headaches. You'll probably be surprised how many paper processes have piled up over the years.

An internal electronic system makes sense as a first step for many organizations. You don't necessarily need complex software right away — even simple spread-

sheets or basic forms can dramatically improve efficiency over paper. This intermediate step helps staff adjust to digital thinking while delivering immediate benefits.

One key advantage of digital tools is automated reminders. Paper checklists are easily forgotten in busy environments, leading to incomplete tasks and documentation gaps. Digital systems can send timely reminders to staff, significantly increasing completion rates for regular tasks. When someone misses a step, the system flags it automatically instead of hoping someone notices a blank field on a form.

Next, pick one or two problem areas to digitize first. It could be incident reporting or facility inspections. Starting small builds confidence before tackling bigger systems. Look for solutions that are intuitive and don't require extensive technical knowledge. The best systems feel natural to use and solve real problems for your team.

New staff learn digital systems much faster than complicated paper processes, which is a huge plus when dealing with turnover. Communication improves dramatically when everyone can access the same information. Data gives you new insights about what's working and what's not

across your facilities.

Digital tools can highlight unusual patterns or summarize information automatically, helping you spot issues before they become problems and make smarter decisions about your resources. For example, digital tracking might reveal certain incidents happen more frequently at specific times or locations, allowing you to address root causes.

Cost concerns often delay digital adoption, but modern solutions are more affordable than many realize. Cloud-based options eliminate the need for expensive hardware, and many systems offer flexible pricing based on organization size. The efficiency gains typically offset costs quickly through time savings and better resource allocation.

Recreation centers that embrace digital tools create more time for what matters — building stronger communities through great programs and services. The technology doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. It just needs to solve real problems for your staff and members.

➔ **Jim Paro is the founder of Operate Fit. He can be reached at jim@operate.fit or visit operate.fit.**

FROM BEN LUDWIG

Engaging Seniors at Your Center

Three strategies to make your programming appealing to older members.



When you consider the demographics of your recreation center, we often see a more varied population than any other health and wellness space from young kids simply seeking activity outside their home, to seniors who likely wouldn't be joining any commercial gym in your area. The difficult part is the older population can often be the hardest to engage and get involved in your programs. So what are the best ways to go about making engaging seniors a priority within your center?

1. Build Social-Focused Programs

This group often seeks more than recreation — they want meaningful connections. Years ago, I was running multiple fitness centers across a broad variance of towns. The city with the highest senior population had the simplest answer I found on engaging this population.

Once a week, we provided free coffee and donuts after one of the senior-specific classes. After the first couple months of getting to know the few people who were coming, we encouraged them to invite their friends. This got one lady to bring her whole bible study group, another told her bingo friends and one member even invited all her friends from a recent class reunion. Socialization can be the biggest lever to winning this older population.

2. Invest Relationally

For seniors, relationships often surpass all other aspects of your program. In my time leading these types of programs, I made it a point to get my instructors, directors and even front desk staff to take senior classes, co-teach for instructors or to be a part of

the special events we held at the facility. I even made it a point to take the class myself once a month. The investment means so much to your older members. It often is more rewarding to have fun with your members as well.

3. Trust the Process for Growth

Many facility owners or directors I've had conversations with around senior programming can feel stuck. They may feel their program isn't growing as quickly as they would like. So, they plan outreach to senior centers or clubs and attempt to promote their program to drive numbers up.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with advertisement. However, our target demographic here tends to like a more personal touch as opposed to a flyer in the mail or an announcement at their center. When you grow a senior program mainly through referral basis not only will it grow steadily, but this group will be your most loyal members and most consistent as well, giving you a great boost in retention and revenue.

Bringing It All Together

Successfully engaging seniors can be one of the biggest wins your center has in creating consistent growth, revenue, great reviews and regular attendance. But most importantly, you're making a difference in the lives of those who have so much to give and a quality of life that can give families memories to cherish for years to come.

➡ **Ben Ludwig is a fitness industry veteran and nonprofit advocate serving on multiple boards including his local YMCA and serves as a pastor with Crosspoint Network of Churches across Kansas.**



FROM THE SUMMER CAMP SOURCE

Food Service Tips for Camps

10 tips to consider when cooking and serving food to visitors.

Food service at camp or within any recreation program can be essential or non-essential depending on what type of program you operate. If you do offer food service or are looking into it, there are many things you should consider to ensure a healthy environment.

When staff, volunteers or participants are handling food, it should be with the utmost caution to enhance the safety of your visitors. Here are 10 tips to consider when cooking, handling, serving and eating food at camp.

1. Staff must wash their hands. Make sure soap, water and towels are available in camp. While wilderness camping — or other times when soap and water are not available — make sure hand sanitizer is available. Dirty hands can spread disease from one camper to another and can contaminate food that will be eaten by other people.

