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Volume 13

Issue 1 *The Science and Practice of Managing  
Forests in Cities*

Article 30

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May 2023

## Inclusive Community Engagement and "Cradle to Career" Strategies for Urban Forest Management

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### Recommended Citation

Strobo, Randy and Knox, Bennett (2023) "Inclusive Community Engagement and "Cradle to Career" Strategies for Urban Forest Management," *Cities and the Environment (CATE)*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 30.

DOI: 10.15365/cate.2023.130130

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cate/vol13/iss1/30>

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## **Inclusive Community Engagement and "Cradle to Career" Strategies for Urban Forest Management**

In the United States, the conservation movement's problematic historical relationship with racism, settler colonialism, and land use discrimination has led to distrust and apprehension towards environmental management and leadership. With its history of redlining and environmental racism, Louisville is no different. Providing job and management opportunities to historically marginalized people can provide economic opportunities and help heal the disconnect between healthy natural areas and healthy people. The City of Louisville has employed several long-term strategies to attract people in historically marginalized communities to job opportunities in Louisville's natural areas. However, those strategies have only been moderately successful to date. The City of Louisville continues to work with non-profit groups, economic development organizations, and youth job programs to develop strategies to fill employment gaps and provide leadership opportunities in urban forest management.

### **Keywords**

urban forest management, inclusive employment, job opportunities, cradle to career, conservation corps, representative mentorship, job pathways, hiring practices

## INTRODUCTION

The park and natural land landscape in Louisville is diverse. Louisville owns and manages one of the largest urban forests in the U.S., Jefferson Memorial Forest, and a large portion of Louisville's original park system was one of the last designed by the Olmsted firm. Many community groups and partners support these natural lands and Olmsted-designed parks, including Wilderness Louisville and the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy. Despite this wealth of park and natural area resources, the participation of Black and Brown leaders, employees, and community members in the management and decision-making involving these lands remains disproportionate to the populations they serve. Recognizing the historic disconnection between Black and Brown communities in Louisville, particularly west Louisville, and their access to nature as a result of historic redlining policies, racist environmental policies, and overall apprehension to government, Wilderness Louisville and their partners have taken intentional steps to connect communities to nature and diversify employment and leadership opportunities in natural areas. While some strides have been made, true systemic success has remained elusive.

## CONTEXT

In the early 2000s, the Natural Areas Division of Louisville Metro Parks recognized significant community engagement gaps with natural areas and parks involving Louisville's historically underserved communities, and was compelled to evolve and improve its historically inadequate community engagement model (i.e., largely non-existent outdoor programming and nature-related marketing outreach in underserved communities).

Based on a recognition that access to outdoor programming and nature-based recreation was not equitably distributed in the community, Louisville Metro Parks, with seed grant funding from the U.S. Forest Service, initiated its *Louisville is Engaging Children Outdoors* (Louisville ECHO) program in 2008. Louisville ECHO is the programmatic component of the West Louisville Outdoor Recreation Initiative (WLORI).<sup>1</sup> The WLORI envisions that all children and their families have hope for a better future through connection to nature and the outdoors and seeks to benefit residents of West Louisville and Portland by creating expanded opportunities for children and families to experience nature within their own neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> The WLORI is housed within the Natural Areas division of Louisville Metro Parks. Natural Areas administers and maintains Jefferson Memorial Forest, one of the largest municipally owned forests in the United States, as well as several smaller natural areas throughout the city of Louisville.

<b>West Louisville Outdoor Recreation Initiative Drivers and Knowledge Resources</b>	
<b>Drivers</b>	<b>Knowledge Resources</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognition of the lack of diversity in staff responsible for outdoor programming</li> <li>- Recognition of local inequity in the availability of outdoor recreation opportunities in Black neighborhoods in Louisville</li> <li>- Acknowledgement of local historical conditions that created inequalities (redlining, environmental racism, inequitable government funding)</li> <li>- Lack of inclusive representation in the marketing of the outdoors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research regarding the historical participation of Black and Brown people in the outdoors<sup>2</sup></li> <li>- Histories of racial discrimination locally and generally in the environmental arena<sup>3</sup></li> <li>- Community leaders and academics with experience in breaking down traditional barriers to accessing the outdoors</li> <li>- Identifying and Celebrating Black mentors in the outdoors<sup>4</sup></li> <li>- Creating Black and Brown-led organizations that promote Black and Brown people leading in the outdoors<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

Louisville ECHO began as a pilot program to increase the minimal and infrequent exposure of Black and low-income youth to nature. It was found that many of the youth that belonged to this demographic only experienced a single school field trip to Jefferson Memorial Forest or a nature preserve during their elementary school years. Louisville ECHO did so by providing five annual inquiry-based field trips for fourth-grade students from three low-income partner schools, involving programmed visits to local parks, natural spaces, regional nature preserves, and the Daniel Boone National Forest, including an overnight camping trip and free play opportunities. Over the next few years, the program expanded to five partner schools and included elements such as a summer teen camp and community events. In 2016, the program expanded to its current scope, serving youth from age three to 21. At that time, the city of Louisville was also selected as one of the first cohort cities participating in the Cities Connecting Children to Nature Initiative sponsored by the Children & Nature Network and the National League of Cities.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Finney, C. (2014) *Black Faces, White Spaces, Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>3</sup> For an interactive storymap on redlining in Louisville, see Poe, J. (2017, December 14). *Redlining Louisville: Racial Capitalism and Real Estate*. LOJIC. available at <https://www.lojic.org/redlining-louisville-news>.

