

Environmental Empowerment in Historically-Excluded Communities in the Washington, DC Region

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Replication



Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society)

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October 21, 2022



nature forward

Connecting people and nature in the Capital Region

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Acknowledgements

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This case study has been prepared for the Chesapeake Bay Trust and Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection as part of CBT Grant #18967 with the grant objective “Synthesize and present a case study of lessons learned and a replicable model for authentic community engagement in watershed education.” Award funding was provided through the Montgomery County Water Quality Protection Fund.



Thank you to our partners for doing this work with us: In Maryland: Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research (CHEER), Montgomery Parks, Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, Friends of Sligo Creek, Linkages to Learning Program at Rolling Terrace Elementary School, Defensores de la Cuenca. In Virginia: United Community, Good Shepherd Housing, Colchester Towne, Creekside Village. In DC: Friends of Oxon Run, The Green Scheme, DC Greens. We wish to particularly honor Vanesa Pinto, Carla Claire, Lisa Büttner, Kit Gage, Cecilia Zavaleta, Valeria Espinoza, Ana Arriaza, Ruth Carbonell, Ronnie Webb, Lauren Parker, Jaren Hill-Lockridge, Melanie Guerrero, Brenda Richardson, Absalom Jordan, Jr., Jerome Nesbitt, TiMisha Harrell, Yolanda Earl-Thompson, Tamara Cobbs, Amanda James (AJ), and Elizabeth Villatoro de Chavez. Other organizations and individuals have been with us on this journey too, and we thank them all.

Thank you to Nature Forward staff and volunteers past and present, particularly Diane Cameron, Monica Billger, and Ari Eisenstadt, for laying the groundwork for us.

Thank you to our funders for making this work possible over the years: Chesapeake Bay Trust, Community Foundation for Northern Virginia, Prince Charitable Trusts, Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, Raines Family Fund, Wallace Genetic Foundation, Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, District of Columbia Department of Energy and Environment, Virginia Environmental Endowment, and generous individual donors who wish to remain anonymous.

"We tend to forget that in our habitat everything is interconnected. We all are part of a bigger system. Therefore, when we help a community to thrive, we all win. In the Xhosa culture, they have a word that describes exactly.

UBUNTU means 'I am because we are.'"

*— Vanesa Pinto, Empowerment and Leadership Development Programs
Coordinator, Community Health and Empowerment through Education and
Research (CHEER)*

Executive Summary

Nature Forward has developed multiple partnerships throughout the Washington, DC region with both watershed groups and social-service and community organizations excited to bring environmental programming to their communities (mostly comprised of people of color, in low to moderate income neighborhoods). This case study shares what we have learned through partnerships in three communities – how to plan, approach, and fund a new partnership; how to develop programming that meets the community's specific interests and needs; and how to build on relationships and trust to deepen skill-building that empowers community members to engage in environmental decision-making around redevelopment, transit planning, stream restoration, park renovations, and more. We share insights, stories, and lessons learned that will be useful for other organizations, grant funders, or environmental agencies interested in replicating or funding similar projects.

Introduction

Beginning in 2008, Nature Forward (formerly known as Audubon Naturalist Society), a historically white, upper-middle-class organization headquartered in Chevy Chase, Maryland since 1969, made a conscious decision to refocus our mission to work only within the greater Washington, DC region, and update our vision to explicitly engage wider and more diverse audiences.¹ Over time, those renewed directives shaped the organization's development to include: extensive public school educational partnerships; the development of new signature programming such as our Taking Nature Black® and Naturally Latinos® conferences and related activities; bilingual family and afterschool programming; a 2020 redefinition of our Conservation priorities to focus on Human Health & Access to Nature, Biodiversity & Habitats, Climate Crisis, and Sustainable Land Use; and since 2017, community outreach and engagement projects that partner with local communities of color often excluded from mainstream environmental education and access to environmental decision-making. Our work with three such communities is the focus of this report.



Community Partnership Goals and Objectives: Enjoy > Learn > Protect

Since 2015, Nature Forward's Conservation Department has begun developing programming which aims to empower residents who have historically been excluded from safe access to nature and control over community planning. We use an "Enjoy > Learn > Protect" model. We help residents enjoy nature and gain the confidence to use their knowledge, skills, and love of nature to take action to improve the health of their local streams, parks, and the natural world around them. Much of our programming has been grounded in our historic expertise in water quality and stormwater management, including our community (citizen) science water quality monitoring program that has been running continuously since 1993. We believe that through our programming and partnerships, residents of all ages can become appreciative, frequent visitors to nature in their neighborhoods. Those who may have stayed away from their local stream or parks due to safety concerns, unfamiliarity, or other demands on their time, can connect to local nature through stream walks and other rewarding outdoor activities. As people feel confident entering their natural spaces, they learn more about those spaces and how important and threatened they are, which motivates residents to take action to protect nature in their neighborhood.

