

Views from the Crossroads

Groundwork 2021
State of the Network



GROUNDWORK
USA

“Groundwork empowers people from different walks of life to get involved in their community and change their future.”

—2021 Youth Program Participant

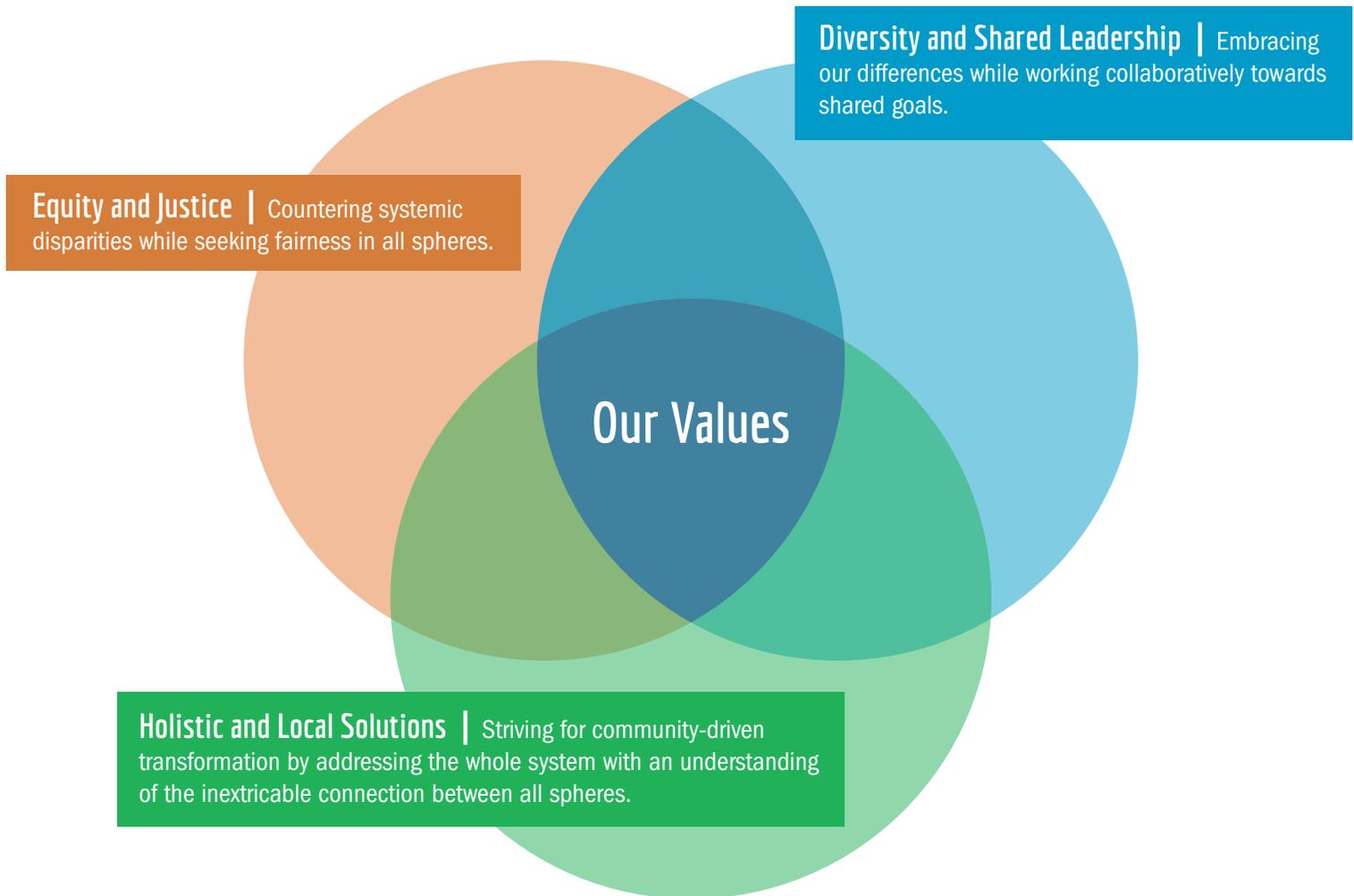


Groundwork USA

The Groundwork USA network strives to create a world in which everyone lives in a community that is healthy, green, and resilient. Groundwork USA supports national network of Groundwork Trusts—grassroots environmental justice organizations—working hand-in-hand with their communities to restore and revitalize urban neighborhoods to make this vision a reality.

