

History of SRAs

Illinois leads the nation in providing specialized leisure services for people with physical and mental disabilities. Here's how it all began.

BY LARRY REINER, CLP

As in the evolution of any industry, the history behind its development is often lost or altered as the story is retold over time. This article shares excerpts from the history of special recreation associations (SRAs) that are not well-known to people in the field today.

The philosophies that formed the foundation of the first special recreation agency embrace the concept of inclusion or "recreation for everyone." This concept was the focus of early discussions among recreation professionals regarding the formation of a new entity charged with the responsibility of serving individuals with disabilities.

In an article written in the late-1960s by Earle Hodgen for *Illinois Parks & Recreation* magazine, titled "Recreation Programs for the Handicapped Needed," he states: "Not a single community recreation department in the nation can be said to have a comprehensive program for the handicapped....The Parks and Recreation departments have a large stake and interest in providing the teamwork necessary to make inroads towards a comprehensive recreation program for the handicapped. There is a profound responsibility for the recreation profession to meet the needs of the handicapped as well as the needs of other citizens."

On January 8, 1968, representatives of ten park districts met in the Chicago area to discuss "the possible establishment of a special recreation district for mentally and physically handicapped children in the area." Initially, Hodgen, from the Highland Park and Recreation Department, worked together with Tom Hall of Wilmette Park District to research the possibility of forming this special recreation cooperative. Two of the larger municipalities worked with the school districts to identify the potential populations to be served and to evaluate the extent of needed programs. Subsequently, the first SRA was established as the "Northern Suburban Special Recreation District," serving the communities of Glencoe, Glenview, Deerfield, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Forest, Northbrook, Northfield, Wilmette and Winnetka.

The first offices of the association were established in the Wilmette Parks and Recreation Department's offices on Green Bay Road in Wilmette. Shortly thereafter the SRAs name was changed and the first director of the "North Suburban Special Recreation Association" (NSSRA), Fred B. McGlone III, was hired and was assisted by a recreation supervisor, Sally Stewart, also from Wilmette Parks and Recreation Department (became Wilmette Park District in 1983).

Shortly thereafter, the administrative offices were moved to the Stratford Center, which was an educational center for trainable mentally handicapped children. Dr. Chuck Panzer, Ed.D., the principal of that school, and Dr. Stanley Bristol,

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❖ *Guidelines for the Formation and Development of Special Recreation Cooperatives in the state of Illinois*
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Ed.D., the executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Education District, were extremely helpful in identifying the populations to be served by the new SRA.

McGlone hired Lillian Black as the registrar secretary and "jack-of-all-trades." She was a tremendous asset to the communication within all the entities who were cooperating to make NSSRA a success. McGlone also hired Larry Reiner as the SRA's first special recreation program supervisor. Reiner was a student in adaptive physical education and was working for Dick Johns and Kay Kastel (Forest) at the Glenview Park District. He was allowed to split his time between NSSRA and Glenview Park District in order to initiate day camps designed for children with disabilities.

In June 1972, Stephen R. Keay replaced McGlone as the executive director, Keay was the assistant superintendent of schools for Kenilworth and had a strong history with the park districts in Chicagoland. He had a vision of what SRAs could be and maintained the energy and commitment to make things happen throughout the state.

Formation of three other special recreation associations followed. The Maine-Niles Association of Special Recreation (M-NASR) (Des Plaines, Golf Maine, Lincolnwood, Morton Grove, Niles, Park Ridge and Skokie) entered its joint agreement in December 1972, and Reiner was hired as its first director in February 1973.

The South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA) (Chicago Heights, Crete, Homewood Flossmoor, Olympia Fields, Park Forest, Park Forest South and Steger) was formed in June 1973.

The Northwest Special Recreation Association (NWSRA) (Arlington Heights, Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove Village, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Mount Prospect, Palatine, Prospect Heights, River Trails, Rolling Meadows, Salt Creek, Schaumburg, and Wheeling) formed in January 1974. Its first director, Kevin T. Kendrigan, came to the NWSRA that same month, and he continues to serve there today. Kendrigan brought to the SRA field the concepts shared by Dr. William Freeburg, a professor of leisure studies at Southern Illinois University, and one of the founding members of Illinois Special Olympics movement.

Reiner currently serves as the executive director of Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA) and has represented the association for the last 20 years. He and Kendrigan are the only two professional staff from the original associations who continue to serve in the SRA field. While Steve Keay has since passed away, his efforts continue to make an impact on today's services.

In 1975, the directors of the existing SRAs began meeting in what would soon develop into SRANI (Special Recreation Associations of Northern Illinois). In 1978, this agency expanded to meet the growing educational needs of the therapeutic recreation professionals working in community-based settings or SRAs. Today, SRANI serves 23 SRAs and 10 affiliate member agencies with 202 professional members and 25 affiliate members.

