

Impact100 Metro Denver 2022 Grantee

Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC)

Project: Healthy Communities Projects

Impact100 2022 Grant Priority Area: Environmental Conservation

Organization information: Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado's (VOC) mission is to motivate and enable people to become active stewards of Colorado's natural resources. As the state's leading stewardship nonprofit, we take bold action and set high standards for ethical and equitable programming - for the good of people and the planet - serving as an example and resource for other outdoor stewardship organizations.

For 37 years, Colorado residents and the public servants who manage the state's parks, open spaces and waterways have relied on VOC to address some of our most pressing outdoor stewardship needs. Since our founding, VOC has engaged more than 128,000 children and adults in caring for Colorado's outdoors – a total donated labor value of more than \$26 million.

Core Activities:

- **Connecting People and Nature** – Our hallmark Boots-on-the-Ground program engages volunteers through projects at parks and natural areas such as recreational trail maintenance, invasive weed mitigation, and park revitalization. Annually we involve 4,500 adult, youth, and corporate volunteers on 90+ hands-on projects. Through our Affinity Partnership Program (APP), we actively engage populations underrepresented in outdoor stewardship, including those in the BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and disability communities. Through our Healthy Community Projects (HCP), we promote community health and resilience in urban neighborhoods that face environmental inequities.
- **Leadership Development** – Our Outdoor Stewardship Institute (OSI) builds leadership and technical skills for volunteers and land agency staff. Our intensive Cairn Youth Program engages high school students in outdoor activities, education, and stewardship projects across the Front Range. Our Stepping Up Stewardship Toolkit offers free-to-download resources to increase capacity and programmatic expertise at outdoor stewardship groups and land agencies throughout the state.
- **Education** – Through our Naturally United™ program, we educate the public about responsible recreation and advocate for full integration and funding for volunteer stewardship of natural areas.

Need for Project: Communities of color and those whose residents have lower-than-average incomes often suffer negative effects of environmental and public policies to the detriment of their health. Air pollution, poor water quality, heat islands, a scarcity of fresh fruit and vegetables, and lack of green space or access to parks can all lead to, or exacerbate, disparate health outcomes. For example, under-resourced neighborhoods with poor air quality see higher asthma rates than wealthier areas.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) posits that everyone should live within a 10-minute walk of a “quality” public park. Such access allows kids to play and exercise outdoors and promotes neighborhood safety, mental health, and well-being. While Denver has a wonderful park system, the best and largest parks are in or near the whiter and wealthier neighborhoods. Historical practices of redlining and exclusionary zoning near large parks created barriers for families of color to live near those natural amenities. Neighborhoods that score lowest on Denver’s Park Equity Index - Globeville, Elyria-Swansea, Cole, Clayton, and Northeast Park Hill - are also food deserts with limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables

Outdoor stewardship experiences are also harder to come by in marginalized neighborhoods. For people with the time and resources to travel to the mountains for a full-day, weekend, or multi-day trail project, there are lots of opportunities to participate. With our HCP, we shape our offerings so that people with higher barriers to participation can experience how meaningful (and fun!) it is to volunteer outside with friends, family members, and neighbors. VOC’s work addresses environmental and health inequities by offering the tools and experience for residents to act on issues that affect them directly.

Grant Request: VOC seeks support from Impact100 to fully launch our pilot Healthy Community Projects (HCP) into a sustainable program with lasting impacts. The HCP represents a significant shift in VOC’s programming and is designed to address the entwined issues of environmental and public health in urban areas. As climate change, pollution, pollinator collapse, and food insecurity impacts increase, we must not wait to implement local solutions that involve members of the communities most affected by these issues. VOC operates at the intersection of people and nature, and the time is now to fully include urban-dwellers and nearby nature in this equation.

With a major expansion of the HCP we will make a positive, meaningful, and measurable impact on low-income and underserved communities in the seven-county Denver metro area that have suffered environmental inequities and subsequent impacts due to discriminatory public policies. This work will not only address historical inequities, but also help communities adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change, improve air and water quality, provide access to nearby nature, and develop healthy urban habitats for wildlife and pollinators. Healthy Community Projects will actively engage residents of all ages to improve the sustainability and resilience of their communities impacted by:

- air and water pollution resulting from proximity to industrial businesses and highways;
- lack of a sufficient tree canopy and heat island effect;
- limited access to well-maintained parks and natural areas in which to safely play and exercise; and
- limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables (food deserts.)

In 2021, we invested time and financial resources into identifying target communities where VOC could make a meaningful difference. We began developing partnerships with reputable community groups who strongly advocate for, and support the needs of, their residents. Most importantly, we integrated strong volunteer leader training, community capacity-building, and cultural competency (for VOC staff and current volunteers) into our pilot year.

VOC's pilot Healthy Community Projects included working with community partners to plant, maintain and harvest community donation gardens to address the issue of food insecurity; plant native trees and shrubs along the Sand Creek Regional Greenway to improve the ecological integrity and biodiversity in an industrial waterway; remove invasive species along the High Line Canal to mitigate negative health impacts such as pollen and toxicity from these plants; and install multiple schoolyard pollinator habitats in Denver's Westwood neighborhood.

VOC will leverage support from Impact100 with that of other foundations, businesses, individual donors, and our own endowment and investments to achieve these goals:

- Make a substantial investment into expanding this new program to increase our impact in vulnerable metro Denver neighborhoods – including local recruiting, training, community capacity-building, partnership development and robust tracking and evaluation.
- Begin the neighborhood assessment and planning process needed to grow the program's footprint to include the greater seven-county metro region. In 2022, we will host several projects in these areas prior to implementing a full-fledged program across metro Denver in 2023.
- Lay the foundation for neighborhoods to implement and sustain HCP projects independent of VOC.

We anticipate that our work in 2022 and 2023 will provide the foundation for a decade or more of public and environmental health-related projects in the greater Denver area. In the long-term, our goal is to grow our Healthy Communities Program to comprise 50% of our overall annual project scope.

Project Impact Evaluation: In the second half of 2022, we will:

- Host 8 projects in partnership with 5-7 local groups and engage 150 adults, youth, and children as volunteers and leaders, 20% of whom will be local residents (living within 2-3 miles of the project). Sample projects include: maintaining and harvesting 6 community donation gardens; planting 2 urban pollinator habitats; undertaking ecological restoration/water quality projects; improving a neglected urban park; and planting trees and providing flood management in a greenway corridor.
- Of the 150 volunteers engaged on these projects, 10% – 15% will participate in VOC's Outdoor Stewardship Institute (OSI) and/or receive specialized training in technical, leadership, or project management skills. Resident volunteers will be trained as project planners and managers, thereby increasing capacity, fostering long-term project success, and reducing the community's reliance on VOC.
- Increase the cultural competency of VOC's volunteers, leaders, and staff.
- Increase engagement of underrepresented groups such as the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities.
- By 2023, VOC will expand our Healthy Community Projects into the Healthy Communities Program and:
 - Double the number of projects offered across Denver Metro that improve human and environmental health in target underserved communities.
 - Develop 6-9 additional local partnerships to identify and prioritize community needs, assist with volunteer recruitment, and serve as the hub for community capacity building efforts.

- Create and implement robust evaluation and tracking mechanisms to understand challenges and enhance program offerings.
- Conduct customized leadership and technical trainings to local residents to build long-term capacity.