

Session Descriptions

Keynote

Chris Singleton, former professional athlete and nationally renowned inspirational speaker, delivers a powerful message on unity, resilience, and overcoming adversity. Drawing from his personal journey following the tragic loss of his mother in a racially motivated mass shooting, Chris inspires audiences to embrace love over hate and foster true connections in their communities. His heartfelt keynote will challenge, uplift, and encourage all to be catalysts for change in the pursuit of equity and inclusion.

The Privilege of Privilege

Delve into the profound impact and responsibility that accompanies privilege in this eye-opening session. Explore the different facets of privilege, using insightful experiences as a lens. This session promises to be a powerful journey into how positions of privilege can be leveraged as voices for those not in the room, fostering inclusivity and equity across all areas of life. Participants will leave equipped with actionable insights on how to embrace and utilize their privilege for positive change in their communities and beyond.

Speaker: Jason Elissalde - Vice President of Next Practice Partners

Beneath the Green: Uncovering Hidden Harms in Parks & Rec

This session takes a hard, honest look at the covert and insidious practices that occur within parks and recreation organizations—practices often referred to as “organizational lynching.”

From withholding promotions and resources, to invalidating expertise and contributions, these harmful actions can erode trust, morale, and well-being, especially among employees from marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Through candid discussions, real-life case studies, and interactive exercises, we will define organizational lynching, examine sector-specific challenges, recognize root causes and develop strategies for change.

Whether you're a frontline staff member, manager, or leader, this session provides the insights, language, and tools to break the silence and drive positive, systemic change within parks and recreation organizations. Together, we'll work towards building workplaces that uphold fairness, value diverse contributions, and genuinely serve the communities they represent.

Speaker: Chris Glover - Director of DeSoto Parks and Recreation

Securing the Future of Inclusive Parks and Programs Amid Rollbacks & Policy Changes

As federal and state-level policies increasingly challenge Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, Parks & Recreation departments face new obstacles in maintaining inclusive access, equitable funding, and culturally responsive programming. With DEI rollbacks affecting funding, language, and policy direction, how can parks continue to serve diverse communities while adapting to these changes?

This session will provide strategic solutions for navigating DEI restrictions while still advancing universal access, community engagement, and equitable recreation programs. Using ISO 30415 (Diversity & Inclusion Guidelines) as a framework.

Speaker: Remy Epps, Ph.D., CPM - City of Decatur Parks & Recreation Director

Equity in Action: Partnering to Close the Park Equity Gap

Access to high-quality parks and green spaces is essential for thriving communities, yet more than 100 million people in the U.S. lack a park within a 10-minute walk of home. Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately affected, a direct result of discriminatory land use policies and decades of disinvestment. The consequences are far-reaching – limiting access to the health, environmental, and economic benefits that parks provide.

Trust for Public Land (TPL) is working to change this. Through our Parks Initiative and 10-Minute Walk® program, we partner with communities to close the park equity gap, ensuring parks are a catalyst for health, resilience, and opportunity. In this session, we will explore how equity-driven partnerships can transform neighborhoods and impact lives using Atlanta-based projects as case studies. These examples will highlight how communities have leveraged access to the outdoors as a platform for fostering inclusion in decision-making and preserving culturally significant spaces, ultimately strengthening community ties. Attendees will learn how communities have developed innovative strategies, elevated community voice, and leveraged TPL's data, policy, and funding expertise to create not just parks, but stronger, more connected communities.

Speaker(s):

- **Eliza Lawson** - Associate Director of Partnerships & Outreach for Trust for Public Land
- **Brianna Jordynn Wright** - CORE Fellow Southeast

Enhancing Community Engagement with Inclusive Special Events, Cultural Arts, and Diverse Programming

Enhancing community engagement requires intentional, inclusive programming that reflects and celebrates diversity. This session will explore proven strategies for designing special events, cultural arts programs, and diverse recreational offerings that foster a sense of belonging and increase participation.

Using real-world case studies from Southfield Parks & Recreation, including their award-winning Black History Month celebration and "Walk Through History" exhibit, attendees will gain insights into equitable event planning, culturally responsive programming, and inclusive outreach strategies.

Participants will leave with practical tools to engage underrepresented communities, avoid common pitfalls like tokenism, and build authentic connections that ensure programming meets the evolving needs of their community. Whether you're launching a new event or looking to strengthen existing programs, this session will provide actionable takeaways to help create meaningful, accessible, and impactful community engagement experiences.

Speaker: Sam Jenkins - Founder of Culture & Community Strategist of Empowering Communities

Beyond the Loudest Voices and Highest Hands: Pathways for Holistic Community Engagement

This interactive workshop will engage participants through a hands-on process to design engagement strategies that amplify the voices of those often overshadowed in decision-making. Using a structured framework, attendees will identify the desired impact of their projects and develop pathways for meaningful participation that go beyond typical engagement efforts. We will cover available data, tools, technology, and even old school efforts to move the needle on community health and satisfaction.

Speaker: Rich DePalma - Vice President of FGM Architects/Barton Springs Conservancy

Raising the Voice of the Unhoused Community (Pushed to the Side and Forgotten)

During this session patrons will learn educational tools on how to foster relationships with unhoused patrons and ways to remove barriers as patrons navigate the system. Those attending will have the opportunity to engage with unhoused patrons up close.

Speaker: Greg White, Executive Director - A Home for Everyone in Dekalb

Day Two Opening Session | Honor Your Journey, Inspire the Next

This interactive session provides an opportunity to explore the pivotal moments that left a lasting impression on how you see yourself in relation to others with different lived experiences. During this session, attendees will explore the dimensions of their socialization. Park and recreation professionals have the opportunity to mentor the next generation of youth and recreation programmers; therefore, it is key for staff to represent the diversity in the community and create inclusive programming.

