

Los Angeles Times

From the Los Angeles Times

Outdoor gyms aim to reduce health woes

Five 'Fitness Zones' are installed to fight such ills as obesity and hypertension among lower-income residents.

By Paloma Esquivel

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

December 28, 2007

Just after sunrise at Belvedere Park in East Los Angeles a small crowd gathers. Some are in sweat suits and tennis shoes, others in worn blue jeans and work boots. Many are seniors.

They're here for the "adult's playground," a county-installed outdoor gym of steel elliptical and rowing machines, arm and leg presses and a host of other cardio and strength-training equipment.

"We used to go walking around the park. But this is something very special," said Ester Rios, 78, a homemaker, who has been trekking to the gym a few times a week since it opened about three months ago.

Park space is limited in East Los Angeles, so people, especially seniors, have to get creative to stay fit. Where there are few trails, people run on sidewalks; where security is a concern, couples walk near a park surrounding the sheriff's station.

Faced with rising obesity, diabetes and hypertension rates among inner city residents, officials have recently constructed five "Fitness Zones" around the county on plots of land about the size of a small office.

Since the gym at Belvedere Park opened, it has become a popular hangout.

Just after 7 a.m. on a recent Thursday, 77-year-old Odilon Beltran was mid-workout in worn cowboy boots and a *vaquero* hat, his legs swinging slowly back and forth on an elliptical machine. Next to him, Rios was focused on her own set using a similar piece of equipment. From there, she walked over to the leg press and started doing repetitions.

"My legs hurt. It hurts to stand up, but this helps," she said as she slowly pushed her legs up and down. "This helps too," she said, pulling a county-produced pamphlet on healthy eating habits out of a blue sweater vest.

Every year, health officials sound the alarm on distressing rates of preventable ills prevalent in urban minority communities like East Los Angeles.

Inner city residents suffer because there aren't enough opportunities to be active, said Frank Meza, physician-in-charge of Kaiser Permanente's East Los Angeles Medical Offices.

"If you live in an inner city, if you're Latino, if you're black, if you're poor, you're just not going to do as well as people who are more affluent," he said. "Not only do we have more diabetes and hypertension and lack of health resources, but the obesity rates are also growing."

These problems are exacerbated by a lack of healthcare resources and an abundance of fast food restaurants in inner city communities, Meza said.

Almost a fourth of adults in East Los Angeles are obese and nearly 8% have diabetes, according to the county Department of Public Health. Health officials constantly urge people to become active: "Get at least 30 to 60 minutes of moderate physical activity each day," reads a county newsletter on the obesity epidemic.

The problem for many seniors is that there aren't enough opportunities to go outside and get exercise, said Meza. Communities like East Los Angeles suffer because there aren't enough parks, trails or affordable gyms, he said.

Rather than lament the lack of green space in densely populated communities, officials said, they are using the outdoor gym project to redefine how small spaces can be used to promote better health.

The Trust for Public Land, an organization that promotes conservation, approached county Supervisor Gloria Molina with the idea for the gyms, said Helen O'Shea, project manager for the trust.

When it came time to decide where to put them, she said, they looked for densely populated communities without many parks or affordable gyms. Some are in the suburbs. They chose Belvedere Park; Dalton Park in Azusa; Roosevelt Park in Florence-Firestone; San Angelo Park in Avocado Heights, near La Puente; and Sunshine Park in East Valinda, near West Covina; in Molina's 1st Supervisorial District.

Each open-air gym costs about \$40,000, with most of the money coming from Proposition A, a park and open-space measure approved by county voters in 1996. Once the zones are built, the county might also have to take on any possible liability, O'Shea said.

A grant from the Kaiser Permanente Foundation will help fund more gyms at Lashbrook Park in El Monte and Santa Fe Dam and Whittier Narrows recreation areas, said Angie Castro, a Molina aide.

This is one of the first large-scale outdoor gym projects in the United States, said Chris Litvinchuk, co-director of sales at TriActive America, the company that makes the equipment.

Molina's office is also looking into installing the gyms at MTA bus zones and other small spaces. "A little bit of exercise here and there," Molina said. "Green space is so limited in the inner city you have to take advantage and create opportunity where you can."

Investing in the parks also makes them safer, said Nicole Lampe, spokeswoman for the Trust for Public Land.

"When you engage the community and you give them opportunities for positive use, when people feel like 'This is our park, we're going to be responsible for it,' that's when a park becomes safe. It's the neglected parks that tend to have the most security issues," she said.

For some, like Ester Rios, the outdoor gyms are a "blessing" for the community. For others, they're merely a nice addition to an already vigorous healthcare regime.

For years, Heleodoro Garcia, 69, and his wife, Hermelinda, 64, have gone at least five times a week to a park near the sheriff's station where they join three other couples to walk for an hour.

When the outdoor gym at Belvedere Park was installed, the couple added half an hour of strength training to their daily routine. There's almost always a crowd in the morning, so they aren't too concerned about security, Hermelinda said.

Heleodoro Garcia stretched his legs as he listed his new workout: 10 minutes on the elliptical machine, 200 revolutions on the stationary bicycle, 30 sit-ups, 30 repeats on the other machines. He comes to stay in shape but also to support his wife, who is among the 12% of Latinos in L.A. County who have diabetes.

"The doctor says I'm doing excellent," said Garcia, who gets checkups every four months at a nearby clinic. "He tells me the most important factor is that I haven't stopped exercising."

paloma.esquivel@latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

[Article licensing and reprint options](#)

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:  