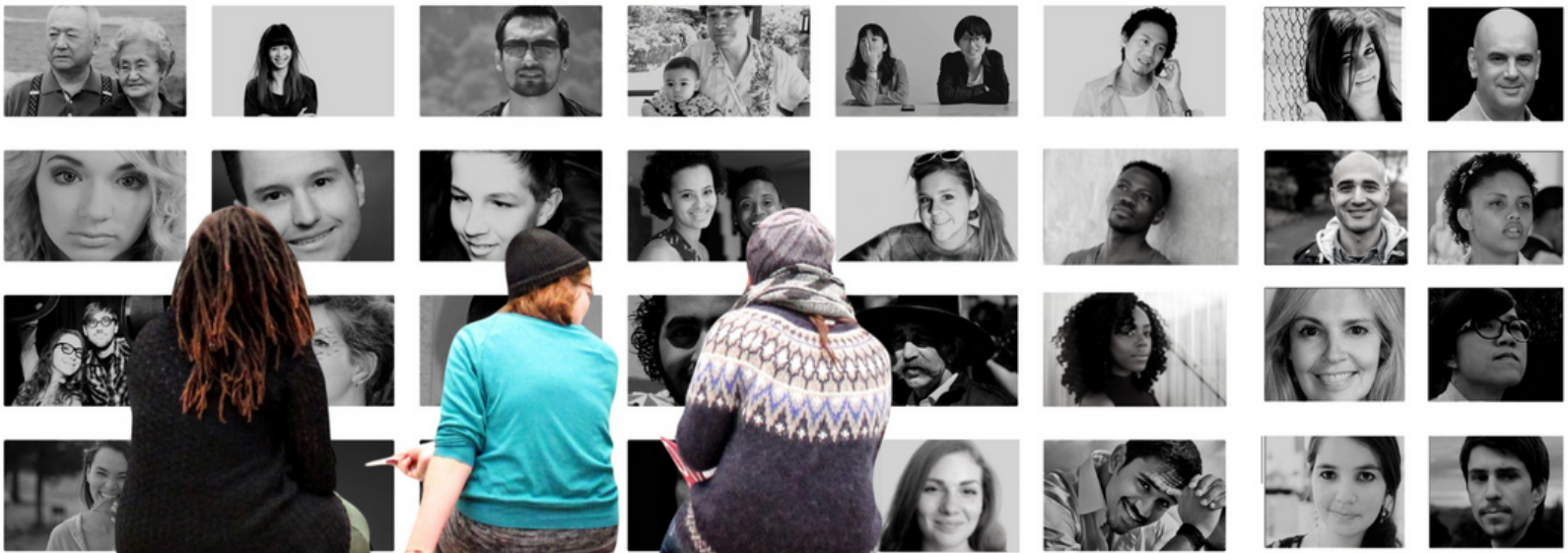




# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR PARKS AND RECREATION





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Group of individuals cleaning out stream trash-trap in Atlanta. Photo courtesy of Groundwork Atlanta.

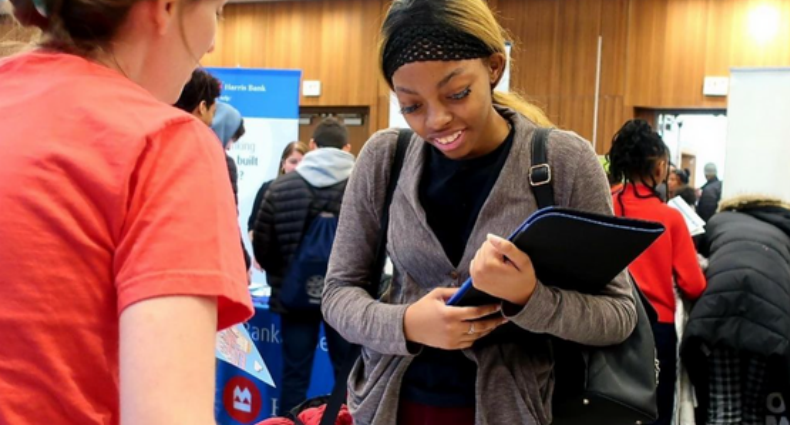


Cover Photo: Three individuals sitting on bench looking at photography exhibit. Photo by Geralt, courtesy of Pixelbay.



# INTRODUCTION

*Coach leading children in stretching exercises. Photo courtesy of Getty Images.*



Young woman at career fair. Photo courtesy of Chicago Park District.

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

The term “workforce development” might not resonate with you or your agency at first glance, but chances are, at some level, your organization is already engaging in workforce development efforts.

Within the field of parks and recreation, we provide seasonal, part-time and full-time employment to youth and adults new to the profession, and career employees. Our staff and employees include: front-desk personnel, marketing and communications staff, fitness instructors, sport coaches, parks and maintenance staff, nature interpretation guides, outdoor recreation staff, lifeguards, construction and skilled trades staff, health and wellness experts, and more. And with each and every role comes opportunities for skills and other trainings. Oftentimes, each job is shaped by the formal and informal, mentorship provided by senior staff.

When it comes to the park and recreation profession, everything that we do can be considered meeting some level of workforce development. So then, what exactly is workforce development? Simply put, workforce

development is the system that helps people gain employment. That system encompasses many interrelated programs and efforts, such as parks and recreation, to provide skills, education and help to overcome barriers to employment.

This resource guide provides an overview of what intentional workforce development looks like, so that you can engage external partners to help develop your own workforce development efforts. It highlights innovative workforce programs that advance economic and workforce equity opportunities for their communities while highlighting career opportunities in the field of parks and recreation. This resource’s key findings and lessons learned from these programs help to inspire your organization to further develop your own workforce development efforts.

Once you have finished reviewing this resource guide, make sure to check out NPRA’s [\*Workforce Development Self-Guided Workbook\*](#). The self-guided workbook provides additional guidance for identifying and reaching your goals for community-based workforce development in the field of parks and recreation.

