Cities and towns throughout the United States have unique recreation resources that, though well known, are seldom used by local residents. Basketball courts, running tracks and grassy fields suitable for soccer, football or baseball often lie unused throughout the day and for months at a time, while community members long for opportunities and places to stay fit. What is this jewel hidden in plain site? The playgrounds, gymnasiums, and practice fields of America’s schools, shuttered before and after school, on weekends and throughout the summer.

Health advocates in Arizona decided they were going to unlock the gates to those facilities by tackling the primary hurdle to their use—concerns over legal liability if someone is hurt using school grounds. In 2012, they began working in the state legislature to create the tools to protect schools that want to share their recreation facilities with community members.

“We added language into the statute that would essentially make school grounds a public park when school was not in session,” says Nicole Olmstead, government relations director for the American Heart Association in Arizona, which helped lead the effort to change the law.

That change was significant and well received, but many school officials still felt it did not go far enough to protect them from potential lawsuits. So the health groups returned to the legislature in 2014 and were successful in securing passage of legislation that would provide greater liability protections for schools. They also ensured that the law would apply to charter schools. And while the original legislation applied only to the grounds of a school, the new measure extends liability protection for inside use, such as gymnasiums. Not surprisingly, the bill easily passed the legislature.

Olmstead says that’s important because many communities and neighborhoods, especially economically disadvantaged one, lack recreation facilities. “Within nearly every town or city, a school tends to be the center of the community. It is a safe place for kids to play, and if there are places for children to play, they tend to be more physically active.”

The changes to the law are already having a positive effect in communities throughout Arizona. Several school districts have already taken advantage of the law change, as have county health departments. In South Phoenix—a less affluent part of the city that has been hit particularly hard by the obesity epidemic—the county health department is applying for grants to help open up school grounds for community members.

In spite of the success of their shared-use work, health advocates in Arizona recognize that it is only one piece in the effort to untangle the obesity puzzle. That’s where technical assistance from Voices for Healthy Kids will come into play. The initiative will provide strategic direction and tools for youth-focused, health-policy efforts such as Safe Routes to School, improved school nutrition and increased opportunities for in-school physical activity. Those efforts will not only complement the shared-use measure, they are central strategies the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has deemed critical to reducing obesity and improving health among the American public.

“Obesity is a leading causes of heart disease and stroke and it is becoming more prevalent in younger and younger-aged youth … we need to reverse this trend,” says Olmstead.