



# **USA Lacrosse Urban Lacrosse Program Development Guide**





Anyone who runs a successful urban lacrosse league or program will quickly share that it is both a rewarding and equally challenging experience. Although there has been unprecedented growth of lacrosse in metropolitan communities over the last couple of years, it is important to note metropolitan lacrosse programs share some unique physical and demographic characteristics differentiating them from other suburban and rural programs. Unlike suburban and rural communities, urban groups operate in densely populated areas serving significantly more students frequently marked by higher concentrations of poverty, lower attendance and participation rates and greater racial and ethnic diversity. USA Lacrosse is dedicated to broadening the impact lacrosse can have on underserved communities. Our goal is that this resource will provide effective solutions and guidelines for new and existing urban lacrosse programs, allowing them to contribute their communities and increase their long-term ability to succeed. Understanding the distinctive nature of urban lacrosse, this document serves as a specialized resource to be used alongside the [USAL New Start Manual](#). We hope that both of these resources will be of benefit to you and your program.

## **Section 1: Player Development**

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### ***Player Recruitment***

Player recruitment and development are ongoing challenges for many programs in urban communities. When you reach out to schools or community groups to recruit players, you should expect to field a larger roster than perhaps a traditional program would because player participation and retention can often be in flux from year to year or even throughout the season. You can easily start out the season with 40 kids on a team and end the season with 25 players, so developing critical mass is important.

Recruiting is a continual process and it's unique when specifically dealing with an urban population. No two programs are alike so successful recruiting efforts might look differently for you and your program than it does for someone else. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Many kids in urban areas see football, baseball and basketball as the only viable sports in urban areas. When trying to recruit and retain kids emphasize the importance of trying new sports and creating your own legacy. Be creative in your thinking and be prepared to constantly build new recruiting strategies based on the current landscape of your local community.
- The most common form of recruiting for many urban programs takes place in schools, after-school programs and community centers. Create a list of local places you would like to target and plan to meet with leaders to share your mission and plan for introducing lacrosse into their class or group.
- Connect with existing community organizations such as Parks and Recreation, Boys' and Girls Clubs, Police Athletic Leagues or YMCA's to establish potential recruiting relationships. Getting a lot of kids in your program often requires on going dedication and persistence. Be prepared to continually cultivate relationships and engage different organizations in order to create a lasting pipeline for new players.
- Keep your introductory clinics for new recruits' fun and engaging. Make sure to collect a list of contact information from all your participants after you meet with them to establish a method for ongoing communication. Be prepared to offer opportunities to get involved right away. Too much lull-time between your initial contact and the next available program opportunity may lose a potential participant's interest.
- Use your current players as marketing tools for your program. Social media boasts endless opportunities for you to showcase your program to potential participants. Have your current players tweet or share videos of them playing lacrosse or hanging around with their teammates so that recruits can see the sport and see players in their community that look like them involved in lacrosse.
- Clearly understand and communicate your program's mission and guidelines for participation. What groups do you want to provide participation opportunities to and why? There are many ways to define the criteria for participation and it is up to you and your staff to determine what guidelines should be established and communicated with new and existing participants. (Some basic areas of focus could be based on school, location, age, ethnicity, household income etc.)

- Distinguish yourself from other traditional youth programs by highlighting the unique offerings of your program. Emphasize your commitment to diversity, life enrichment and physical activity. By outlining your program's particular goals, it will heighten your appeal with parents, players, donors and coaches.