Interviews with 11 park and recreation agencies and community partners across the country serve as a foundation for the National Recreation and Park Association’s (NRPA) research on workforce development. A synthesis of findings from the interviews and survey are presented here, highlighting some of the current best practices and innovative approaches to workforce development in the field of parks and recreation.

# Does Your Agency Offer Workforce Development?



# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT 101

Workforce development is the system that helps people obtain employment. The system relies upon numerous workforce development programs to collaboratively provide resources and opportunities. A recent survey by NRPA found that one in five park and recreation leaders is looking to establish workforce development and/or career exploration programs within the next two years.<sup>1</sup> Workforce development programs can introduce youth and adults new to the profession to the wide array of occupations within the field of parks and recreation.

The term “workforce development” is increasingly used to describe a multitude of policies and programs related to learning skills for employment. This can, and often does, include youth development, adult education and human resource development. Broadly, workforce development has been defined as “the coordination of public- and private- sector policies and programs that provides individuals with the opportunity for a sustainable livelihood and helps organizations achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the societal context.”<sup>2</sup>

Workforce development, then, brings awareness of the interconnectedness of systems, creates opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, and promotes community well-being while also providing technical and essential skills.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, job trainings have been focused on developing technical skills. In the field of parks

and recreation, this has encompassed skills such as first aid, chainsaw safety and risk management. Now, job training programs are evolving into a broader sense of workforce development and are emphasizing essential skills first. Essential skills, or soft skills, are the social and professional norms required to navigate the contemporary workplace. These skills are a combination of behaviors and social attitudes and can include: communication, problem solving, decision making, time management, work ethic, professionalism, teamwork, leadership, ability to focus on and attend to details, conflict management, flexibility and adaptability, cultural sensitivity and appreciation, and more. More succinctly, essential skills are the everyday tools that people need for work, learning and life. The foundation for these skills is often created during a first job experience.

More and more, innovative workforce development programs in parks and recreation successfully pair both essential and hard skills in order to prepare participants for a successful career, while also helping address systemic issues of economic inequities, racial discrimination and other barriers to community health and well-being.



*Jefferson Memorial Forest workers cleaning up a park. Photo courtesy of Louisville ECHO.*



Group of children practicing bicycle safety checks as part of the ECHO program. Photo courtesy of Louisville ECHO.

There are several critical components that comprise a workforce development program. While not every workforce development program will have all elements, as agencies intentionally layer more of the elements, over time they will develop comprehensive programming with tiered functionality. Start with the programming you have, and consider how with additional intentionality and a few more components, you might grow your workforce development programming.

The first component is the provision of career skills for parks and recreation and/or related fields (e.g., green infrastructure, construction, landscape architecture) along with the provision of essential skills. In the field of parks and recreation, this can be easily accomplished through simple changes, such as ensuring part-time and seasonal workers have access to all the training opportunities provided to full-time and career employees.

The second component is exposure to career pathways. This involves an intentionality to build upon the “first” job and presents pathways forward for the individual to grow and advance their park and recreation career. This might include adopting a model in which youth volunteers move into leadership roles or where

internship opportunities translate into entry-level, full-time fellowships.

The third component is fostering lasting allies. Not every participant in your workforce development program will seek a career in parks and recreation. However, during their engagement with your workforce development program, you have an opportunity to teach them about the field, and why our services are vital to community health and well-being. Community advocacy skills can be taught, laying the foundation for future advocacy and partnership with your agency.

The fourth component is adapting to community changes. No workforce development program can be successful and stay static. As your community faces new issues, such as social justice, climate change, economic downturns, pandemics and technological advances, there will be an opportunity to reassess and realign your program to better meet the needs of your community. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic showed how resilient and innovative the park and recreation profession can be. By having a dedicated and intentional workforce development program, your agency will be better equipped to work with your partners and community to address future workforce challenges.

# KEY FINDINGS



*Group of young business professionals having a meeting in a conference room. Photo by Jacob Lund, courtesy of Canva.*



# BUILDING A NEW WORKFORCE

The field of parks and recreation has long held the distinction of employing many youth and first-time job seekers. Often, these seasonal jobs have provided both essential skills development and job skills training, as well as exposure to the profession. That initial opportunity might be exactly how the field prepares for the emerging challenges our communities will face. Shifting from a seasonal work mentality to one that promotes early career pathways can help position the field as an innovative and essential profession. One suggestion would be to incorporate stronger ties with your existing youth development and early career programs as a way to foster essential skills.

Recommitting to addressing the myriad economic and social disparities in our communities can help the field attract, engage and support a diverse workforce, one that reflects the communities it serves. In turn, the passion and commitment of these young and early career workers can ensure parks are relevant and vital to all communities. To do so, early experiences can be parlayed into an intentional development pipeline, supporting workers moving from youth development programs into educational/certification programs, and finally, into early career development opportunities. The workforce development innovators in the field have found that supporting young workers through intentionally designed, succession opportunities

helps the field retain and advance the next generation of professionals.

## PROMOTING ECONOMIC EQUITY

Workforce development programs can help address economic disparities in our communities and contribute to social well-being. In the interviews conducted with the programs profiled in this report, this function of these programs was specifically identified in three main ways:

### **1. Attainment of a first job is often critical for youth and young adults.**

Park and recreation organizations and departments are noticing that these new workers are frequently contributing to their family's household finances. These seasonal and part-time jobs are providing crucial income for community members to meet basic needs. Understanding the role of workforce development programs in advancing economic equity suggests that, as a field, there is a need to reconsider seasonal versus year-round programming as a pathway for how to best address local economic inequities and needs.

**“Workforce development programs can help address economic disparities in our communities and contribute to social well-being.”**

## Leveling the Playing Field With Job Readiness

In Missouri, the Columbia Parks and Recreation's Career Awareness Related Experience (CARE) program has been providing job-readiness training and essential skills development to low-income and at-risk youth ages 14 to 20 since 1982.

In a college town, it is especially difficult for these youth to get an interview, let alone a job, with so much competition from the college students. The CARE program provides this training and development to ensure that program participants are ready to enter the workforce equipped with the skills necessary for successful careers.