Speaker: Atuya Cornwell, CPRE - Director of Town of Chapel Hill Parks and Recreation Department

From Hierarchy to Honesty: Redefining Organizational Culture with Radical Candor

In today's rapidly evolving world, leadership demands a shift from rigid hierarchies to cultures of openness, trust, and inclusion. This session explores how the principles of Radical Candor can transform leadership approaches, foster psychological safety, and create truly inclusive communities. Participants will engage in discussions and exercises that will not only examine the stifle in inclusion and innovation but also explore the role of Radical Candor that can lead to building authentic, trust-based leadership.

Speaker: Sydney Elliot, CPRE - Youth & Business Supervisor of DeSoto Parks and Recreation

Environmental Equity Staff and Citizen Engagement

In this session we will share sustainability tools that help park and recreation professionals identify current work that could be leverages in supporting equitable sustainability goals. We will also provide opportunities to engage staff and community through plug and play citizen science campaigns like Pollinators for Parks. This plug and play community engagement opportunity has been used across the county to inspire support for system wide maintenance and planning practices. Special preview of new NRPA podcast launching in late April.

Speaker: Ayanna Williams - NRPA Director of Community and Environmental Resilience

Bridging the Gap: Inclusive Coaching Education for All Athletes

Coaching education plays a crucial role in safeguarding vulnerable groups and fostering success in athletes both on and off the field. However, many coaching programs often overlook the inclusion of content aimed at coaching athletes with disabilities. This session will highlight key educational milestones that should be incorporated into coaching education to achieve optimal outcomes.

Speaker: Karolyne Bell - Senior Manager of Education for BlazeSports America

From Legacy to Renewal: History, Neglect, Funding, and Hope in Our Underserved Community Pools

It is no secret, public pools serve as critical community resources, not just for recreation, but for lifesaving swim education. The Pop Myles Pool in East St. Louis and Parque Zaragoza Neighborhood Pool in East Austin both have been a symbol of each community's resilience and systemic barriers to aquatic access. This session explores the mirrored history of these pools, their closures, and efforts to revitalize these cultural and recreational spaces. We will dive into how each project was funded, the messaging used, and the hope it is bringing to the community.

Speaker: Rich DePalma – Vice President of FGM Athletics

Balancing Park Improvements with Housing Affordability: Strategies for Equitable Growth

As cities invest in parks and recreational spaces, they often face unintended consequences rising property values that lead to displacement and affordability challenges. This session will explore how municipalities can improve public spaces while ensuring equitable housing solutions. Using Decatur, GA, and other case studies as models, attendees will engage in a solutions-driven conversation to develop strategies for their communities.

Speaker: Remy Epps, Ph.D., CPM – City of Decatur Parks & Recreation Director

Leading through Empathy (DEIBA Leadership Session)

This leadership session will provide a deep dive into the critical elements of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Accessibility (DEIBA) or Opportunities for All (OFA), focusing on fostering conscious awareness of biases—both conscious and unconscious—that shape decision-making and workplace culture. Participants will engage in interactive discussions and exercises designed to build empathy as a core leadership skill and explore strategies for measuring and advancing inclusion at scale. The session will provide actionable insights to help leaders navigate complex dynamics, foster a more inclusive environment, and create meaningful headways in driving equitable outcomes within their organizations. Through reflective activities and practical tools, this workshop equips leaders to lead authentically and foster belonging for all.

Speaker: James Mickle, CPRP – Manager at BerryDunn, McNeil, and Parker

Executive Leadership Roundtable (Black Men in Leadership)

This roundtable discussion brings together male executive directors of color in the parks and recreation field to explore the complexities of leadership, succession planning, mentorship barriers, and the resilience required to navigate the unique challenges they face. This session aims to foster meaningful dialogue, shared experiences, and strategies for sustained success.

Facilitator: Keith Wallace, CPRP - Executive Director at Lincolnway Special Recreation Association

Professional Development on Purpose: A Guide to Intentional Career Growth

Success doesn't happen by chance—it happens by choice. This interactive session will guide you through the process of creating a purposeful and strategic professional development plan that aligns with your career goals, strengths, and aspirations. Whether you're looking to advance in your current field, pivot to a new opportunity, or refine your leadership skills, this session will provide practical tools to help you take control of your career trajectory with confidence and clarity.

Facilitator: Tracey Crawford CTRS, CPRP - Senior Learning Strategist or Access to Growth Learning Solutions

Roundtable: The Opposition to DEI: How Can NRPA Support You?

As Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives face increasing opposition across the country, park and recreation professionals are encountering new challenges in advancing equity within their agencies. In this interactive roundtable discussion, NRPA's Chief Education & Equity Officer wants to hear from you. How is opposition to DEI affecting your work? What support, resources, or advocacy do you need from NRPA to navigate these challenges? This session will provide a space for open dialogue, allowing participants to share experiences, voice concerns, and help shape NRPA's future DEI efforts to better support the field.

Facilitator: Autumn Saxton-Ross, PhD - NRPA Chief Education & Equity Officer

Closing Session: Equity in Action: The Path Forward

This closing session will inspire, empower, and challenge attendees to apply the insights, strategies, and connections from the summit to their communities and organizations to advance equity in parks and recreation. Attendees will understand the importance of actionable equity strategies, develop a personalized commitment to equity, and recognize the power of collective responsibility in advancing equity.

Speaker: Lakita Frazier - CEO of Women in Parks and Recreation