At a Glance

Over a decade ago, Polley Field was the place for community gatherings and recreation in Nelsonville, Ohio. The park was home to the beloved Nelsonville Community pool, playground equipment, and baseball fields. After the pool moved to a new location, the building and surrounding area was left abandoned and recognized as an unsafe place for children. Fortunately, passionate community members and former city council members took action to bring Polley Field back to life. In 2018, the Athens County Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) program worked with the city council and community members to convert the rundown park into a community focused gathering space. Although it may take several years and considerable fundraising to restore the park entirely, encouraging progress has been made and will continue in years to come. Community members are energized and eager to see Polley Field come back to life.

Public Health Challenge

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Rankings, one in four Athens County residents do not have adequate access to opportunities for physical activity which contributes to chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and heart disease. Limited access to healthy foods and exercise opportunities are among other health disparities that influence poor health outcomes for residents. While Nelsonville, a small city in Athens County, has a strong desire to rebuild after the boom and bust of the industrial revolution, resources for active infrastructure are limited. Polley Field is one of two parks in the city and is in significant disrepair. When speaking to local youth in Nelsonville, they recalled not being allowed to go to Polley Field due to their parents concern about safety in the park. Many residents shared that they didn’t know the park was still there. Conversations about rehabilitating the “old” park ignited a lot of excitement and storytelling.

Approach

The city’s Parks and Recreation Committee and the CHC coordinator set up a community focused parks and recreation meeting that was held at Polley Field in March of 2018. Over 30 community members of all ages were able to express their concerns and ideas for improvements that needed to be made. It was expressed by many that an updated park, especially the repaving of the basketball courts, would help create a sense of community and a place for children and families to gather. The children of the HIVE of Nelsonville, a drop-in center for children, presented a large poster board expressing their ideas for
the park at the community meeting. It was interesting to learn they have a strong desire for a safe place to play and directly requested that adults be present while they are utilizing the park. By making improvements to the park that the residents want to see, the project will be a place for the beloved community gatherings of the past and encourage use of the park for recreation.

Results
Through community engagement and a listening session with Nelsonville City Council members, work has begun on Polley Field. Local grant funding available through the Rocky Community Improvement Fund and the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville allowed the city to repave the basketball courts. During the community meeting, it was shared that residents did not like using the basketball courts inside the fence as it was originally designed. The fence around the courts has been updated to create a more welcoming and safer environment. The previous entrance was in disrepair, with a broken gate and an uneven surface of grass, mud and gravel. A new entrance was created to allow better access for all. Improvements made to Polley Field sparked community interest and participation. In September, the first annual City of Nelsonville Community Picnic was held at Polley Field. At this picnic the park was re-dedicated in memory of all service personnel who gave their lives in dedication to our country, especially Nelsonville resident Richard A. Polley who gave his life during the Vietnam War and for whom the park is named. Improvements made to Polley Field increased the number of physical activity opportunities for the residents of the City of Nelsonville. This project also started conversations to create a plan for a number of other improvements such as: developing a community center, creating a new play space, adding additional green space, and addressing safety through better lighting and access to the park.

What’s Next
The Polley Field revitalization effort made Nelsonville City Council see the value in creating a Parks and Recreation Commission. This board will be made up of five local citizens to serve as an advisory board to the City Council. To continue the momentum of work already being completed, the City of Nelsonville was awarded a NatureWorks grant from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). These funds will be used to create a new play space area in the front of the park, per community members’ requests. Community engagement has remained at the forefront of this project. Youth in the City of Nelsonville continually provide their input and design ideas for Polley Field. They are eager to help more next year, specifically focusing on art and recycling at the park.

Find Out More
- Visit Polley Field! The park is located off of Watkins Street in Nelsonville, Ohio.
- Be an advocate for your community! Let your local government representatives know what changes you want to be made to your community.
- Participate in park events and park clean-up days to keep your local park in good condition.
- Join the Athens County CHC Coalition to learn more about how to be involved with similar efforts.

“I think the new improved basketball court is great. I hope the old pool house gets fixed up to a community center soon.”
—Dekota Simonton, age 14, member of The Hive of Nelsonville

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