Our Vision | Healthy, Green, & Thriving Communities

Our Mission | We bring about the sustained regeneration, improvement, and management of the physical environment by developing community-based partnerships that empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.



All Hands On Deck

A Message From Groundwork USA's President

Dear Friends,

Over the past year, I have found myself reflecting more frequently on the scale of the environmental and climate challenges facing our nation. From deep freezes and flooding to extreme heat, wildfires, and late-season tornadoes, there is seemingly endless coverage of the harm caused by climate change.

As the climate crisis escalates the frequency of extreme weather events, it's increasingly apparent that we're at a crossroads as a nation. The clock has run down on our time to prevent climate change and we urgently need to act to reduce the social, economic, and health impacts borne by those on the frontlines.

For over 15 years, I've had the privilege of working with the Groundwork network as we collaborate with community members to create real and lasting change in our neighborhoods. I have been endlessly inspired by our community members' commitment to championing a different future and the effort of our youth, our future environmental leaders, for the hours they have spent soliciting community input, growing food, and building green infrastructure, to bring this vision to life.

In this work is a powerful message of hope—we can meaningfully move the needle toward environmental justice.

In this year's State of the Network report, we pause at the crossroads to look at the future that's possible if we invest deeply in the potential of communities on the frontlines to undo the legacy of environmental harms and co-create more resilient neighborhoods. As you'll see in these pages, there are endless reasons to be hopeful that a future where everyone can live in a community that is healthy and thriving is possible. I'm excited to share this message of hope with you!

Thank you to all of the staff, youth, volunteers, board members, community partners, and supporters who continue to champion the belief that everyone deserves to live in a neighborhood that is healthy, green, and resilient and together, make all of this work possible.

With your support, we continue to prove that a brighter, safer future is not only possible—it's already in progress.

With gratitude,



Heather McMann
President, Groundwork USA

The State of the Network

Changing Place, Changing Lives, Changing Systems

Groundwork USA is a national nonprofit that supports a network of place-based environmental organizations—Groundwork Trusts—working hand-in-hand with their communities to address the legacy of environmental injustice and revitalize urban neighborhoods.

Groundwork USA launched in the late 1990s, through a partnership between the National Park Service and the US Environmental Protection Agency. Currently, twenty-one Groundwork Trusts operate in over 30 cities across the country, representing more than 6.6 million residents living in environmentally neglected urban areas. More than 90% of those living in Groundwork neighborhoods are low-income, immigrants, and people of color.

Through our people-centered environmental justice work, Groundwork Trusts seek to build community and connection while transforming the built environment to create safer, healthier, more resilient places to live. Through the process of changing places, we change lives and create new and better systems that keep us safe and healthy.

While we share a vision and mission, each Groundwork Trust is as unique as the community they call home. Collectively we work to:



Transform Neglected Land & Waterways into Community Assets: Centering community voice and collaborative partnerships, we are transforming contaminated and neglected land and waterways into community assets like parks, community gardens, urban farms, and greenways.



Increase Resilience to Climate Change & Environmental Crises: Addressing the disproportionate vulnerability to extreme heat and flooding experienced by low-income communities—particularly communities of color—by installing green infrastructure and advocating for systems change.



Increase Access to Healthy Food: Creating healthy, local food systems through a wide variety of programs, including community and school gardens, urban farms, local and mobile farmers markets, community-supported agriculture shares, healthy corner store campaigns, and culturally relevant nutrition and cooking classes.



Cultivate the Next Generation of Environmental Leaders: Building the capacity of the next generation of environmental leaders by engaging young people aged 5-35 in age-appropriate environmental education and paid employment opportunities that prepare youth for a variety of environmental careers.

Building on an existing foundation of community connection and responsive programming, this year was a significant period of growth across the Groundwork network. From the launch of new collaborative partnerships to doubling the size of youth programming and breaking ground on new land revitalization projects, Groundwork Trusts are increasing their impact and effectiveness across the board.