Special recreation associations are committed to providing comprehensive leisure services for children and adults who have diverse disabling conditions or "abilities." Persons with various levels of mental retardation, physical disabilities, emotional disturbances, hard-of-hearing/deaf, visual impairments/ blind and multiple disabilities are provided opportunities for quality leisure services specifically oriented towards individual ability levels. Pilot programs are initiated to serve the newly disabled and temporarily disabled residents. Recreation programs were designed for accident victims, heart disease patients, stroke patients and individuals with other chronic neuromuscular disorders.

Even from the beginning it was realized that not every disabled individual is in need of specialized recreation services. SRAs initiate services that allow individuals with disabilities to access member park district and village recreation programs. By providing opportunities for involvement in new situations and environments, individuals with limiting conditions can learn about and become comfortable with leisure opportunities. Thus, they will be able to independently pursue them.

With the development of SRAs, a new frontier in community services has opened. The special recreation cooperatives found that many of the people served, with the appropriate training and experiences, will eventually be involved in mainstream society. By providing them with opportunities to participate in quality leisure activities and an opportunity to develop a positive self-concept, the local park districts and villages are providing a service that can upgrade the quality of life in the total community.

Legal and Legislative Milestones

The legal base for special recreation cooperatives came as a result of Senate Bills 745 and 746 of the 1969 Illinois General Assembly Under the 1970 Illinois State Constitution, it is now legal for government agencies to enter into such agreements. This legislation was designed for communities with a population base of 500,000 or fewer.

The initial legislation created sections 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code, effective August 18, 1969. Section 810-B was amended in 1980 and again in 1983 in order to meet the developing needs

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of communities that belonged to SRAs. In any aspect of the enabling legislation there were no restrictions on the maximum number of communities that could be served within a joint agreement, the severity of disability nor the etiology of the disability, nor the ages of the individuals who could be served.

(1969-1972) Park districts contributed tax dollars from their recreation and corporate tax levies to initiate and maintain services referred to as "special recreation" (Section 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code). Funding for these cooperatives was made possible through Senate Bills 1442 and 1443, introduced and passed in 1972 by the Illinois General Assembly. These bills allowed park districts and municipalities to levy by referendum up to .02% of \$100 of assessed valuations for the "recreation of the handicapped."

These bills were introduced to allow this levy without a referendum; however, they were amended to require the same. Significant energy was expended to remove the referendum requirement from the legislation; thus, two entirely new bills were introduced: Senate Bills 220 and 221. Legislation was obtained in the 1995 Illinois General Assembly; however, the bills were again amended to require a referendum by petition clause in each bill. This amendatory act of 1975 is not a limit upon any municipality that is a home rule unit.

(1974 -1975) Park districts established new legislation under Section 5-8 of the Park District Code to create a special recreation tax levy for cooperatives providing special recreation under Section 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code. These funds may be legally accessed only through the participation in a joint agreement.

(1976- 1977) Many new SRAs formed and began serving the disabled residents of the collar counties around Chicagoland.

(1977-1984) Programs flourished and new services established that were never provided for people with disabilities. Illinois SRAs led the country in the new services arena and were recognized with many National Gold Medal Awards.

(1986-1987) New legislation was created with the full support of the Taxpayers Federation and bipartisan support of the legislature. The .02% tax levy rate limit for special recreation associations was Increased to .04% and all referendum requirements were removed from Section 5-8 of the Park District Code. It was recognized that special recreation associations do not have the authority to place an issue before the public through a referendum. It was further recognized that in the remote possibility that an association received permission from all of its member communities to place an issue to a subsequent referendum before the public, it would have little or no chance of success universally across all of the partners in the special recreation cooperative. Thus,

any such action would be destructive to the spirit of cooperation on which the formation of special recreation associations were based.

(1987-1991) New SRAs were formed, this time in more rural communities where a higher tax rate was required to generate sufficient funds based on EAV. Metro Chicagoland associations expanded services, creating models for inclusion and integration support services, developing wheelchair sports facilities and increasing Special Olympics and specialized service opportunities.

(Jan, 26, 1991) The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law.

(1991) The Tax Limitation Act of 1991 was signed into law. Under the new "tax cap," park districts again were placed in the position of contributing what essentially amounts to an allocation that has direct impact on the recreation and/or corporate levies. Special recreation tax levy in Section 5-8 of the Park District Code would no longer be a tax specifically set aside for the purpose of providing services for people with disabilities in addition to those which were available to the general public. Now these funds fall under the aggregate levy as they did 25 years ago in 1969 through 1972 and the SRAs affected do not have the authority to place this issue before the public through a referendum.

For so many years, professionals around the country have recognized that Illinois' unique special district system and special tax levy have enabled the state to do so much for the people with disabilities. Without the special protection, our progressive approach to people with disabilities has a serious potential to fall behind.

The elected commissioners and trustees of Illinois park districts have an incredible commitment to people with disabilities. The professional expertise that exists in the field of therapeutic recreation works hand in hand with those in public parks and recreation and forms a very unique marriage of efforts to provide excellence in public service.

The history of special recreation associations is very short but has many significant milestones. SRAs look forward with a positive outlook regarding what we can do together for all people to maintain a quality of life that makes us proud.

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