Our community outreach programming is strongly grounded in individual and community health goals as well. Individuals and families who use local streams and parks tend to increase their time outdoors, resulting in positive physical and mental health benefits that im-

¹ Board Source video: Nature Forward. Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHxfv/lhbn4>.

pact cardiovascular and respiratory health, and result in stress reduction and improved mood. **Watershed health equals community health.** A safe and healthy community contains many trees, safe places to recreate in nature, minimal trash and litter, and is protected from flooding and excessive heat.

The long-term goal of these projects is to equip historically -excluded residents with the skills they need to take an active, leadership role in improving their local natural and built environments (streams, parks and communities). By working with neighbors, elected officials, agency decision makers, and local business and nonprofit leaders, residents hone their skills and become empowered to ensure that local watersheds are improved over time and become safe community recreational resources.



Long Branch, MD residents provide feedback to Montgomery County Parks staff about the proposed renovation of their local Long Branch-Garland Neighborhood Park. This outdoor, interpreted activity was facilitated by Nature Forward and primary project partner CHEER as part of our *Sí Se Puede* project. Photo credit Nature Forward, November 2021.

Our three community-based projects have been a learning experience and the lessons learned are described in this report. As we have worked with these communities over several years, we progressed through the Enjoy and Learn stages and are now moving into the **Protect** stage of our “**Enjoy > Learn > Protect**” ladder of engagement model. We have been deeply encouraged and inspired by our experiences so far. We believe there is much to be gained for local residents and the environment through these types of projects and partnerships.

The Big IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility)

Nature Forward began expanding our community-based outreach work at the same time we formally adopted goals for **Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility** (IDEA) into our 5-year strategic plan in 2017. We made deliberate efforts to reach two specific audiences in greater depth: African-American and Latine adults and families. Building on the new successes of our Taking Nature Black® and Naturally Latinos® conferences which launched in 2016 and 2017 respectively, we began to re-



Audubon Estates resident Carla Claire (left) puts on waders and prepares to clean up Little Hunting Creek. Carla is still a community leader and now is a partner with us in designing the continuation of Waterkeepers of Little Hunting Creek project. Photo credit Nature Forward, 2016.

cruit, hire, and retain more staff of color to best serve these new audiences. We learned from professional trainers about communication styles, implicit biases, and systemic racism. We developed an internal discussion and training series on a wide variety of staff-selected topics around IDEA. We rolled out an IDEA training program to all our volunteers, many of whom help execute public programming. As we approached new communities, we learned to be explicit about differences in race, class, and culture, and not to be afraid of naming and discussing differences in the interest of building a shared understanding of the situation and the opportunities we could create together.

Most importantly, we practiced **listening to and learning from** our new partners and not assuming that our staff, even if they had race or class in common with our new communities, knew what each community would want or how ideas would best resonate with residents.

“Some apartment complexes are in the worst state/condition possible causing psychological trauma to residents...nature activities like the ones we provided, can provide a healing outlet to these low-income families, but they are not aware of these opportunities.”

-Focus Group participant, What Lives in Long Branch? Project, 2019

Planning the Work

How we became involved in each of the three communities

Below is a synopsis of how we became involved in each of the three communities in which we have been doing multi-year community engagement with local partners:

- Little Hunting Creek / Route 1 Corridor in Fairfax County, VA
- The Long Branch Neighborhood in Montgomery County, MD
- Oxon Run Park in Washington, DC

Little Hunting Creek / Route 1 Corridor in Fairfax County, VA

In 2015, Nature Forward began commenting on a new comprehensive plan amendment in Fairfax County, the EMBARK Richmond Highway Plan Amendment² for re-envisioning the Route 1 Corridor from Huntington to Fort Belvoir. Our initial motivation for reviewing the plan was the environmental benefits that it could bring. We wanted to ensure that redevelopment along the aging commercial real estate of the corridor (82% developed with 25% impervious land cover), included modern stormwater management standards and removed acres of underutilized pavement from outdated strip malls and old parking lots that send dirty, untreated stormwater into small tributaries of the Potomac River, such as Cameron Run, Little Hunting Creek, and Dogue Creek. Whereas Resource Protection Areas (RPAs) are protected areas of 100' on each side of a stream, currently, the majority of stream buffers in this area are only about 25' wide as development occurred here prior to RPA protec-

² [Embark Richmond Highway - Plan Amendment 2015-IV-MV1; Adopted Amendment 2017-10 & 2017 P-02 | Planning Development \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](#)



Location of Route 1 Corridor project. Clockwise from top-left: locator map in the Washington, DC region. Relationship of Little Hunting Creek watershed, target neighborhoods, and Route 1 Redevelopment corridor. Areas of high socio-economic need in Fairfax County. Aerial view of the target outreach neighborhoods showing relationship to Little Hunting Creek, Huntley Meadows Park, and the Route 1 Corridor. Also visible are some of the enormous parking lots along the strip malls and big-box stores next to Route 1.

tions were put in place. 15% of stream habitats are ranked as “Very Poor” quality, 58% Poor, and 27% Fair.