<sup>4</sup> Louisville recently recognized Bud Dorsey, a local photographer for his dedication and contribution to the outdoors. See Smith, E. (2022, August 24). *Shawnee Park Has A New Hiking Trail, And A Mural In Honor Of 'Bud' Dorsey Jr.*. LEO Weekly. <https://www.leoweekly.com/2022/08/shawnee-park-has-a-new-hiking-trail-and-a-mural-in-honor-of-bud-dorsey-jr/>

<sup>5</sup> In Louisville, this led directly to the creation of the local chapter of the Outdoor Afro (<https://outdoorafro.org/>).

To improve Black and Brown outdoor participation, leadership, and job opportunities, Louisville ECHO created a “cradle to career” program - encouraging youth participation in programming, identifying frequent participants, and encouraging participants to stay involved with programming, job opportunities, and eventually leadership positions in parks and natural areas. As a result, staffing diversity within Louisville’s Natural Areas has improved but is still not proportionally representative of the community. In 2019, the first year self-identified demographic information for Natural Areas staff began to be tracked, 8% of staff (2 individuals) were Black, with zero from non-white racial groups. This increased to 14% in 2020 (4 individuals, including one within the land management department) before declining to 8% (back to two individuals) in 2021. Of these staff in 2021, none were at the supervisory level, and the individuals were within the outdoor recreation program area (none within the land management department). The Olmsted Conservancy staff data suggests age diversity, women, LGBTQIA, and some racial diversity consistent over the past 15 years. The Olmsted Conservancy continues to employ different strategies to solicit applications from a more diverse candidate pool.

Over the past decade, Louisville ECHO has continued to expand, offer programming, and has realized the critical need to also provide employment and leadership opportunities to members of the communities served. However, the results have not met expectations. While Louisville ECHO and its partner organizations have intentionally made this job pathway program successful, job and leadership numbers are still not concurrent with community demographics or needs.

## **GOALS**

Louisville identified several goals to address the community engagement gaps with natural areas and parks in Louisville's historically underserved communities. First, Louisville needs to provide access to a safe and healthy environment that increases physical activity, reduces stress, and leads to healthier lives through outdoor recreation, environmental education, and stewardship. Second, Louisville needs to provide better social cohesion and connection to parks and natural areas through robust community engagement centered around engaging youth and family outdoor programming. Third, Louisville must improve academic and career path connections to the outdoors and natural areas. Fourth, Louisville must improve the long-term, full-time employment opportunities in the outdoors and natural areas for members of underserved communities (south and west ends of Louisville).

## **APPROACH**

Louisville has implemented several complementary approaches to advance these goals. One approach has been to move beyond Louisville’s historic community engagement model (i.e., invitation to regularly scheduled public meetings at standard prescribed times) to incorporate public outreach and input into community events and programming. Given the inequitable nature of programming around outdoor education and recreation within Louisville metro and adjacent organizations, applying the principle of “experiential” public engagement has been crucial. This mirrors the approach of experiential learning that is core to the field of outdoor education, whereby feedback is provided through actual engagement in outdoor learning, recreation, and stewardship. This approach was developed organically by local parks staff and reflected

recommendations included in the National Recreation and Parks Association's Community Engagement Guide. This focus has allowed Louisville to effectively build community support and trust as it moves through the planning and implementation phases and positions it for sustainability. Essential elements include the community engagement process; a focus on creating nearby nature and capacity at the neighborhood level; and agency ownership and empowerment.

A second approach has been to utilize the Louisville ECHO program to increase participation in physical and outdoor activities that connect to nature, improving physical and mental health and increasing social cohesion. This is being done in three phases: (1) plan for a nature-based educational and recreational environment for West Louisville residents by addressing root causes of poor health outcomes; (2) build community relationships and capacity for children and families to engage in and embrace the outdoors; and (3) implement systemic environmental changes by creating outdoor infrastructure in West Louisville, promoting health equity leading to healthier residents and building social cohesion. Career pathways are a large component of this, as they are a key social determinant of health.

Louisville ECHO's "cradle to career" outdoor programming was developed to encourage access to nature through community engagement in natural areas, leading to youth part-time and summer employment and then to long-term adult part-time and full-time positions. Louisville has also funded major infrastructure requirements, including office space and equipment, in communities where these programs are being offered. Louisville ECHO has continued to expand community outreach by creating an outreach specialist position and a participant data process designed to better market opportunities within the communities served and connect youth to Louisville ECHO programming. This allowed programming capacity to be tailored and increased. Influenced by this results-based accountability model, this strategy flows from a community-based asset inventory to partner development. This approach led to formal strategies for increasing out-of-school time programming. Out-of-school time programming has improved community outreach, provided early childhood and adolescent after-school outdoor recreation, allowed partnership with youth service providers, and created a summer job training and opportunity component. In addition, resident community councils were formed and now meet regularly to guide these initiatives, including the job training component. Through WLORI and the Louisville ECHO program, staff has developed relationships to collaborate among community groups, schools, its members, and other government departments and agencies to create "cradle to career" programming and other opportunities to engage in the outdoors.