We're excited to share the impact of our work with our growing community of champions.

By The Numbers

Groundwork 2021 Impact

Transforming Neglected Land and Waterways into Community Assets

153

Miles of Sidewalk, Paths, and Trails Improved or Maintained



219

Miles of River Habitat Cleaned, Restored, or Conserved

5,939

Acres of Brownfields, Parkland and Open Space Improved or Maintained

Increasing Resilience to Climate Change and Environmental Crises

921

Properties Retrofitted with Climate Resilience Infrastructure

16,433

Community Members Engaged in Climate Education and Action



220

Green Infrastructure Projects Completed

Increasing Access to Healthy Foods

3,160

New Gardens Beds & Urban Farms Built, Maintained, or Supported

14,158

Families Benefiting from Produce Grown in Urban Farms and Gardens

69,273

Pounds of Food Donated

119,477

Meals Donated



Cultivating the Next Generation of Environmental Leaders

17,091

Youth Engaged in Programs and Events

570

Jobs Created

86,374

People-Hours in Environmental and Green Jobs Training Delivered





Transforming Neglected Land and Waterways

Groundwork Trusts restore the connection between people and their environments by engaging their community in the process of transforming neglected land and waterways into community assets like parks, gardens, urban farms, and greenways. By centering community voice and collaborative partnerships, we aim to ensure that these efforts lead to revitalization, not displacement. **Our goal: All 6.6M of the people we serve have access to safe, just, and healthy outdoor spaces.**





Groundwork San Diego *Designating Chollas Creek As A Regional Park*

Due to a legacy of river channelization and poor water management infrastructure, the communities surrounding the Chollas Creek in San Diego, CA are often subjected to flash flooding. For decades, the community has advocated for two critical improvements in the watershed region: updates and improvements to the creek infrastructure to prevent flooding, and new investments in parks, trails, and recreation areas to increase access to the outdoors. Last year, Groundwork San Diego began convening a coalition of local non-profits, neighborhood groups, and religious organizations representing the Watershed's different communities to advocate for the City to address pressing flooding concerns and inequitable access to outdoor spaces. Capitalizing on a change in the administration, Groundwork

and its partners engaged residents across different neighborhoods in a coordinated public advocacy campaign to advocate for long-term systems change. In 2021, the City of San Diego officially designated the Chollas Creek Watershed a regional park and began undertaking a master planning process to revitalize the watershed. The long-overdue park designation will unlock funding to tackle flooding challenges caused by the channelization of Chollas Creek and to create outdoor recreational assets in San Diego's most climate-vulnerable neighborhoods. It will also increase the sense of regional identity by connecting diverse neighborhoods through a 20-square-mile network of small parks, open space canyons, and trails.





Groundwork Jacksonville *Community-Driven Design*



Due to over 100 years of channelization and extensive development in the surrounding watershed, McCoys Creek in Jacksonville, FL, has become increasingly prone to flooding. In 2021, the City committed \$105.4M to restore the Creek collaboratively with Groundwork Jacksonville. Through extensive community engagement and intentional design, the partners hope to ensure that the project will benefit current and future residents alike. After a year-long design process, which included extensive visioning with the community, the first phase of the McCoys Creek project officially broke ground in June 2021.

This project will restore the Creek's meandering structure, improve landscaping to increase stormwater management, and connect the Creek to the Emerald Trail—30 miles of linked trails, greenways, and parks surrounding the city. Once complete, McCoys Creek will be a critical piece of resilience infrastruc-

ture, reducing flooding and pollution, increasing biodiversity, and improving the quality of life in Jacksonville.

Because large-scale land restoration projects can lead to green gentrification and displacement of long-time residents, Groundwork has ensured equitable development principles have been engrained throughout this process. Before starting the restoration project, they convened local community members, business owners, and other stakeholders to understand their vision for McCoys Creek and made sure that the community's vision was reflected in the final design. To help sustain continued engagement, at the request of residents, Groundwork Jacksonville launched the Community Restoration Environmental Stewardship Training (CREST) program – a cross-generational program that builds the capacity of residents to participate in the long-term stewardship of the creek through job training and hands-on learning experiences. CREST members will help ensure there is a clear role for residents in future McCoys Creek efforts.