### **2. The importance of providing income goes beyond the individuals in a workforce development program.**

Participants talked about economic disparities as being a deeper and broader discussion around intergenerational financial cycles. They highlighted the importance of co-creating workforce development programs with the community in order to engage and support career development that, in turn, leads to long-term positive community impacts by helping individuals excel in their career path.

### **3. Co-creation of workforce development programs with community members requires a paradigm shift in how volunteerism is considered.**

Co-creation ensures that community values, perspectives and insights are included by engaging and uplifting community members in our program design process. However, we cannot continue to expect co-creation to be done only through volunteerism. Several interviewees encouraged parks and recreation to apply a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) lens to opportunities in order to understand that

volunteerism is a privilege. Organizations must be mindful that if they truly want to create opportunities for low-income households, then there is a need to fairly compensate those individuals for their time, expertise and effort. When we engage our community, we must have allocated resources to compensate those individuals for their time, through such actions as providing a stipend.

## CONNECTING TO NATURE

Parks and natural areas are essential to communities as a health and well-being resource at the community level. "Greener parks" that include green infrastructure, such as bioswales, can mitigate the effects of climate change and enhance community resilience by directing stormwater away from community assets. Such enhancements lead to sustainable parks that support the health of the community, while increasing resiliency against the harmful impacts of climate change.

Recently, studies have been conducted that examine connectedness to nature as a society,

and have concluded that many of us suffer from a nature deficit, or a disconnection from nature. How we discuss and programmatically address nature access inequities can be strengthened by honoring traditions and the connection to nature within communities of color and by seeking to strengthen that experience through our current programs. It's also important to reinforce this formal connection to nature in order to shift the dominant narrative and to provide more visibility for communities of color and other marginalized groups in these nature spaces. This also helps to normalize the narrative in visitation and workforce representation.

A career in the field of parks and recreation includes a number of possibilities, such as recreation programming, public safety, community engagement, park operations, natural resource management, programmatic planning and green infrastructure. While conservation is one of the three core pillars for NRPA, several respondents indicated that professionals and community members alike do not always include outdoor recreation, nature stewardship and natural resources management in the same category as parks and recreation. As such, innovative green jobs or environmentally focused programs are not always synonymous with the field of parks and recreation. For departments and organizations looking to help foster connections between the community and the outdoors/natural environment, it is important to realize that additional translation and outreach may be required.



*Staff member with program youth at a playground. Photo courtesy of Chicago Park District.*

## ENGAGING COMMUNITY

Success and growth of workforce development programs were attributed, in part, to innovative ways of reaching and connecting with previously disconnected communities. It was acknowledged that getting started on this process was the hardest part. For tips and guidance on how to develop equitable community outreach, see the recommended resources list on page 28. Once the initial cohort of youth workers has been established, several programs discussed how the youth workers then become active recruiters in their own neighborhoods and communities. This creates authentic representation of the community within the program and also creates a cycle of mentoring and outreach that directly speaks

to the community. Often, the official job postings from the human resources department are not seen by the communities they are focused on engaging. The workforce development program participants can provide guidance on how to effectively reach various communities, identify additional posting avenues, such as community-based social media accounts, and provide connections with key gatekeepers. Uplifting the experience and knowledge of these new hires leads to a deepening of authentic relationships with the community.

The next generation of the workforce cares about more than just making money. They believe in a quality-of-life approach that includes giving back to their community. Several of the workforce development programs provide outlets for this service mission mindset. In Philadelphia, the Parks and Recreation Department offers its Parks and Recreation Summer Youth Employment Program. Program participants are engaged in a challenge to raise funds for local charities. The friendly competition gives the youth the space and freedom to practice leadership skills, team dynamics and project management, all while facilitating a way for the youth to give back to their community.

## DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS AND FUNDING

Programming often relies upon key partnerships for support and funding. A recent NRPA survey found that 88 percent of park and recreation agencies partner with at least one organization to implement their workforce development programs. Several agencies intentionally work with

external nonprofit partners who receive the funding and provide the expertise in workforce development in order to support their city initiative. Others have dedicated internal city, county or other municipal budgets that support the workforce development programming, but they still rely on partnerships to provide additional job resources and opportunities. Ultimately, programs are enriched by broadening the partnership network, which creates a groundswell of new ideas and approaches.

### Tips for Creating a Workforce Development Program

#### 1. Step back to create space.

Respect and invite the voices of your intended program participants to shape the program from conception onward.

#### 2. Identify and address barriers.

Review hiring practices, department culture, etc., and address identified barriers.

#### 3. Figure out your finances.

Seek quality over quantity; it is better to invest fully in fewer participants than fail many.

#### 4. Build momentum.

Nonprofit and community partners are critical to this work; broader networks can help sustain momentum.

#### 5. Train and educate staff.

Broaden awareness of what a workforce development program is and the commitment it requires.

#### 6. Track your impact.

Learn from your progress and be open to updating your approach with the new next best answer.

*See Recommended Resources on page 28 for additional tools and guides for creating a program.*

A photograph showing community volunteers engaged in a cleanup activity. In the foreground, a person wearing a white perforated work glove is holding a clear plastic bottle. In the background, another person is holding a large green plastic bag, likely for collecting trash. The scene is outdoors, with sunlight filtering through trees, creating a bokeh effect in the background. The overall atmosphere is one of active participation in environmental stewardship.

# CASE STUDIES

*Community volunteers cleaning up trash in local park. Photo by South Agency, courtesy of Getty Images.*

# Sacramento Youth Workforce Development

## Sacramento Youth Employment At a Glance

Location: Sacramento, California

Participants: Ages 13 to 17 and high school seniors

Development Focus: Youth development

Website: [cityofsacramento.org/ParksandRec/Youth-Division](http://cityofsacramento.org/ParksandRec/Youth-Division)

In the City of Sacramento, youth workforce development efforts extend beyond merely one program. The Youth Division, a subdivision of the Youth, Parks and Community Enrichment (YPCE) Department, offers three different youth vocational training and employment programs, including: Prime Time Teen, Landscape & Learning, and Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act.

