

Community Conversations
on Safety, Belonging, and Inclusion

Executive Summary

2021/2022



Introduction

Between November of 2021 and January 2022, The Vida Agency conducted five (5) community conversations and two (2) internal focus groups on behalf of King County Parks to explore the topics of safety and belonging in parks, trails, and other public lands. Insights were gleaned to inform near-term budget decisions; the Parks, Trails, and Open Space Plan; as well as long-term approach and resource decisions.

We recruited participants in English and Spanish through King County Parks and The Vida Agency's social media channels, email outreach to existing community contacts, and physical flyer at parks and trailheads. Registrations were prioritized from individuals underrepresented in public input in the past, and 58 community members participated in virtual discussions focused on Glendale, East Federal Way, Northeast/North King County, as well as the County at-large.

- 72% of registrants were Hispanic or Latino and 20% were White.
- 78% identified as women, and 20% identified as men.
- 83% of registrants were between 26 - 55 years old, with 41% between 36 - 45 years old.
- 73% said their household income is \$60,000 or lower, which is less than the median household income of \$81,083 in Washington State.
- 63% of registrants speak Spanish as their primary language, and 31% speak English.

Due to interest from Spanish-speaking registrants, a second in-language listening session was added to accommodate additional community members. 15 minutes prior to all sessions, participants who desired tech assistance were provided with one-on-one support to get logged in and prepared to participate. After each session, community participants were compensated with a \$150 honorarium for their time and insights.

What Makes People Feel Unsafe?

We asked listening session and focus group participants about what makes them feel unsafe while visiting parks and trails in King County. The most frequently mentioned concerns included:

- **Not seeing other park users:** Being alone and not being able to see other park users or employees. Not having help nearby in case of an emergency.
- **Lack of visibility and lighting:** Inability to see the area around them due to lack of lighting or overgrown foliage, and as a result not having situational awareness needed to keep themselves safe or away from threats.
- **Uncertainty about what to do in an emergency:** Medical emergency, physical threats, or environmental concerns. For field staff, limited wildlife training or experience coupled with exposure to predators (like bear and cougar) and large prey (like herds of migrating elk) in the field.

- **Lack of information and guidance:** Many participants noted a general lack of information and knowledge about King County parks, whether due to limited signage at the park, lack of in-language information, or lack of familiarity with how to find trail maps or nearby transit stops. Several shared stories about being lost or underprepared for their trail experience. Even for field staff, it's not always clear where they should park, or what facilities are available at a site.
- **Lack of access to clean bathroom and water:** Access, maintenance, and upkeep were noted both safety concerns as well as a barrier to visiting.
- **Widespread presence of trash, used injection needles, dog and human feces:** Park cleanliness was a primary concern across all discussions, with many participants noting that they don't feel safe when they see excessive trash, feces, or syringes from drug usage.
- **Threats of physical violence:** Parks field staff recalled multiple incidents where they were threatened with violence or targeted as a King County Parks staff member. Physical threats ranged from humans wielding weapons, boobytrapped injection needles hanging from trees, to being charged by apex predators.
- **Crime, vandalism, and theft:** Damage and theft of cars and bikes were a common concern amongst participants, and field staff noted a rise in racially charged vandalism and tagging, particularly in East Federal Way parks.
- **Alcohol and drug use:** Parents are afraid that their kids might pick up the needles or be influenced by illicit drug use, and both staff and community members commented on drug and substance use in parks.
- **Presence of houseless campers:** Not having a plan for how campers will transition into housing and out of living in the park. Several field staff have been threatened or stalked, and reported campers coming back to the park after being evicted and seeming to target Parks employees in retribution.

"If I pull up to a park and there's nobody there, I'm going to feel less safe." - East Federal Way Listening Session Participant

"We're hooking up equipment in the dark, using headlights and flashlights, which isn't ideal." - King County Parks Field Staff

"Coming across human waste. Unfortunately, that's something that when we go to parks in Seattle we frequently come across. That makes me feel unsafe only on the biological level. Things like, you know, potentially getting sick from." - Northeast/East Listening Session Participant

- **Car and bike speeding:** Lack of safe pedestrian pathways leading into parks, particularly where there are high speed limits on park-neighboring roadways.
- **Dogs off leash:** Many report that people are letting their dogs off leash in parks and on trails, and that dogs appear uncontrolled as they approach people and children.
- **Water safety risks:** Concern about whether the water is safe to swim in, and not having help (such as lifeguards) in emergency situations.
- **Environmental and wildlife safety risks:** Pesticides, roadway runoff, or invasive plants, and uncertainty about level of safety risk, particularly for people with allergies or Tribal members who are harvesting there.
- **COVID-19:** Field staff frequently see park patrons not adhering to COVID-19 guidelines, whether by packing events with too many attendees, not wearing masks, or generally not being conscientious of staff safety.

