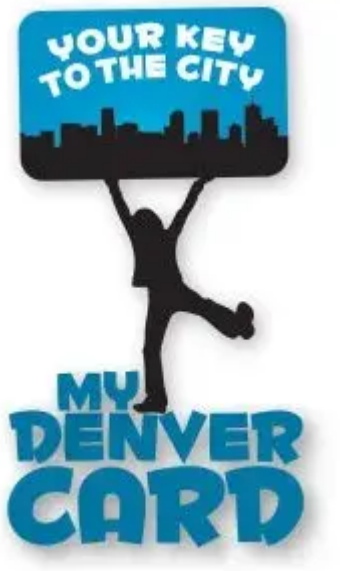
The Colorado Health Foundation™

Does a Free Pass Open Doors for Fit Kids?

One of the biggest recent innovations in Colorado health and fitness is the brainchild of a 12-year-old girl.



In 2011, Maggie Trout approached Denver Councilman Chris Nevitt and pitched the idea of giving Denver kids a card to access city services and programs.

Denver Mayor Michael Hancock bought into the idea and the MY Denver Card was born. Today, the MY Denver Card gives all Denver students ages 5 to 18 free, year-round access to the city's 23 recreation centers and 29 pools. Kids can swim, play basketball or volleyball, learn about healthy cooking and nutrition, and much more. The card also serves as a Denver Public Library card. Rec center access for kids previously cost $50 a year.

More recently, the benefits of the MY Denver Card increased to provide access to some of the city's art, culture and science institutions. Nine organizations are

participating, including the Denver Art Museum, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and the Denver Botanic Gardens. Cardholders enjoy free or discounted entries to the venues.

The MY Denver Card program was funded after Denver voters approved ballot measure 2A in November 2012, allocating $1.5 million to pay for the program from the overall $68 million generated for the city's coffers.

The first cards were issued in March 2013. By the end of September 2014, 61,000 youths had registered for the card; 105,000 kids are eligible cardholders.

"We didn't expect to be at 61,000 this soon," said Erin Brown, executive director of Denver's Office of Children's Affairs, which provides leadership to support city agencies sponsoring the card along with Denver Parks and Recreation and Denver Public Library. The expected enrollment was penciled in closer to 50,000 by the end of September, she said.

With the addition of the nine cultural institutions, officials project that 70 percent of Denver's eligible youth will register for the card by the end of 2015. Now the trick is to link rec centers with physical education on how to use the available space – otherwise, the passes may be equivalent to giving a student a book without teaching them how to read.

So far, according to Brown's office, 54 percent of the kids have used the card regularly for entry into Denver parks and rec centers. Officials hope to boost use of the rec centers by 25 percent in 2015, owing to improved tracking software systems, more accurate usage reports and outreach efforts.

Before extending the program to cultural institutions, kids used the cards mainly for access to outdoor pools, rec centers and libraries during school breaks – especially in summer.

Brown said it is too early to determine why some kids haven't used the cards. "We've not done a deep enough dive to figure out why some kids aren't using them," she said.

Other cities that have deployed similar programs include Boston and Washington, D.C. But Brown said it is hard to compare Denver's program with the other cities.

"There are not many metro areas that have as many rec centers as Denver," she said.

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