Groundwork Lawrence *Community-Led Green Space Action*



Lawrence, MA, is a densely populated former mill community that is home to a large immigrant and Latino community. With its industrial past, the city has a significant lack of open green space and a lengthy history of environmental justice concerns. Groundwork Lawrence has been working for decades to create new parks and trails while ensuring that community voice is reflected in all of Lawrence's greenspace initiatives. This year, in partnership with the City of Lawrence and the Conservation Law Foundation, they worked to formalize advisory roles for community members in planning efforts. Through the Pa'Lante Initiative, Groundwork Lawrence established a bilingual, standing Resident Task Force to help co-lead their land revitalization efforts. This fully compensated Task Force provides input on Groundwork Lawrence's efforts to create "resilience corridors," interconnected networks of parks, trails, and sidewalks that facilitate access and connection to essential destinations like healthy food,

parks and green spaces, community and health centers, and schools. Through this resident-led initiative, Groundwork Lawrence is working directly with residents to map how they get around the city and identifying barriers and challenges residents face as they navigate around the city. Using this data, they will pursue systems-level climate adaptation projects to improve how people experience their neighborhood. By prioritizing action across the City's park system, transforming access to community and health resources, and increasing community resilience through land reuse projects, the Pa'Lante Initiative ensures that climate adaptation efforts are accessible, equitable, and, most importantly, impactful.





Increasing Resilience to Climate Change & Environmental Crises

Climate-related extreme weather events like hurricanes, heatwaves, and wildfires are increasing in frequency and intensity. Low-income urban communities, particularly those with a legacy of housing discrimination and divestment, are often lacking in climate resilience infrastructure—like trees, parks, and rain gardens—and are left disproportionately vulnerable to the social, health, and economic impact of these crises. Groundwork Trusts are working with their communities to understand the root causes of this inequity, advocating for a more equitable distribution of resilience investments, and leading large-scale green infrastructure and land restoration efforts to increase neighborhood resilience to extreme heat and flooding. **Our goal: Reduce the day-to-day impacts of extreme heat and flooding in climate-vulnerable neighborhoods.**





Groundwork Rhode Island *Going Green To Address Urban Heat*

In Rhode Island, historically redlined neighborhoods have just 12.25% tree canopy cover compared to 35% tree coverage in neighboring communities. Inadequate tree cover coupled with disproportionately high rates of pavement and asphalt, exacerbates extreme heat

in neighborhoods with fewer resources to combat the heat. While redlining has been illegal for decades, these climate-vulnerable neighborhoods continue to be home to lower-income, immigrant, and Black and brown residents. In 2020-2021, Groundwork Rhode Island partnered with Rhode Island's state environmental agency and the national advocacy group,

American Forests (AF), to utilize AF's Tree Equity Score Analyzer (TESA) tool to identify areas with inequitable tree canopy coverage.

Using the information illuminated by TESA, Groundwork Rhode Island was selected to lead a community-centered initiative to equitably expand tree cover in the cities of Pawtucket and Central Falls in spring 2021. To spread the word, Green Team youth led outreach efforts and recruited eager businesses and homeowners to plant trees on their property in a campaign called Trees4Us. Instead of planting on a first come first serve basis, as was the norm for municipality-led tree planting programs, Groundwork Rhode Island used TESA results to prioritize planting and maintaining 190 trees in the most climate-vulnerable areas. The team recently received an additional grant to expand this project to more communities. Not only has this initiative sparked community interest and support, but it is also providing climate resilience infrastructure that mitigates the urban heat island effect through equitable tree canopy expansion.





Groundwork Hudson Valley *Creating Healthier Homes*



Due to its proximity to the Hudson River, socioeconomic factors, and dense urban landscape, Southwestern Yonkers, NY is especially vulnerable to climate change-related flooding and heatwaves.