Each program has a positive reputation and standalone branding that has earned respect from the community and local governance. Funding for these programs is included in the department's annual operating budget, providing established and consistent financial support.

The Youth Division focuses on delivering a workforce development program for participants to safely develop 21st century skills. This is accomplished by exposing youth to various careers and providing them with opportunities to amplify their own voices.



*Landscape & Learning participant holding wheelbarrow with tree limbs. Photo courtesy of City of Sacramento.*

Prime Time Team engages youth in an eight-week, work-readiness training program that includes community service project activities and a mock interview. Participants who meet attendance goals and participation requirements receive a \$300 stipend.

Landscape & Learning is a paid work experience program in which more than 200 youth provide landscape maintenance and general clean-up services in city parks. The youth are placed into small cohorts with an adult ally or instructor, which allows for greater engagement and facilitates a better learning environment.



*Landscape & Learning participants posing with rakes in a local park. Photo courtesy of City of Sacramento.*

The Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act is a paid work experience for high school seniors. The program provides pre-employment skills for participants with specific barriers (e.g., foster youth, pregnant and/or parenting teens, people experiencing homelessness). The program helps connect the students with supportive services that can help them overcome these additional barriers that they may be facing. Students are placed in a variety of department recreation programs such as youth camps, before-/after-school, youth sports, and assist with front-counter operations at community centers. At the conclusion of the work experience, supervisors have the opportunity to hire students as recreation aides — further encouraging the potential career pathway.

The Youth Division uses evidence-based youth development frameworks to help them develop innovative and award-winning youth workforce development programs. They start by centering the youth voice and genuinely valuing it. They involve the youth every step of the way, listening to them in all aspects of the training to develop a quality product that delivers what the youth need. This careful development leverages intentionality for success and helps

Sacramento's Youth Division to carefully cultivate partnerships that directly correlate with the program quality. To do this, they focus on developing reciprocal relationships and capacity building with community partners. The Youth Division continues to create more formalized career pathways and pipelines with external partners.

### **Creating Support From Within**

Building a workforce development program requires an agency to honestly assess the culture of the department. Are there voices within the department who will advocate for the program? Will the entire department support the program?

The City of Sacramento owes its success, in part, to the widespread support for their programming efforts. This includes the support of council members to invest the resources into the programs.

The YPCE Department also completed a strategic plan that included the decision to focus on youth and the value of youth. This commitment helped set the tone for a department-wide culture shift.

# TeenWorks

## TeenWorks At a Glance

Location: Montgomery County, Maryland

Participants: Ages 15 to 24; have never been employed

Development Focus: Youth development

Website: [montgomerycountymd.gov/rec/activitiesandprograms/youthdevelopment/teenworks.html](http://montgomerycountymd.gov/rec/activitiesandprograms/youthdevelopment/teenworks.html)

TeenWorks is a year-round volunteer and employment program for teens and young adults who have never been employed, but who are looking for job-readiness training and ongoing skill-building through workshops, college tours, financial literacy training and internships.

TeenWorks exposes participants to public service career opportunities in the nonprofit and public sectors. Students are placed in roles such as: lifeguards, camp counselors, conservation project crew members, and TechConnect staff for senior programming. TeenWorks staff emphasize a motto of “learn to work,” providing participants with mentorship and support as they try out different skills and roles. Ultimately, TeenWorks is helping participants learn how to work, from filling out hiring paperwork to mastering essential work skills and exploring career possibilities.

TeenWorks is a program under the Montgomery County Department of



*TeenWorks participant learning job skills. Photo courtesy of Montgomery County, Maryland.*

Recreation’s Youth Development Team. It works with multiple partners throughout the country, including after-school programs in four high schools. A typical year sees more than 130 program participants employed through Montgomery County Recreation and placed in one of several teams working with nonprofit and public partners throughout the county, including partnerships with Maryland State Parks, the Conservation Job Corps and the National Park Service. Having shown their success in blending youth development and workforce development, TeenWorks continues to garner the support of elected officials and partners working in workforce development across the county.



The success of the program can be measured in part by the ripple effect seen in the community. TeenWorks participants have become critical to the success of programs. They serve as role models to younger students and they are seen by community members, making it easier for the community to connect with the department; these students are the social connectors to the community. TeenWorks participants use their creativity, talents and interests to enrich and diversify community outreach efforts and provide language translation support. The enrichment of each participant goes beyond career readiness. As a result of their own deepened connection to leisure pursuits, TeenWorks participants become stewards of the environment and advocates within their community. In several instances, those youth

participants became the conduit to nature and the outdoors for their friends and family, helping them overcome barriers and fear of the outdoors.

A focus on youth development grounds the TeenWorks program and elevates the importance of education and mentorship. While some programs set low expectations, TeenWorks raises expectations and gives students the chance to meet them and excel. This success can be in large part attributed to the dedication of site directors and staff to encourage, check in, educate and motivate their youth workforce. The TeenWorks program draws upon principles and research around social-emotional learning (SEL) as a framework for promoting essential skills in youth.

### **A Lesson in Youth Motivation**

Struggling to keep your volunteers engaged? Let them earn their colors.

TeenWorks requires all interested participants to complete volunteer hours before onboarding them into a hired position. To keep the youth engaged, TeenWorks gives all volunteers a program uniform — a white shirt. After the first 25 hours of work, each participant graduates to a blue shirt. Along the way, the students receive performance evaluations, while the program partners and site directors are learning the incredible value of the students. TeenWorks staff help the blue shirt volunteers complete the application and hiring process. Once the youth are brought onto the payroll, they graduate to wearing the official green shirt.

In addition to being a powerful motivator for the youth to work, this gradual onboarding system can be a great way for small or under-resourced agencies to find the right fit for the youth workers before committing to the full hiring process.