What Makes People Feel Safe?

We asked participants to share what might make them feel safe in parks and on trails. The most frequently mentioned solutions included:

- **Cleaning and maintenance,** including clean bathrooms and trash, poop, and needle pickup. For many, simply seeing a maintenance or cleaning staff or volunteer presence made them feel safer; a sentiment echoed by Parks field staff themselves.
- **Visible presence of other users** through recreational activities, classes, events, family activities, arts and culture, and multi-generational programming.
- **Visible presence of staff** at a welcome station, gear rental, or as rangers/trail guides or medical (mental or physical) providers.
- **Physical features including lighting, emergency call boxes, clear lines of sight** (through foliage and to play areas), security cameras, sidewalks, parking lots, bathrooms, covered shelters, accessibility features, gardening and edible plants, as well as mode-designated areas (for off leash dogs, biking, smoking, etc.).

***"I feel much safer when there's a large presence of other people."** - Glendale Listening Session Participant*

***"The ones that are cleaner, you're more motivated and you're going to want to stay longer."** - Spanish Listening Session Participant (translated)*

- **Widely disseminated information** about wayfinding, trip planning, allowable activities, and how to get help during an emergency in a park.
- **Signage, maps, trail markers, and online resources that are multilingual** and provide insight on environmental safety concerns (high tide, pesticides, trail condition, known risks), trip planning, wayfinding, and natural and cultural history of the location, wildlife, and plant life.
- **Intentional support or infrastructure for campers** (houseless park residents), including:
 - **Facilities:** bathrooms, water fountains, showers, waste disposal and frequent emptying of trash, bio-waste disposal (for needles), and designated campsites with camp hosts (similar to State and National parks).
 - **Staffing:** welcome station with coffee and food, first aid/crisis response team, outreach presence, addiction support professionals, mental health professionals.
- **Information:** Compass markings/maps to show where restrooms and water stations are located.
- Awareness, signage, and enforcement around **dog leash requirements.**
- **Art** (colorful signage, cultural art installations, locations where graffiti is encouraged) **and music** (performances, rotating artists, festivals).

Perception of Law Enforcement

Participants were divided about whether law enforcement in parks would improve or impede the sense of safety. Many shared that the presence of law enforcement would not make them feel safer in a park due to the record of police violence against People of Color, fear of the problem escalating to violence, or concern about being deported.

Others felt that the level of crime within local parks necessitates an enforcement presence of some kind, though there was concern that a limited law enforcement

“It makes me feel unsafe when I see a lot of police in a park.” - Spanish Listening Session Participant (translated)

“If people have immigration problems, it's not helping them feel safer.” - Spanish Listening Session Participant (translated)

“Parks Patrol has been extremely helpful in having that safety net when we need it.” - King County Parks Staff

“When I look at police officers around a park I sit down, I feel safe, and I feel comfortable.” - Spanish Listening Session Participant (translated)

presence monitoring so many miles of parks and trails would not be an effective solution for the scale of safety issues. King County Parks field staff noted that the presence of Parks Patrol offers critical safety while working alone, in the dark, or in remote locations.

Community participants tended to agree that emergency situations aren't one size fits all, and many want to see a variety of response types, with escalation to armed law enforcement only when needed. Many participants were most concerned with urgency, and prioritized whichever responder can arrive fastest. Suggested alternatives to law enforcement response included:

- **Trail volunteers/rangers/ambassadors:** Individuals in a clearly identifiable vest who patrol parks for safety and environmental concerns, and can escalate a situation by calling in back-up as needed. They provide information and support visitors, but do not have the authority of law enforcement.
- **Alternative security companies:** An alternative to sworn law enforcement officers, who enforce safety and rules with an emphasis on being both inside the park and at parking lots to reduce car theft.
- **Lifeguards:** Particularly at parks with water features, but mentioned as a "land" lifeguard as well, an individual who is trained to search in water and on land for missing park visitors, educate about high and low tides, and provide a sense of safety for families.
- **Mental health professionals:** Trained in handling a mental health crisis and able to provide additional or ongoing resources.
- **Peacekeepers:** Trained in de-escalating fights, harassment, and who respond when park visitors are at risk. These professionals would be unarmed, but would be able to respond to higher-level incidents that a park ranger may not be trained to intervene in.
- **On-site first aid/EMTs:** Trained in CPR, medical crisis, administering Narcan, and providing on-site first aid. Participants also discussed the importance of time when it comes to medical emergencies, and suggested on-site park staff be trained in CPR.
- **Community-based solutions:** Alternative solutions created and led by local communities. For non-English speaking communities, this was a popular suggestion, as participants saw a need for professions who speak their languages and have cultural awareness. There were several suggestions for a community agreed-upon phone tree, app, or hotline for triaging the appropriate response, which might take the pressure off park visitors in an emergency. Participants also suggested a way to report incidents that are not immediately putting someone in danger but should be reported. Finally, participants suggested education and knowledge about park policies and rules for the public through more signage.

“The last thing we want is people carrying guns into the park because they don’t feel they’re getting any resolution.” - King County Park Staff

“You have to fend for yourself.”
- East Federal Way Listening Session Participant

In an internal focus group, Parks field staff warned that if lack of enforcement continues, community members will increasingly take matters into their own hands. Several staff had already witnessed “vigilante justice” occurring in parks and on trails, including a group of residents rallying together to conduct their own sweep of a homeless encampment. Luckily, in this case, the campers had already moved on, and no physical confrontation occurred.

We heard from both staff and community members that they feel that they are on their own when something goes wrong in a King County park or trail, and that even if help does arrive, it may be too late, or it may not resolve or de-escalate the problem.

What’s Feasible Right Now?

In an internal focus group with King County Parks, we asked staff to identify ideas from the community listening sessions that felt feasible or like “low hanging fruit.” They identified the following areas of opportunity:

- **Cleaning and Maintenance:** More trash and recycling cans, trash/poop pickup bags, dog poop cleanup signage, and exploration of a partnership with Public Health for needle cleanup.
- **Human Presence:** Official vest for park staff or volunteers, trail guides/crews/park stewards, and volunteers.
- **Visibility:** Foliage trimmed for visibility, creating clear visible to cars, playground, and immediate surroundings.
- **Information:** Multi-language materials, resources on length of trails and estimated time to complete.
- **Programming:** Group walks, LGBTQ+ events, multi-generational events, in-language events, community clean ups, food trucks, barbeques, classes/educational opportunities, and partnerships with community organizations.
- **Training:** Classes or info sessions to help normalize users with park and staff, including

“I think this just highlights how important it is for us to have resources to do real on the ground outreach.” - King County Park Staff

“In an ideal world, we would have a person in a park all day long.” - King County Park Staff

topics like knowing how to use the park, natural safety awareness, wilderness safety training, and park preparedness.

- **Campaign:** Cultural outreach about the diversity of people using King County Parks and the variety of ways that the space can and should be used.

What's Possible in the Future?

We asked King County Parks staff to share what ideas from community listening sessions might be possible in the longer-term, if resources and staff could be dedicated to them. They identified the following areas of long-term opportunity:

- **Welcome Station:** Information on site with support or kiosk, forest ranger/park ambassadors, gear rental, on-site outreach staff, mental health support, other forms of staff presence.
- **Information:** Signage in multiple languages, wayfinding signs and maps, clarity around separate zones or uses within the park, in-language trail guides.
- **Emergency Infrastructure:** Emergency call boxes, security cameras.
- **Emergency Response:** Bilingual community liaisons, first aid and health crisis responders.
- **Programming:** Concerts and plays, playgrounds, movie nights, crafts, fitness equipment, 5k runs.
- **Cross-Agency Collaboration:** Lower speed limits on surrounding streets.

"We have an outreach van that has a bunch of materials that used to go to partnership events. That is primarily how we used it. And to me, this is making me see we need to have that van out in the parks every single day with staff in it.

Now, of course we don't. We don't have staff that can do that. But I think there are ways that we can make that happen. It just seems like a really easy, low hanging fruit for us to be able to get people out there and interact with people on a daily basis."

- King County Park Staff