

Recreation Centers: For Members Only

by David R. Jones

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This month some of the city's poorest residents have lost access to public services that they, in particular, need.

On July 1, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation began charging fees at six previously free recreation centers located in low-income, minority neighborhoods. This means that all of the city's 28 recreation centers -- public facilities, financed through taxes -- now charge.

In 2003, the Parks Department began charging membership fees at 22 recreation centers to bring in additional revenue. It also raised fees for tennis permits at the city's courts. But the six centers supported by federal Community Development Block Grants were exempted from the charge. The city has now brought those centers in line with other centers by charging for annual memberships.

A spokesperson for the Parks Department said the fees are being instituted "so that all the membership fees will be consistent with all our rec centers." (The city's parks, playgrounds and outdoor pools will remain free.) The city also says the fees will reduce overcrowding at the six centers.

The primary purpose of the change is to raise revenue -- the city projects that an additional \$2 million will be raised through the enlistment of 40,000 paying members. But a March 2006 Independent Budget office [report](#) disputed that claim, estimating that the "city will receive no more than half that amount."

Three recreation centers that had been free -- Hunts Point in the Bronx, and Thomas Jefferson and Hamilton Fish in Manhattan -- will now charge adults \$50 annually; three other centers with indoor pools (St. Mary's in the Bronx, and Brownsville and St. John's in Brooklyn) will charge \$75. Seniors 55 and older will have reduced membership fees, and children under 18 will continue to be admitted free.

At hearings on the plan held in April, critics said the fees would drive away people who depend upon the centers but will be unable to afford the new charges. The IBO report found that

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attendance dropped 13 percent at centers that began charging fees in 2003 but rose 23 percent at centers that remained free.

While the fees may sound modest, they can loom large for low-income New Yorkers. Nancy Rankin, director of policy research at the [Community Service Society](#), points out that more than a third of the city's population lives near or below the federal poverty line, making a \$50 or \$75 fee difficult. "More than 70 percent of all low-income New Yorkers have less than \$100 in savings," she said, "and 65 percent of poor households spend more than half their income on rent."

Until they began charging, the centers' gyms, pools, basketball and volleyball courts, boxing rooms, and other features may have been the only health facilities that the poorest of New Yorkers could afford. The neighborhoods where the centers are located suffer from high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic health issues. For example, in Hunts Point and Mott Haven (where St. Mary's is located), the rate of diabetes is twice that of the city on average.

"By making it more difficult to access recreation and exercise precisely in those neighborhoods that most need an increase in access, the administration is directly contradicting Mayor Bloomberg's commitment to promote public health in his second term," said Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum.

"A city like New York that suffers from obesity and high asthma rates needs to provide affordable recreation opportunities in all neighborhoods," said Christian DiPalermo, executive director of [New Yorkers for the Parks](#). "With the implementation of the charge we will be watching closely to see if the increase deters people from using the recreation centers."

And it's not just exercise facilities that are affected. Adults will also need to become paid members to use the centers' computer resources that were built to help "bridge the digital divide" by providing computer access and instruction to the community.

But Robert Matthews, chair of [Community Board 8](#) in Crown Heights, does not think the new fees will be a problem at St. John's, particularly since young people will still be able to take advantage of the center's facilities, including its after-school programs, for free. "Generally in

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our community people find ways to pay for what they want," he said. "We have to remind ourselves that the day of the free lunch is over. In this city there are certain things that need to be taken care of, and people have to learn they have to pay their way."

In fact Matthews sees the charges as an opportunity for residents: "If they're paying into their membership it opens up more doors for them because they can go into other centers and utilize those facilities as well as St. John's to which they are restricted now."

Several proposals have been made to eliminate the need for fees at the centers or at least minimize their effect on residents. Gotbaum, who once served as parks commissioner, has suggested an "Adopt-a-Rec-Center" program to try to get corporate and community sponsorships for recreation centers. She points out that, while money raised from memberships fees enters the city's general funds and can be spent anywhere, money from sponsorships of specific centers would have to stay at those centers.

New Yorkers for Parks suggested a sliding scale of fees based on the income level of the member.

It is unclear whether such alternatives might still be possible, now that the fees have gone into effect. The next step may simply be watching to see if the poorest users of these centers decide they have no choice but to stay home.

David R. Jones is president of Community Service Society.Â