The long-term effects of redlining and other discriminatory practices over the last 75 years have led to the placement of seniors, low-income families, and residents with disabilities in locations disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis, such as areas with limited tree cover, green spaces, and parks; near air-polluting manufacturing centers and a municipal waste treatment plant; and along truck routes. In 2020, Groundwork Hudson Valley began an 18-month process of evaluating climate risks in the city and found that the

most vulnerable residents are those living in Yonkers public housing facilities. In partnership with the Municipal Housing Authority for the City of Yonkers (MHACY), Groundwork Hudson Valley completed a study in 2021 assessing the feasibility and potential impact of green infrastructure on heat and flooding in public housing. Using study results and feedback from community outreach efforts, during which residents expressed that on many hot days the unshaded playgrounds and sitting areas kept them homebound, Groundwork has begun working with MHACY to retrofit four of the most climate-vulnerable properties with green infrastructure. They are training and employing residents and Green Team youth to work directly on these projects. When complete, these projects will convert 10 acres of impervious surfaces to natural biofilters, divert 250,000+ square feet of stormwater runoff, plant 100 trees, and restore 1,000+ feet of riverbank. These projects will decrease surface temperatures and improve flood management, benefiting residents' quality of life and addressing environmental inequities. In the coming years, GWHV plans to continue this effort across all public housing properties.





Groundwork New Orleans

Restorative Placemaking for Climate Justice



In the 1960s, Claiborne Avenue, once a hub of Black economic and cultural life in New Orleans, LA, was cleared to build a freeway, forcing the relocation of over 100 homes and businesses and removing vegetation. The freeway has increased pollution, extreme heat, and flooding in the area, which was already prone to frequent storms. In 2021, Groundwork New Orleans and their partners reclaimed a small portion of what was lost by transforming a vacant, muddy lot in the shadows of the freeway into a stormwater management park. Incorporating a bioswale, native plantings, and permeable paving, the new, beautiful green space is equipped to manage 35,000 gallons of stormwater to reduce flooding in the surrounding neighborhoods while decreasing freeway air pollution, providing community green space, and improving water quality. Future plans include additional stormwater management features, public seating, and fencing to create a stronger sense



of place and safety for community gatherings. This project is among the dozens of green infrastructure initiatives currently being organized and constructed by Groundwork New Orleans. Like this project, all green infrastructure work is being completed by participants in workforce development programs such as the Groundwork Ground Crew, LA Green Corps, and New Orleans Technical Education Provider Trade School. Groundwork New Orleans is employing youth to carry out these projects, opening opportunities to make a meaningful environmental change while providing the skills, experience, and certifications to pursue sustainability careers.



Groundwork Elizabeth *Youth Voices for a Climate Safe Future*



In Elizabeth, NJ, formerly redlined communities feel extreme heat and flooding more acutely than others due to a lack of green space and resilience infrastructure. In an effort to engage in effective justice-focused climate action, the Mayor, in partnership with Groundwork Elizabeth, relaunched the Mayor's Youth Council in 2021. The Council provides young residents with an opportunity to propose climate policies and implement local climate resilience solutions with the backing of the municipal government. Using available GIS data and information collected through their own community science and outreach projects, The Youth Council, a subset of Groundwork Elizabeth's Green Team youth program, has been leading a major tree-planting

initiative to address greenspace inequities. Over the past year, the Youth Council has sited and planted over 400 trees in formerly redlined neighborhoods, helping to mitigate the urban heat island effect and reduce flooding. Having been granted permission to site an unlimited number of trees, the Council is also planning a series of mini-forest plantings to cool air and increase stormwater absorption in highly flood-vulnerable neighborhoods, simultaneously reducing flooding and nurturing biodiversity. Young people are climate justice leaders in Elizabeth, advancing resilience-building policies and projects that improve the community's ability to manage and recover from climate disasters and prioritize future sustainability.