### ***Player Retention***

Player turnover in urban programs is one of the most discussed and least understood topics in sports. Too often, the approach to retention is very simplistic and it obscures the ongoing issues associated with coaching this demographic. Generally, player retention rates in these communities by itself tells us little, because it says nothing about which players are leaving and which ones are staying. If you retained 40 percent of participants from last season, your initial thought might be that that is a deflating statistic and indicative of your program and your staff. However, this single-minded focus lacks a comprehensive portrayal of the full picture. Keep these things in mind when looking at your program's player retention statistics:

- Review your retention numbers in context so you have a benchmark to compare the current state of the program with the previous year. This tracking method will make it much easier to use up-to-date records to complete your annual analysis.
- If your retention numbers are not where you desire, but you have seen an increase in retention then you should celebrate those results. If your retention numbers are low, but you have retained the players who achieve higher academically and athletically, you should also count that as a success. Make sure to rationalize retention beyond just a number or percentage.
- Stay engaged with your participants throughout the course of the year. Even if it's a small off-season team dinner or a scheduled team bonding event, this allows you to stay connected with your kids without long lapses of communication. When these team engagement opportunities continue throughout the school year, participants and families begin to think of the program as a long-term commitment, rather than just a seasonal program and they start to invite their friends and siblings and it becomes a community instead of just a sport.

For more information about player recruitment or retention please access the [USAL NewStart Manual](#).

## Section 2: Developing Urban-Based Lacrosse Coaches

### *Recruitment and Education of Diverse Coaches*

Whether you have volunteer coaches or a full-time staff, your coaches should inspire children to be leaders and contributing members of their communities. A good coach, particularly in an urban setting, understands that every practice or game is a chance to positively impact a child's future. These are some of the most important things to consider when recruiting and developing urban youth coaches:

- All of your coaches should bring energy and excitement to your program. Often time kids continue to participate in lacrosse programs because they have developed a lasting bond or relationship with a particular coach. Coaches of this caliber get outstanding results and provide a more engaging learning experience for your participants.
- Make sure to honor good coaches and volunteers who make significant contributions to your players and your program. A simple gift card or public acknowledgement will cultivate memorable experiences for your coaches, and it will also improve your program's long-term retention efforts at both the participant and leadership level.
- Make sure you have coaches on staff reflect the culture and experiences of the participants in your program. Your staff should reflect the population you serve because kids identify with adults who look like them and come from similar backgrounds.
- Some of your coaches with lacrosse experience may not have experience coaching in an urban setting. It is imperative to openly discuss any diversity differences and highlight issues that your coaches may face in order for your coaches to work with the kids more effectively.
- Use your veteran coaches to serve as experts within the program so institutional knowledge can be passed on to new coaches who have, perhaps the greatest need for additional learning and support.

- Require that all your coaches have criminal background checks and updated CRP/First aid certification. If your coaches transport players, make sure they have a current license with no major traffic violations.
- Host an annual coach's education clinic or workshop that couples on-field instruction with urban youth development training for your staff.

For coaches education opportunities take advantage of the [USAL Coaches Education Program](#) or our annual [USA Lacrosse Convention](#).

You can also access the [USAL's Diversity and Inclusion Best Practices for coaches and program leaders](#) and the [Top 5 Tips for Lacrosse Parents to Talk Diversity and Inclusion with Their Kids](#) for more information.

## **Section 3: Parent Engagement**

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### ***Cultivating relationships with parents***

Experienced teachers and coaches are aware of the benefits of family involvement in child's sports experience. It's important that coaches and staff pay particular attention to approaches that acknowledge the unique challenges and needs of engaging families in urban communities. It is widely known that some low-income parents can be reluctant to be involved in their children's education or extracurricular activities. This could be for several reasons for this and it doesn't necessary mean that a parent does not want to be involved or does not care about their child's sport experience. For these reasons, coach-parent connections are increasingly important and must be based on shared understandings of what parent engagement is, what it looks like in practice, and how it improves student achievement. In order to engage parents, communication must also provide parents with opportunities to give feedback, ask questions, and make suggestions for future correspondences. Some tips for being most effective are:

- At the start of each new season, your program should provide participants with a set of guidelines or team rules. This same strategy can be similarly employed with parents. You should create a tool that provides parents with all the information they need in one place. A comprehensive parent handbook should make clear the expectations that programs hold for participants and for parents.