2. Ensure clean cooking surfaces are used to prepare food. Always wash cutting boards and other utensils with detergent and clean water after contact with raw meat, poultry or eggs. Eggs, meat and poultry can carry Salmonella and other bacteria.

3. Don't drink or cook with water from the outdoors. Surface water is often contaminated with bacteria and parasites from animal feces. Make sure staff know to use only properly treated water for cooking and drinking.

4. Those handling food do not share cups or utensils. Saliva can spread a variety of viruses and bacteria, including those that cause colds, influenza and meningitis.

5. Teach staff and participants to keep foods at desired temperatures. Cold foods should be kept cold and hot foods should be kept hot. Storing foods at the right temperature can inhibit bacterial growth.

6. Keep raw foods separate to prevent cross contamination. Use separate areas for preparing food that will be cooked and food that won't. Never use cooking surfaces that were used for raw meat or chicken to prepare or store cooked food. By the same token, only use clean cutting boards and utensils for foods that will be eaten raw, such as fruits, vegetables or salads.

7. Clean dishes and utensils properly. Do not use water from rivers, creeks or streams

for cleaning as it may be contaminated.

8. Cook foods to proper internal temperatures. Meat and poultry must be cooked to the proper internal temperature to destroy germs that cause foodborne illness. You must use a food thermometer to be sure. You can't tell just by looking. Color isn't a reliable indicator of doneness.

9. Use fish as little as possible. This is because it's hard to keep fresh and could pose other threats for allergies and cross contamination.

10. Make sure to wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly.

When you're ready to embark on implementing food service at camp, concessions or within any of your programs, ensure there are plenty of resources who will guide you so you don't have to figure it all out by yourself. Make sure you do your research, know the rules and offer food to your participants in a clean and safe environment.

👉 **Jason Schaitz is the parks and recreation director at the City of DeBary and creator of The Summer Camp Source.**

THE LAST WORD

“A TEAM IS A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO CELEBRATE EACH OTHER’S SUCCESS AND THE TALENTED TEAM AT THE TUCSON JCC DOES JUST THAT”

six questions with

Todd Rockoff

PRESIDENT AND CEO | TUCSON JCC **by JOHN REECER**



1 How did you get started in the community recreation industry? **TR:**

While in high school and college I worked as a camp counselor at the JCC of Rochester Day Camp. I then made the decision that I wanted to dedicate my life and career to working in the JCC movement. I went off to college at SUNY Cortland to major in Recreation and Leisure Studies and Education. Following college, I began as the youth and camp director at the Scranton JCC and haven’t looked back since.

2 What’s been a key to your team’s success? What are you most proud of?

TR: I believe the secret to our team’s success is we’re a true team. A team is a group of people who celebrate each other’s success and the talented team at the Tucson JCC does just that. I’m incredibly proud of the growth we’ve experienced over the past

five years and the focus we’ve had in implementing our strategic plan that led us to be the host of the 2025 JCC Maccabi Games.

3 What has been one of the biggest accomplishments of your career?

TR: That’s a hard question. I’m proud of the impact that I — along with the teams I have worked alongside — have made on the communities that I’ve worked in. I’m incredibly proud to have hosted the JCC Maccabi Games in 2008 in Akron, Ohio — the smallest community to do so — and now again in 2025 in Tucson, Arizona.

4 What has been one of the biggest challenges you have faced in your career?

TR: I wouldn’t characterize it as a challenge as much as an opportunity. When I started this work, I needed strong programming and group work skills. As

time has gone on, I’ve had to learn to build my knowledge base in new areas like construction and security. I love the variety of things that fill each of my days.

5 What is one lesson you have learned that other community recreation professionals can learn from? **TR:**

I would say three things. First, always be learning and growing. Second, focus on relationships with your teams, community and volunteers. Third, have a trusted colleague you can talk to. Also, in a statement of the obvious, have fun.

6 Tell us one fact about yourself others may not know. **TR:**

Since I began working at a JCC Summer Camp in high school in the summer of 1979, I’ve never worked for an organization other than the JCC.

AD INDEX

21 Aqua Creek
aquacreekproducts.com

21 Cedarworks
cedarworks.com

19 Fitness Flooring
fitnessflooring.com

BC Matrix Fitness
matrixfitness.com

35 ROR
rorpartners.com

19 Operate Fit
operate.fit

25 Upace
upaceapp.com

keep learning

Love the Community Rec content you're experiencing in print? Get even more exclusive articles, photos and more by subscribing to our e-newsletter at

communityrecmag.com.



community rec



MATRIX STRENGTH THAT NEVER RESTS

Matrix doesn't just manufacture equipment — we craft strength training innovations that evolve with your fitness facility and your lifters. We listen to owners, trainers and users to put real-world insights at the heart of our designs, captivating a new generation and delivering innovation that outperforms the ordinary in better, smarter ways. Best of all, we design and develop all of our durable training tools in the USA, the global epicenter of strength training. Choose Matrix, and discover strength that never rests.

Discover more at MatrixFitness.com