# Louisville ECHO

## Louisville ECHO At a Glance

Location: Louisville, Kentucky

Participants: Age 18 and younger

Development Focus: Outdoor Job Training and Nature Connection

Website: [louisvilleecho.com](http://louisvilleecho.com)

Louisville ECHO (Louisville is Engaging Children Outdoors) launched in 2008 and was initially seeded by the U.S. Forest Service; it continues to be predominantly grant funded. The initiative is the programmatic component of the West Louisville Outdoor Recreation Initiative (WLORI) and is managed by the Jefferson Memorial Forest and the Natural Areas Division of Louisville Parks and Recreation.

Louisville ECHO is focused on improving equitable access to the outdoors and does so through four distinct program components: school-based experiential learning, out-of-school time education and recreation, annual community events, and an outdoor job training and employment program. The primary goal of this program is to create equitable access to nature and career pathways for youth. At the heart of this initiative is a commitment to applying a health and racial equity lens. And for Louisville ECHO, health equity begins with wealth creation and empowerment, which is where the outdoor job training and employment program come in. Louisville ECHO partners with the Louisville



*ECHO participants holding crawdad in net. Photo courtesy of Louisville ECHO.*

Mayor's SummerWorks program, managed by KentuckianaWorks and YouthBuild Louisville, to provide complimentary youth workforce development activities. Participants are placed in positions that support park operators, including: summer camps, environmental programming, land management, marketing and community engagement.

The youth workforce component of Louisville ECHO is successful due to its conscious consideration of systemic and structural barriers that need to be overcome for participants to succeed. The innovation begins with recruitment. Louisville ECHO goes beyond web-based job postings; they engage current participants in actively recruiting in their communities to help generate an increasingly

diverse applicant pool.

The awareness of barriers begins with hiring practices and moves beyond. For instance, Louisville ECHO is place-based programming. The program does not onboard the youth participants through the city's human resources department; instead the external partners handle the hiring of the youth. Staff are working hard to ensure that they incorporate more inclusive language throughout the outdoor activities, and they explore what nature and a love for nature mean for different community members. As a result of centering diversity, the program has led to older youth coming back to the program, mentoring the younger participants, and even being recruited to full-time staff positions as outreach coordinators. This process has shown to be an effective way of diversifying staff and positively changing how the department engages with the community. As for the participants, at an early age they are being exposed to the wonders of nature and learning that they can go to college and earn a degree in environmental science or natural resource management and pursue a nature-centered career.



*Horticultural park worker staff carrying out trail and habitat improvement. Photo courtesy of Louisville ECHO.*

### **Reimagining Equitable Nearby Nature**

Louisville, like many communities in the United States, is reckoning with its past and assessing a present that has been shaped by segregation and racism. Race-based discrimination and prejudice has continued to shape how community members do or do not engage with natural areas. Inspired by Dudley Edmondson's book,<sup>4</sup> and Dr. Carolyn Finney's work,<sup>5</sup> the Natural Areas Division of Louisville Parks and Recreation shifted its approach to engaging the local community and focused on equitable nature access. Many of the natural sites in Louisville are outside of the urban core, making transportation and access a potential barrier. Improving equitable access goes beyond the programmatic, and the WLORI includes a proposal for a new nature and outdoor education center to provide nearby nature access for West Louisville residents. Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer has allocated \$2.5 million toward the center in his proposed fiscal year 2022 budget request. The expansion of programming and park amenities is the result of extensive public outreach and engagement to determine how to better meet residents' nature needs.

# PeoriaCorps

## PeoriaCorps At a Glance

Location: Peoria, Illinois

Participants: Ages 18 to 24, currently out of school and out of work

Development Focus: Green Infrastructure Job Training

Website: [peoriagov.org/public-works/peoriacorps/](http://peoriagov.org/public-works/peoriacorps/)

PeoriaCorps is a six-month leadership development experience focused on green infrastructure for ages 18 to 24 who are currently out of work and out of school. Program participants are exposed to development opportunities that ready them for green infrastructure skill-specific tasks, as well as essential professional and leadership skills. PeoriaCorps, as a workforce development program, is centered on an environmental literacy curriculum that leads to an industry-recognized credential in green infrastructure through the National Green Infrastructure Certification Program.

PeoriaCorps is an AmeriCorps program provided by Serve Illinois Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, focused on educating its members on green infrastructure. Primarily, PeoriaCorps invests in communities that are under-resourced and serves participants who need assistance building a foundation for career success. Over the past three years, 85 percent of program alumni found employment immediately after the program.



*PeoriaCorps participant studying for certification. Photo courtesy of PeoriaCorps.*

As an AmeriCorps program, PeoriaCorps provides participants with a biweekly living allowance, along with an educational scholarship that is earned upon completion of 900 service hours through the National Service Trust. This education award has propelled several program graduates on to achieving additional degrees, furthering their opportunities for career success in this burgeoning industry, while also learning how transferable their new skills are in other career paths, such as in the healthcare field.



PeoriaCorps participants during a training session. Photo courtesy of PeoriaCorps.

What drives the success of PeoriaCorps can be glimpsed in the intentionality of the program to have participants reach the finish line with a better vision and employment outcome. Participants are encouraged throughout the program to focus on building self-efficacy and confidence. This focus on the individual uplifts and brings value to each participant's journey to overcome past difficulties. It encourages them to see that their strength, when applied to the program, will lead to career readiness and attainment of professional credentials that will then help them stand out from the crowd and succeed personally and professionally. The power of uplifting lived experience also can be seen in how PeoriaCorps helps rebuild confidence in participants, honoring the multi-generational connection to nature and the environment that is too often overlooked. As a result, PeoriaCorps is helping participants appreciate and value green jobs as important and providing them with the necessary skillset to succeed in that field.

Participants are not the only beneficiaries of the PeoriaCorps program. Alumni of the program have gone on to create their own businesses and worker cooperatives, leading to more job opportunities for the community. But perhaps

the greatest impact is the result of engaging young people in addressing community issues. PeoriaCorps harnesses the passion of these young adults into service for their community, whether that is helping maintain green infrastructure projects, planting trees or picking up litter around the community, or encouraging them to give back to the community and share their message of hope, all of which brings environmental justice to these communities.