- Your staff can also host a parent meeting at the beginning of each season to provide parents the opportunity to choose the ways in which they can volunteer and engage with the program. This is a chance to agree on parent and participant expectations and let them know they do not necessarily need an extensive background in the sport to be of service to the team.
- Some of the best connections with parents are through impromptu meetings or conversations. If you can take five minutes to talk to a parent after practice or before a game, do it! This type of simple engagement can open the lines of communication towards a more meaningful parent-coach relationship in the future.
- Ask your players about their families and their background prior to calling home. It's important to know primary language spoken at home or who the primary caretaker is for each individual player. Some participants may only have one parent or may not reside with either parent. If you are unsure ask for a guardian or caretaker to make sure you are inclusive of each child's situation.
- Many parents have no experience with lacrosse, but it is still important to engage them with parent volunteer or management opportunities whenever they become available. Be sure to recognize active parents and highlight those who were particularly helpful during your season.

## **Section 4: Program Logistics**

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### ***Season Preparations***

There are so many things that go into the logistics of creating and sustaining a successful urban lacrosse program. Most participants perform better when they know the daily structure and routine for the program. When your players are aware of the schedule and your expectations, they will respond accordingly. With all the components involved in developing and executing a strategic plan, it is critical to stay on top of all the moving parts. Here are some tips for effectively prepping for each season:

- Take the time after each season ends to sit down with your staff and map out a program calendar for the next year. Lock down dates for your major lacrosse-specific events (tournaments, recruiting clinics, start of the spring season etc.) and non-lacrosse specific events (fundraisers, board meetings etc.). This should be laid out quarterly on a shared calendar, so all staff and volunteers are aware

of the set schedule. Use this calendar as a guide to discuss upcoming events during each coaches meeting.

- As the year continues, be sure to add more detailed action steps for each event or initiative. Consider the small but important logistics like field permits, staffing, uniforms, field lining, game scheduling, officials, transportation, and equipment. Make sure to compare your event dates with the school year calendar so you can make sure to line up your program logistics with the academic schedule for your participants.
- Balance your recruiting or playing season with your non-lacrosse specific activities. Hosting three large fundraisers during the spring lacrosse season is unrealistic and it will place a heavy burden on you and your coaches. Think about what events work best in the fall and winter and consider what things will take up a lot of time. Try to be proactive and plan your schedules accordingly based on availability, funding and general logistics.
- Design your recruiting efforts so one touch point leads directly into the next. If you recruit players in August and they have no opportunity to play until February, you will most likely lose their interest quickly. If you plan to host an introductory clinic or plan a recruiting event, you should center your efforts around a time new player can join your program. Now when you have players engaged and interested in playing, you can say “We have another clinic next Saturday. We’d love to have you join us.” This helps you narrow down the best times to focus or expand your recruiting efforts.
- Schedule league play and games that make sense for your program. Don’t schedule a game against opponents that easily outmatch the skill development of your participants and avoid games that can create a transportation nightmare for your players and their families. Make sure you always consider what opportunities are most productive for your program.

### ***Transportation***

The ultimate challenge for urban programs is ensuring that participants have reliable transportation following completion of the practice, games and other team activities and events. Participants with transportation barriers are at a disadvantage in their ability to successfully participate in your program if they cannot access the location by means other than parent pickups and drop-offs. Often, kids in urban communities will walk or use public transportation in order to participate. You need to be conscious of the players in your program and how you can minimize transportations challenges.



Understanding how your participants travel and where they live is an important piece of planning where games and practices will be held. Many families do not have cars, so you will have to schedule practice and game times around the bus schedule or before the sun goes down. Many programs have ensured participants have access to transportation through a variety of different mechanisms:

- Partner with companies or transit authorities to provide/donate bus passes or train tickets for your participants.
- Contract for shuttles and buses for away games or tournaments outside of the city.
- Facilitate parent carpools for participants that live in close proximity.
- Select a central field location, if possible, with “walkable” neighborhoods—one that has sidewalks, crosswalks and leisure destinations for kids who need to walk home or to the bus stop safely.
- Budget anticipated transportation costs into annual operating budget costs. Rental costs can add up quickly so make sure to budget accordingly.