Creating Healthy Local Food Systems

One-third of residents in Groundwork communities are food insecure or reside in a food desert, but in some Groundwork communities, that number is over 90%. Through the implementation of innovative, urban agriculture programs, Groundwork Trusts are increasing access to fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods. Across the network, community gardens, urban farms, and farmers' markets are restoring the connection between community members and the land they call home. **Our goal: Reduce food insecurity in communities by producing, donating, and distributing thousands of pounds of food each year.**





Groundwork Southcoast

Building Connection Through Urban Gardening



In the zip code where much of the work of Groundwork Southcoast is located in New Bedford, MA, the approximately 43% of residents are considered food insecure. This is among the highest rates of food insecurity in the state. In response to this need, Groundwork Southcoast led the transformation of Riverside Park, a long-neglected brownfield site in the community, into the first fully fenced-in Urban Farm and Community Garden in New Bedford. The new community garden is maintained by Groundwork's Green Teamers and includes 150 adoptable raised beds for city residents to grow their own gardens. Their full spectrum of food access programming, anchored in their urban farm, enables community members to access healthy food in a variety of ways. They have adoptable community garden beds where gardeners can grow their own produce and they host weekly Pick Your Own Produce days for residents who can't adopt beds. Through the Sow and Grow program, Groundwork Southcoast distributes seeds kits for home gardens along and

youth-produced educational gardening videos help new gardeners to grow food at home. They also host a youth designed volunteer event, called Second Saturdays, where community members volunteer at the community garden and learn about all of Groundwork's programming. In 2021, Groundwork Southcoast distributed 1,326 lbs. of food from the Riverside Park community garden and another partner site – providing 2,688 meals to community members – and distributed 720 Sow & Grow kits. Growing food increases permeable surface, builds community, and the sense of connection to land stewardship. The Urban Farm is the center of Groundwork Southcoast's first "Resilience Zone," a neighborhood facing inequitable climate impacts. Multiple partners will co-locate resilience infrastructure in the zone to address resident-prioritized resiliency concerns. The Urban Farm and Community Garden is the heart of this effort and is surrounded by green infrastructure demonstration projects to address heat islands and flooding.



Groundwork Milwaukee *Creating Community Health Hubs*



The COVID-19 pandemic left many living in Milwaukee, WI, feeling isolated and in need of opportunities to connect with their neighbors. In response to residents' input, Groundwork Milwaukee piloted its Community Garden Health Hubs program in 2021, with the goal of providing fresh food to residents from gardens and directly engaging the community in creating places of healing, health, and connection. Through the operation of six Hubs throughout the city, the program delivers workshops on gardening and cooking skills, provides access to health resources and community health

workers, and workbooks with food-related activities in order to improve knowledge about food production and increase consumption of healthy foods. The Community Garden Health Hubs have restored community connections in the midst of pandemic isolation, improving mental health and wellness. Groundwork Milwaukee has supported residents to directly impact the prevalence of green spaces, improve access to fresh food, and the beautification of the city, while learning about and gaining access to health resources.



Groundwork Buffalo

Small Growth; Big Impact

Nearly all of the east side of Buffalo, NY, is considered a food desert, and most residents are considered food insecure. While corner markets exist, the selection of produce is limited, and travel to the nearest full-service supermarket can be a whole day affair. Groundwork Buffalo's small, but growing, urban agriculture efforts aim to address this gap for the more than 50,000 residents they serve by engaging young people from the community in the creation of community gardens and donating the produce for free to community members. After several years of building and maintaining a

small collection of garden beds, their program got a serious boost in 2021. Groundwork Buffalo established their first greenhouse and added eight new beds—bringing the number of food producing garden beds up to 29. This year, 250 families benefited from the 600+ lbs. produced by the young urban gardeners. Beyond providing much-needed healthy produce, the community gardens bring together a cross-generational community—restoring connection and building trust in a community with every reason to be distrustful of service programs.





Cultivating the Next Generation of Environmental Leaders

To sustainably tackle environmental injustices and build more resilient communities, we need an environmental and conservation sector that is reflective of our country's diversity. Groundwork cultivates a more diverse generation of environmental leaders by engaging young people aged 5-35 in age-appropriate environmental education and conservation activities. Each year, we employ more than 4,000 young people in our paid Green Team and workforce development programs. **Our goal: To ensure the next generation of environmental leadership reflects the diversity of Americans' experiences and backgrounds.**