### Key Takeaways From PeoriaCorps

- Balance quality versus quantity of the experience. By honing in on the quality of the experience, this program has shown that being participant-focused and relevant to the community can produce meaningful results.
- Sustainable programs, such as PeoriaCorp, rely on multiple partnerships and streams of income. When developing your own program, consider how partners should invest in the program.
- Invest in the people. Not everyone will develop within the fixed timeframe of the program. Consider how to continue providing support and growth opportunities for alumni.

# Atlanta Trash-Traps

## Atlanta Trash-Traps At a Glance

Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Participants: Age 18 and older

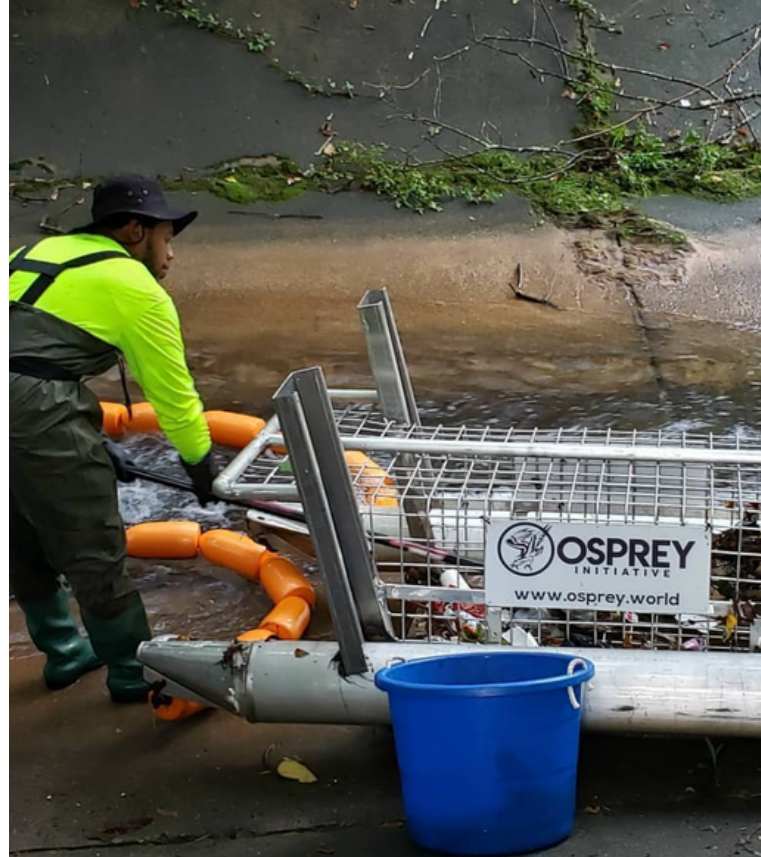
Development Focus: Green Jobs

Website: [groundworkatlanta.org/water](http://groundworkatlanta.org/water)

Trash pollution is an environmental justice issue faced by many communities, including neighborhoods located in Atlanta's Proctor Creek Watershed. What began as a community-driven project to reduce litter and plastics in a tributary of the Chattahoochee River evolved into a demonstration of how environmental solutions also can lead to economic growth via workforce development programs.

The Proctor Creek project started in 2019 as a partnership between Atlanta's Department of Parks and Recreation and the Department of Watershed Management, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, Groundwork Atlanta and Park Pride. The goal was to install trash-catchment systems at different locations in the watershed.

The ongoing need for maintenance of these trash-traps led Groundwork Atlanta to develop a green job workforce program specifically for the operation of these systems in partnership with Georgia TRADE-UP. Green



*A worker completing maintenance on a Proctor Creek trash-trap. Photo courtesy of Groundwork Atlanta.*

infrastructure projects, such as trash traps, require approaches to address the long-term operations and maintenance. This requires a specialized training for workers in an industry that may just be emerging locally. The partnership with Georgia TRADE-UP specifically addressed this potential barrier by helping to train a new workforce while also providing additional employment hours on other projects to help stabilize the part-time role of trash-trap operations. Such innovative partnerships can create long-term solutions and stable job opportunities for burgeoning markets.

These new green jobs are located in underserved, low-income communities, but the partnership also is benefiting the city. The new community ambassadors working on the trash-traps bring community activism and stewardship awareness to the role.



Workers completing a trash count and inventory from a Proctor Creek trash-trap. Photo courtesy of Groundwork Atlanta.

The growth of green jobs in Atlanta expands beyond the trash-traps project and centers on the concept of community engagement. Park Pride has partnered with the city and other organizations to create new parks in underserved neighborhoods, but instead of relying on the traditional model of community volunteers for community engagement, they have begun piloting a new approach. The capacity for volunteering is predicated upon privilege — having both the time and money to personally offset the labor — and fails to account for financial inequities. Park Pride, with funding from the JPB Foundation provided through The Conservation Fund, invested in paying the park ambassadors as a way to equitably support the sustainability of the community partnerships.

When communities are not showing up to engage in conversation, often the assumption is that they are not prioritizing nature or the environment. The reality in many of these communities is that economic and health inequities prevent them from having the time to engage. The creation of green jobs provides both stable career pathways and neighborhood environmental solutions that can foster community engagement and prioritize neglected communities.

### **Creating New Green Jobs and Workforce Development Opportunities**

Environmental issues present challenges in many of our communities that are entwined with other community issues, such as health and income inequalities and social identity. As professionals in our field, we have the opportunity to address both community and environmental issues through a novel solution — green jobs.

Creating and funding new environmental jobs, whether it is a workforce to maintain new green infrastructure or a parks crew dedicated to eradicating invasive species, such as Kudzu, gives community members the opportunity to help return their communities back to a place of health. These seemingly never-ending tasks could become never-ending job opportunities. Paired with an intentionality to benefit youth, these jobs also could function to get them started on and ready for the next step in their career journey.

