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KABOOM! is a national nonprofit organization that works with communities across the nation to build playgrounds and other outdoor recreational infrastructure. Our work specifically focuses on communities of color which have been historically underserved. Because outdoor recreational infrastructure closely mirrors neighborhood housing and school locations, policies like red lining, school segregation, and urban renewal have had generational impacts which resulted in a disproportionate negative impact on the availability of high-quality playspaces in communities where many Black and Brown residents have historically lived. Addressing this challenge in a restorative and just manner requires identifying a diverse set of needs that new or refurbished playgrounds can meet because the needs of our target communities are so great. In addition to the lack of play infrastructure, many of the neighborhoods we work in also lack other forms of critical civic and environmental infrastructure. As a result, they often become heat islands, food deserts, and sites for municipal waste management as well as illegal dumping. When combined, these factors have a profound impact on the neighborhoods' environmental quality and therefore the health of residents.

Playgrounds are a unique form of civic infrastructure because they serve a variety of needs. Not only do they provide space for children to play and interact with one another—activities which can have long-term impacts on their physical and mental health—but they also assist with family childcare management, serve as anchor spaces in communities, and foster a community sense of ownership and belonging. While serving in these capacities is critical to helping build strong neighborhoods, encouraging municipal and school leaders to think of their playgrounds more expansively would enable them to meet so many more needs. Because of the footprint playgrounds occupy, they can be designed to help leaders meet other pressing environmental justice goals. Examples include, but are not limited to, the placement of air quality monitors, natural and artificial cover to provide shade, community gardening spaces, and the installation of solar panels on top of shelter structures. Each of these actions would have a direct, and positive, improvement on the long-term environmental quality of the community and the long-term health outlook of the children who live there.



These added design features do make the creation of playspaces more expensive and oftentimes the funding streams for play and environmental infrastructure are completely separate. However, the challenges each are trying to address are intertwined. Social determinants of health, like environmental quality, are often connected with a lack of appropriate spaces for children to play and engage in physical activity. Community leaders should be encouraged to tackle both problems simultaneously and be provided with incentives to incorporate sound environmental justice design principles into their park and playground design or improvement efforts. Resident input should also be required when projects seek to address environmental justice issues in a multi-faceted manner. Community based organization and national nonprofits with close connections to the community can, and should, serve as ambassadors to residents who may be disinclined to trust governmental engagement practices. This will ensure that the solutions proposed authentically address the diverse set of challenges residents want solutions for. That input also helps empower communities that are too often left out of the decision-making process and therefore feel alienated from their own local government. In this way, these spaces are both transformed but also have a transformative effect on the communities they will serve.

Many communities lack the experience or expertise to undertake this kind of work. Therefore, national nonprofit organizations which have the requisite experience in forming public-private partnerships should be allowed to apply for any planning or implementation funding when they can demonstrate a partnership with an eligible local entity and a strong community desire to foster these types of arrangements. These kinds of collaborations help public or more localized nonprofit systems incorporate best practices while also learning from national leaders in their fields on the best way to undertake these kinds of multi-tiered projects.

Because the construction or refurbishment of playgrounds often involves working on a location's infrastructure located beneath the surface, this work also provides municipal systems an opportunity to install enhanced storm water management infrastructure. In this way, playgrounds can also become a part of an entity's climate resiliency plan as well as its environmental justice activities. Climate resiliency is a growing concern and civic infrastructure at every level must become part of the solution. The extreme weather patterns which have stemmed from global climate change are having profound impacts on every type of community; and so, any opportunity to help neighborhoods mitigate the threat of flooding from rain or snow melt must be taken advantage of whenever possible. Like the climate justice features which can be built into a playground's design, this work will increase the cost of the project. However, the long-term benefits far outweigh the costs while also protecting neighborhoods that would often become the most vulnerable during an extreme weather service.