Climate Resiliency Corps



Groundwork Ohio River Valley *Growing a Community of Leaders*



Groundwork's mission is not only about changing places, but also about building the capacity of residents to lead the reimagining of their community. Investing in the skills of our young people is core to that vision. In Cincinnati, OH, Groundwork Ohio River Valley has committed to rapidly scaling the number of young people engaged in their program and diversifying the types of experiences and skills youth build through their engagement. Their Green Team program prepares students for job readiness in the green industry with training in soft skills, natural resource management, energy efficiency, composting, recreation skills, urban agriculture, and green infrastructure. Green Teamers have an opportu-

nity to gain hands-on experience by completing trails, parks, and community spaces projects identified by Climate Safe Neighborhoods resident planning committees. In 2021, Groundwork ORV doubled the number of youth engaged in their Green Team program—growing from 70 to 141 high school youth! To keep track of the collective impact of their efforts and help youth see themselves as part of a larger movement, they developed a new Field Programs Dashboard and trained youth to update the dashboard themselves. The Dashboard showcases individual projects, celebrating individual contributions, but also captures collective impact, showing that small efforts can have a big effect.



Groundwork GroundCorps *National Foundation for Green Infrastructure Certification*



As the green industry continues to expand, youth from low-income communities and youth of color face multiple barriers to accessing living-wage careers in this sector despite growing up in communities with the greatest need for green infrastructure investments. Over the past several years, Groundwork Trusts have developed and expanded a GroundCorps workforce training program to provide for unemployed or underemployed young adults with skills, experience, and certifications. This year, under the leadership of Groundwork New Orleans, we partnered with the Center for Watershed Protection to adapt their nationally

recognized clean water certificate program to the Groundwork training model. In 2021, five Groundwork Trusts completed the train-the-trainer certification program and became qualified to provide this training to their Corps participants. Combined with the hands-on experience Corps participants receive through the implementation of green infrastructure projects, this certification provides participants with an additional, nationally recognized, marketable skill that helps increase long-term opportunities for living-wage employment.



Groundwork Northeast Revitalization Group

Youth-Led Green Design

Youth living in environmental justice communities often lack access to environmental education, job training for living-wage careers, and leadership opportunities. To address this gap, Groundwork Northeast Revitalization Group provides their Green Team—a high school-aged, paid youth group—with opportunities to lead every stage of land reuse and brownfield revitalization projects, from visioning to implementation to maintenance. In 2021, Green Team members developed a resident engagement toolkit to guide their efforts to identify priority restoration projects. Using the newly developed resource, they went door to door asking their neighbors to identify vacant lots or brownfield areas in need of revitalization and share their vision for how the sites could be put to better use.

With resident data in hand, the Green Team designed and completed three brownfield land reuse projects in 2021. First on the list was the transformation of a vacant lot in the historic Douglass/Sumner neighborhood into a community green space with native plants and a walking trail. The Green Team also collaborated with Turtle Hill Community Association residents to revitalize a vacant lot in their neighborhood. They reconfigured the space by adding solar-powered street lamps and a living, shady fence with 17 Arborvitae trees. Lastly, in the beautiful and historic Parkwood Park, the Team worked to clear Parkwood Stream of invasive species to allow native biodiversity to flourish. Through the transformation of neglected land into usable green spaces and participation in hands-on, community-driven work, youth are gaining the skills they need to become future social and environmental leaders.



Thank you!

Our work building healthier, greener, more resilient communities is only possible through the generosity of our partners and supporters. Thank you to everyone that continues to champion our shared vision of a more resilient future.



Groundwork USA

Groundwork USA is a national nonprofit that supports a network of place-based environmental organizations—Groundwork Trusts—working hand-in-hand with their communities to address the legacy of environmental injustice and equitably revitalize urban neighborhoods. We believe in collaboration and building community-based partnerships that empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.

The Groundwork Network

The Groundwork USA network was launched in the late 1990s through a partnership between the National Park Service and the US Environmental Protection Agency. Groundwork Trusts transform neglected land and waterways into community assets, increasing environmental, social, and economic well-being while building community capacity. Each Groundwork Trust is an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit entity with the ability to engage and influence that comes only with local roots. Our Trusts are invested in long-term, visionary community building, recognizing that true societal change comes with deep connection and long-term commitment.

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