# Chicago Workforce Development

## Chicago Park District Workforce Development Pipeline At a Glance

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Participants: Age 13 and older

Development Focus: Continuous Learning

Website: [chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/departments/workforce-development](http://chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/departments/workforce-development)

The Chicago Park District's (CPD's) innovations come from tapping into programmatic capabilities. A program creates an opportunity for our profession to collaborate with partners, creating unparalleled learning and workforce development opportunities. Consider this: a typical day on the job for a park and recreation professional requires skillful navigation of numerous policy and social issues that often manifest as user conflicts. The skills learned in mitigating and managing these conflicts translate to all careers. When learning is intentionally centered within each job, employees are given meaningful experiences that prepare them for any career. That ethos has guided CPD as it strives to provide learning and career development opportunities for first-time job holders, youth, college students, college graduates, union workers, mid-career professionals and on through further leadership opportunities.



*Coach talks to a youth basketball team. Photo courtesy of Chicago Park District.*

Innovative workforce development is found embedded throughout CPD as an intentional approach to learning and career growth for every employee. CPD can provide widespread workforce development due in great part to its efforts to create collaborations with partners that provide seasonal and year-round, entry-level jobs for anyone looking to enter the park and recreation profession.

One such collaboration is with After School Matters (ASM), a nonprofit which utilizes an apprenticeship model to provide skill development and career pathways. ASM provides a stipend for apprenticeship program participants while giving them hands-on experience that leads to seasonal jobs with CPD, including sports officiating, lifeguarding, program instruction, health and wellness programs and more.



When faced with lifeguard staffing shortages in the south and west side of Chicago, CPD collaborated with ASM to build connections with communities of color, working to identify and eliminate barriers to becoming lifeguards by providing reduced or no cost access to lifeguard training and course materials. As a result, CPD was able to adequately staff pools in communities by hiring youth from these neighborhoods as lifeguards.

CPD annually hires more than 3,000 youth, but the focus has shifted to help these youth move from seasonal jobs to a career path. Youth now are getting more than a paycheck; they are getting mentorship and guidance on how to perform as an employee and receiving career-readiness skills for their next job. This created a job pipeline. Youth in these neighborhoods now see themselves reflected in park staff and supervisors, this increases interest in exploring career opportunities with CPD. As youth become interested in serving their community, such early job experiences help direct them towards additional public service positions and careers centered on helping their community including the Chicago Police/Fire

Departments.

CPD also collaborates with higher education. Chicago State University's accredited Recreation Program not only engages and embeds college interns into CPD, but also grows programming and opportunities for workforce development and continuing education for existing employees.

In 2012, CPD created a Workforce Development Department that offers centralized training and professional development for all staff, including crisis support services. It also promotes and supports staff to obtain their Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP) certification. The department developed an online learning management system, SuccessCenter, which provides training to staff at no cost, helping them engage as life-long learners, and promotes the importance of professional growth. The department provides opportunities for all employees to advance their careers, while also focusing on the whole person through offerings such as financial awareness, self-care, life coaching and continuing formal education.

### Creating a Workforce Development Pipeline

Programming for jobs is, in essence, programming for community participants. Whether those participants are youth or adults, park and recreation agencies are well-positioned to create their own workforce development pipeline. Looking to apply the CPD model to your agency? Here are some tips to get you started.

- 1. Identify sector growth.** Look to the business world in your community. Are green infrastructure, agriculture, construction or skilled trades jobs growing? Assess what opportunities for employment exist in your community.
- 2. Create a space for support.** Consider how your agency can provide support for training and learning opportunities for the whole community.
- 3. Find local funding.** Local businesses will fund internships or stipends around the work we do in the park and recreation profession if we can show how the skills translate to all careers and benefit the community at large.

# CONCLUSIONS



Maintenance on Big Creek Greenway north of Atlanta. Photo by darrylbros, courtesy of Canva.

# THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION

Workforce development programs benefit not only the field of parks and recreation, but also the communities in which these programs are conducted. These programs improve overall community health and well-being by addressing economic disparities and promoting equity and inclusion, all while creating partnerships with champion stakeholders and bringing young adults, youth development and career opportunities to the forefront of a sustainable park and recreation model for the future.

In addition to youth development, the opportunities presented by green job creation and green infrastructure improvements allow there to be new connections created for reciprocal relationships between communities and nature for both human and environmental health. Human health encompasses individual physical, mental and social well-being, but these factors also are impacted by community-level issues, such as access to nature. Through the creation of these jobs, both increased positive health and positive economic impacts are being promoted to the community at large via individual life improvements. It is crucial that these programs are a co-creation, working with the communities to make sure the diverse population of the community is reflected in the programs, using language to shape the narrative in a way that is authentic to communities of color and people from other historically marginalized groups. In doing so, these programs can help address the traditional

barriers of inclusion and equity that have impeded community access to natural resources and the outdoors.

In order to continue to improve these programs, we need to track the success of individual, community, and parks and recreation outcomes. Both quantitative and qualitative reporting methods must be employed so that together, they can show the complete picture. And, these methods must be viewed through a DEI lens. Qualitative methods include storytelling: profiling people who have been through the program, highlighting key partnerships that have formed over the years, and following individuals and families in an effort to showcase the impact of park and recreation job opportunities on undoing trauma and breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Quantitative methods include measuring the workload necessary to run the program, producing facts and figures around program costs and participants, analyzing the investment needed to keep the program going, and assessing the ecological and environmental impacts in terms of land stewardship and the reduction of access barriers.

**Ready to create, or redesign, a workforce development program, but not quite sure where to start?**

Check out NPRA's [\*Workforce Development Self-Guided Workbook\*](#), along with several toolkits and guides listed in the recommended resources at the end of this report for in-depth guidance on a range of topics, including: DEI; youth development; green infrastructure; and partnership development.



*Several Chicago Park District workers standing in front of work truck. Photo courtesy of Chicago Park District.*

Many of the youth-focused workforce development programs examined in this document were very strongly grounded in scientific evidence-based practices that informed the structure. There is a great opportunity to apply the same rigorous programmatic formation process to young adult and early career programs, as well. Incorporating specific considerations — such as natural resources stewardship, land ethics, climate change, long-term individual and community health, and an integration of diverse communities — will create programs with a wide range of successful outcomes to measure. These success measures — both the qualitative and quantitative — then can be compared to the inputs and outputs of other program reports and shared in context when related to other studies and research being conducted.