The collection and evaluation of program data is a critical approach to creating "cradle to career" programming. Since Louisville ECHO-related programming began in 2008, thousands of youth have been engaged in Louisville ECHO activities. Louisville ECHO staff is focused on achievable and measurable outcomes related to increasing participation by youth and their all-important parents and caregivers. Louisville ECHO staff track participants via rosters at each program activity. Through sustained community outreach, Louisville ECHO staff encourages caregivers to sign their children up to be members of Louisville ECHO (i.e., "ECHO Kids") by providing their contact information and giving permission for their children to be tracked in Louisville Metro Parks' reservation system known as RecTrac. For ECHO Kids, the hours spent annually participating in Louisville ECHO activities are tracked, and communications are made

to parents and caregivers about Louisville ECHO-related events and opportunities. This allows Louisville ECHO staff to identify youth experiencing a high “dosage” of time participating in nature through Louisville ECHO and parents who are demonstrating high engagement. These youth may be open to further engagement, such as seasonal employment as a Louisville ECHO counselor or volunteer. Conversely, youth receiving a relatively lower dosage offers the opportunity to examine program effectiveness.

## RESOURCES

Louisville ECHO Program

<https://www.wildernesslouisville.org/programs/louisville-echo/>

West Louisville Outdoor Recreation Initiative (WLORI)

<https://www.wildernesslouisville.org/initiatives/west-louisville-outdoor-recreation-initiative/>

National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)

Workforce Development Resources

<https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/best-practice-resources/workforce-development-resources/>

NRPA Monthly Magazine: Louisville ECHO: A West Louisville Outdoor Recreation Initiative

<https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2019/april/louisville-echo-a-west-louisville-outdoor-recreation-initiative/>

Creating Opportunities for Underserved Youth in Louisville

<https://www.nrpa.org/blog/creating-opportunities-for-underserved-youth-in-louisville-episode-084/>

Children & Nature Network: Creating Systems Level Change in Cities: A Toolkit

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/creating-systems-level-change-in-cities-a-toolkit/>

National League of Cities (NLC): Municipal Action Guide: Cities Connecting Children to Nature

<https://www.nlc.org/resource/municipal-action-guide-cities-connecting-children-to-nature/>

## KEY RESULTS

While making some strides, the efforts to hire and retain Black and Brown employees to work in Louisville’s parks and natural areas or to recruit, retain, and/or promote Black and Brown employees and community members into leadership positions have not been successful.

On the positive side, resident community council members have moved into leadership positions. For example, Wilderness Louisville, the “friends” or “conservancy” organization that supports Jefferson Memorial Forest and other natural areas and Louisville ECHO, has added several board

members from community councils. Wilderness Louisville has been instrumental in promoting infrastructure projects and programming and prioritizing and fundraising for those projects. Other examples include concerned citizens recruited to become leaders in WLORI and other adjacent organizations after participating in public meetings to discuss park and natural area restoration initiatives. Black representation on Wilderness Louisville's Board of Directors has increased from 9% in 2011 to 38% in 2022, and of the organization's two contracted staff, one, its development coordinator, is a Black female.

Louisville ECHO's participant data tracking system, launched in 2019 to improve community engagement and marketing of opportunities to communities served, while significantly improved, remains a work in progress. The COVID pandemic caused many disruptions in the program. Wilderness Louisville has taken advantage of other ways to improve the tracking system as the world continues to adjust. Wilderness Louisville and its partner organizations continue to support the theory of change behind the initiative — constant and sustained contact with nature by underserved youth; intentional efforts to address racial inequities associated with outdoor access; and systems change related to recruiting and hiring practices.

Problems persist with Black and Brown staff turnover and a lack of Black and Brown employees in supervisory positions. The City of Louisville's lack of equity planning and inefficient hiring practices have made it difficult to timely hire and retain staff. Many Metro Louisville Government agencies, including the Parks Department, lack racial equity plans, specifically those that outline departmental racial inequities and outline recommendations for addressing them. However, agencies have been required to provide employees with racial equity training. This type of systematic change is difficult to drive from the sub-departmental level. Wilderness Louisville, as the primary advocate for Louisville Metro Parks Natural Areas Division and the Louisville ECHO program, continues to advocate for this system change and will seek to disseminate Louisville ECHO sustainability and policy plans that are generated at the end of 2022 as part of the aforementioned Social Determinants of Health grant.

While Louisville ECHO's goals to improve outdoor access by improving recruiting and hiring practices for members of underserved communities have not been met, Louisville ECHO staff and their partners have laid a foundation to improve those measures.