If you and your staff can provide transportation support for games and practices, it can certainly improve your attendance and retention efforts. If you plan to provide transportation for your participants using your own vehicle, make sure you are aware of safety and liability insurance issues which vary depending on your state of residence. USAL does not recommend that coaches transport their players using their own vehicles and we also caution you from transporting youth alone in any vehicle.

For more information about transportation please access the [USAL New Start Manual](#).

### ***Field Space***

Securing field space is crucial when starting a lacrosse program, however open space in urban environments can be very limited. First you need to decide how many fields you'll need for the number of players and teams you intend to accommodate in your program. If your program is school-based or catering to students in a specific school district, explore opportunities to develop partnerships with a centrally located school for the use of their fields. School property can provide a valuable resource for recreational space before and after-school hours. Due to the rise in youth obesity and the need for recreational activities in urban communities, an increasing number of schools are open to lending field space to programs that support their local community.

If your program does not have access to school field space or local school facilities are not available, then public community or city fields may also be an opportunity for you. Some of these organizations will require a rental fee for you to use the facility, so make sure you budget each year to prepare for those fees. The facilities may offer a non-profit or a discounted rate, so make sure you promote your program and the community you serve to see if there is an opportunity for a price reduction or sliding scale option for you. Most fields will also require that you have insurance or a field permit before they agree to let you use their fields. Please refer to the [USAL New Start Manual](#) for additional information about insurance and liability and be sure to review the [Rules and Safety](#) to review procedures and best practices regarding stability, safety and responsibility.

If you can't find field space every day, use a local gym, rec center or outdoor tennis or basketball court for practice. Although it may not be ideal, there are plenty of effective lacrosse skills and drills that you do not need to do on a lacrosse field. Make sure the space or field that you provide for your participants is friendly and welcoming for them. The field should ideally be in close proximity to your participants in a central location that allows them to commute to practice easily. Make sure to factor in transportation and logistics when you are considering facilities.

For drills and coaching tips to use in a gym or on a small-sided field, you can access our [USA Lacrosse Athlete Development Model](#).

## **Fundraising**

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### ***Grants***

Most urban lacrosse programs rely heavily upon the generosity of donors for some or all of their funding. To best understand and get the most out of this activity, it is important to understand what various fundraising options are available. Most nonprofit programs depend on outside contributions, grants, and fundraising efforts so it is important for you to develop a clear focused message in order to sell your program and its mission.

A grant is one of many different forms of financial assistance available for your program. Applying for a grant is an exciting, but labor-intensive process. A grant is a way that federal and local foundations or donors fund your ideas and projects to provide public services and stimulate the community. A good way to discover what grants are available along with processes for application is to explore online. You can type in search phrases such as "public charities" or "private foundations" in your area. You also can call your State Commissioner for local grants, or go to your public library and ask for

books on foundations and agencies offering grant money in your field. Before you apply for any grant, make sure you find a funding opportunity you are eligible for and thoroughly research each grant and the organization that sponsors it. Foundations award funding based on what matters to them. If the way you plan to spend the grant money doesn't match the foundation's mission, it's highly unlikely your application will be selected. Your grant proposal must demonstrate you have a solid plan for using the money that aligns with the foundation's areas of focus.