Another way to improve program success measurements is to work hand-in-hand with human resources departments and other hiring bodies to use a DEI lens to examine the competencies needed, both from the individual and from the organization, in order to create a successful job and employee retention opportunity. Especially with the emerging workforce, DEI considerations are paramount for engaging and retaining a younger

generation within the field of parks and recreation. For instance, centering trauma-informed processes across an agency or organization creates a methodology for treating people in a way that helps bring forth healing and welcomes new employees into a department, agency, organization and field that may have had significant barriers to access previously. Ensure that the interview and review process reflects that understanding, that hiring panels held via workforce development programs include informed community members, and discuss cross-cultural humility and accountability when forming programs and employment opportunities.

Share power with community members to create a program that will be of and for the community, and change the dynamic of how hiring decisions are made within partner organizations working with these youth, young adult and early career workforce development programs. By doing this, the experiences of communities of color are being centered and their expertise is being valued in a way that will create significantly more successful programs. Ultimately, this will lead to greater individual, community, and economic health and sustainability, ensuring that the field of park and recreation continues to be relevant and innovative.

# ENDNOTES

1. National Recreation and Park Association. (2021). *Workforce Development and Career Exploration in Parks and Recreation*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/workforce-development-and-career-exploration-in-park-and-recreation/>
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Camp staffer and camper overlooking lake. Photo courtesy of Montgomery County, Maryland.

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

## GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONSERVATION EFFORTS

[Green Infrastructure Evaluation Framework](#) — Offers tools and research-based information to measure the environmental, social, economic, and health benefits of green infrastructure projects.

[Resource Guide for Planning, Designing and Implementing Green Infrastructure in Parks](#) — Provides basic principles, inspiration and ideas that can help planners, designers, and decision-makers equitably integrate green infrastructure into parks and park systems across the country.

Greener Parks for Health resources — Provides the tools and knowledge to communicate about, advocate for, and institutionalize equitable access to greener parks, including:

- [Communications Toolkit](#) — Provides evidence and values-based messaging to build community and leadership support, including one-pagers that provide facts and statistics on the environmental, health, economic and social impacts of greener parks.
- [Advocacy Toolkit](#) — Offers key actions tailored to specific audiences to advance cross-sector solutions for implementing greener parks.

[Climate.Park.Change.](#) — Allows park and recreation professionals to explore regional impacts arising from climate change and discover associated climate adaptation strategies that can be integrated into park designs.

[COVID-19 and Parks and Recreation: Making the Case for the Future](#) — Provides key messaging, strategies and template graphics to equip professionals and advocates with the knowledge and tools to communicate about the essential role parks and recreation has in the well-being of communities.

NRPA's Green Infrastructure Certificate Program (releasing in July 2021) — Hosted through NRPA's education department, this certificate overviews green infrastructure operations and maintenance tailored to the park and recreation profession, including financing and starting a green infrastructure program, community engagement and partnership building, maintenance of green infrastructure projects, and evaluating the multiple direct and co-benefits of projects in parks.

Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency through Stewardship (releasing in Summer 2021)

## HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

[NRPA Inclusion Resources](#) — Creating and adopting a formal inclusion policy is a great way to ensure that your park and recreation facilities, programs and activities are accessible, welcoming and inclusive. NRPA has developed a toolkit to help lead agencies through policy creation and implementation.

[Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation](#) — This framework is designed to help park and recreation professionals intentionally advance health equity by applying a racial equity lens when designing, implementing, and evaluating programs and services, and when developing infrastructure, maintenance and operations plans.

## EQUITY

Tools to Center Equity in Your Outreach Efforts, including:

- [Community Engagement Resource Guide](#)
- [Community Needs Assessment Resource](#)

[Creating Equity-Based System Master Plans](#) — A tool to understand and center equity in park planning efforts.

[Parks for Inclusion Policy Guide](#) — Creating and adopting a formal inclusion policy is a great way to ensure that your facilities, programs and activities are accessible, welcoming and inclusive; this resource can help you create your own.

[Health Equity Framework](#) — Helps park and recreation professionals intentionally advance health equity by applying a racial equity lens when designing, implementing, and evaluating programs and services, and when developing infrastructure, maintenance and operations plans.

[Equity in Parks and Recreation: A Historical Perspective](#) — Illustrates policies and examples of park inequities throughout United States history, revealing both the opportunities and challenges ahead of us.

## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND MENTORING

[Youth Mentoring Framework](#) — Supports the creation of mentoring programs with research-supported practices and approaches. The framework considers common assets found in park and recreation agencies, as well as feedback on the need for self-care, reflection and mindfulness for both mentors and mentees.

[Search Institute's Developmental Assets® Framework](#) — Outlines 40 research-based, positive experiences and factors that influence youth development and lead to positive life outcomes.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## ABOUT NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at [nrpa.org/Research](https://nrpa.org/Research).

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Thank you to Rachel Banner, Kevin Roth, Autumn Saxton-Ross, Michele White, Ayanna Williams, Tiff Cunin, Suzanne Nathan, Jennifer Nguyen and Vitisia Paynich for making this resource possible.

Thank you to the agencies who provided insight and stories: Chicago Parks District; City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management; City of Columbia (Missouri) Parks and Recreation Department; City of Louisville Parks and Recreation Natural Areas Division; City of Sacramento Youth Division; Groundwork Atlanta; Montgomery County Department of Recreation; Oregon Metro Parks and Nature; Park Pride; PeoriaCorps; and Philadelphia Parks and Recreation.

## FUNDING

The Coca-Cola Company provided funding for this work. Health & Technology Partners and NRPA staff — which informed and created this resource guide and an accompanying workbook — are solely responsible for the content of this resource.

Suggested Citation: National Recreation and Park Association (2021). *Workforce Development: Resource Guide for Parks and Recreation*.





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