### ***Fundraising Events***

Another prominent option for increasing your program's income is through local and national fundraisers. Fundraising efforts are a great way for programs to directly interact with the communities that they serve while raising the money that they need. A successful fundraiser is often a great way to involve your program's family and friends and is also a fantastic way for your program to recruit new members. Here are some key points for successful fundraisers:

- *Know your donors:* Having a good knowledge of your donors and their contributing habits is key to persuading them to donate their money.
- *Educate your donors:* Make sure you educate your supporters about your program and what you do. You must be able to tell your program's unique story and sell your organization. Education builds trust and assures your supporters they are bringing about positive change. They trust you because you stay in touch with them and let them know what their donations have done. Their prime interest is seeing what impact they've made, so be sure to send brochures and updates with pictures and testimonials to show the results of their support.
- *Focus on your current support base:* It costs much more time and energy to solicit a donation from a new donor than from an existing one. That's why it is so important to keep in touch with your current donors. Go back to your current list of donors often to update contact and donation information and keep communication open so when it's time to give, it will be easy for you to ask.
- *Advertise aggressively:* The way you advertise will depend on the audience you're trying to reach. Make an interesting social media campaign for your event and create memorable flyers, posters or invitations that complement the type of event you're having.

- *Make giving fun:* When your program can help people find fulfillment through charity work in a fun and meaningful way, they will be more willing to jump on board to help your cause. You must be able to come up with creative and compelling ways to show the need for donations and support.

Here are a few examples of ideas that have worked with various organizations and individuals to increase their annual revenue:

- Start a team website to create an online fundraising campaign (Gofundme.com)
- Host a fundraising event (auction, gala, dinner parties, golf outing, 5k etc.)
- Have players and parents sell a team product (team shirts, cups, store discount cards, baked goods etc.)
- Host a tournament or lacrosse clinic for local teams.
- Create a pledge drive (pledge cards, phone calls etc.)
- Plan an equipment drive and invite local colleges, high schools, youth programs and retailers to donate new equipment for your season.

For other fundraising ideas please access the [USAL New Start Manual](#). For USL funding opportunities you can apply for the [National Diversity Grant Program](#) or reach out to your local [USAL Regional Manager](#).

### ***In-kind donations***

One of the difficult realities of running an urban lacrosse program is the amount and cost of equipment needed for lacrosse participation particularly in men's lacrosse. Often this may serve as a barrier for participation for low-income families and it can be a limiting factor in regard to growth and development for some programs. Many first-time players and parents are also hesitant to invest in equipment before they determine whether they are going to continue to play. In order to continue growing and putting more kids on the playing field, you will most likely need to rely on the community and local businesses to help supply some or all your equipment needs.

USA Lacrosse created [The Equipment Grant Program](#) and the [Urban Lacrosse Alliance](#) to deliver equipment grants and coaches resources to awarded teams, but there are also other national organizations as well that offer equipment grant opportunities. Here are just a couple of corporate giving providers:



*Dick Sporting Goods:*

[http://dickssportinggoods.sponsorport.com/?ab=Footer\\_Column4\\_Donations](http://dickssportinggoods.sponsorport.com/?ab=Footer_Column4_Donations)

*Under Armour:*

<http://www.uabiz.com/corporategiving/guidelines.cfm>

*Adidas:*

<http://www.adidas-group.com/en/sustainability/communityengagement/donations/>

*Leveling the Playing Field:*

<http://www.levelingthefield.org/>

*Good Sports*

<https://www.goodsports.org/apply/>

You can also contact your local lacrosse retailer to ask for discounted equipment or donations of older model or surplus equipment. Often a local college or high school team will also make generous equipment donations as well. By alleviating some of the cost for equipment, you will have the ability to allocate the funds saved for equipment towards another initiative or area of focus.

## **Conclusion**

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USA Lacrosse believes the most important issue is ensuring lacrosse players, at all levels, have a positive experience. By creating this resource, we aim to support self-sustaining youth lacrosse programs in urban communities that operate by USA Lacrosse national standards and best practices. USA Lacrosse feels broad representation and participation add significant value to the lacrosse experience and USA Lacrosse is best positioned to provide sustained leadership and resources to initiatives focused on this opportunity.



If you have more questions about starting an urban lacrosse program, we want to help! Contact [diversityprograms@usalacrosse.com](mailto:diversityprograms@usalacrosse.com) for more information about how USA Lacrosse can support your program, or you can read more about our resources and support opportunities at [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion | USA Lacrosse](#)