The plan would provide another environmentally beneficial component: the development of a Bus Rapid Transit route to the Yellow Line Metro at Huntington, providing better transit access to communities south of Huntington that include a high proportion of non-drivers and face a high risk of pedestrian injury and death.

As we began attending community meetings and working with other advocates and leaders on the redevelopment plan, we came to understand potential risks of redevelopment for low-income communities. The aging buildings of the current corridor hold some of the last remaining non-subsidized, affordable housing in wealthy Fairfax County for low-income non-white communities. Those communities include historic Gum Springs, founded by descendants of enslaved people freed from George and Martha Washington’s Mount Vernon Estate, the highly diverse tenants of Creekside and Colchester affordable housing communities, and the largely Latino communities of mobile-home residents in Audubon Estates and Harmony Place. Residents in these communities are concerned about rising property values

leading to displacement plus community-specific concerns such as safety, crosswalks, traffic signals, and access to neighborhoods abutting the corridor.

This section of Fairfax County is one of its most diverse, lowest-income, and has some of the greatest health disparities.³ It also includes the biggest natural park in the Fairfax County Parks Authority – Huntley Meadows Park. Streams wind through Route 1 neighborhoods to reach the beautiful Potomac River along the protected George Washington Memorial Parkway corridor and Dyke Marsh wildlife preserve. Many lower-income community members do not have convenient ways to access these beautiful locations. For example, Little Hunting Creek flows through these communities, but there is little to no public access to the stream or its forested buffers for nearby neighbors. Official access to Huntley Meadows Park is only by car (and more than a mile away from the corridor itself), despite the fact that the back of the Park actually borders some of the communities described above.



Nature Forward and Coalition for Smarter Growth leading a watershed and traffic walk along the Route 1 Corridor during the EMBARK planning process. Photo credit Nature Forward, 2018.

Nature Forward began partnering with community leaders in organizations such as United Community and the county-led Opportunity Neighborhood program to deliver environmental education programming such as water quality monitoring activities with our Creek Critters® app, nature walks, and cleanups in individual neighborhoods. Over time, this program came to be called “**Water Keepers of Little Hunting Creek**” and we received our first dedicated funding for it from the Community Foundation of Northern Virginia, supplemented by longtime family foundation funders. Follow-on funding has come from the Virginia Environmental Endowment.

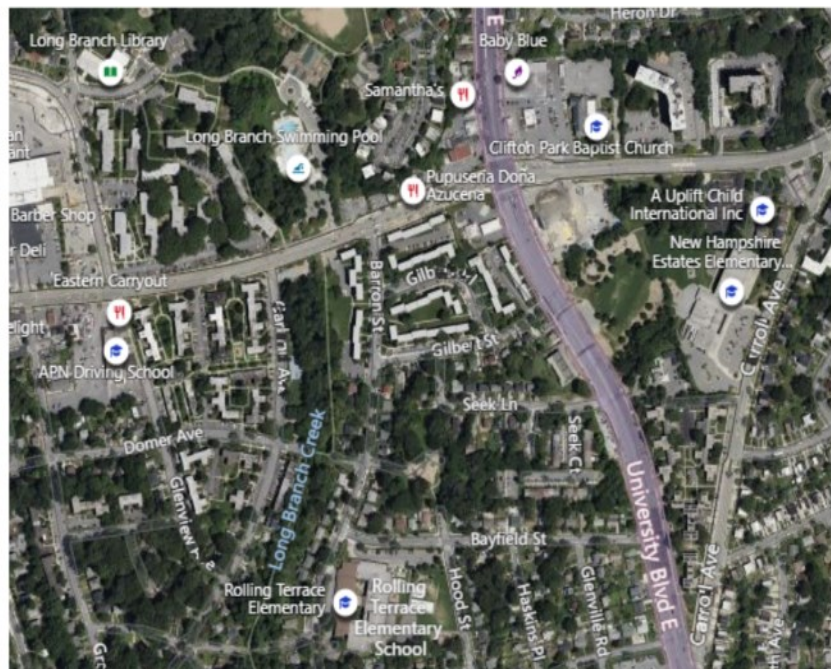
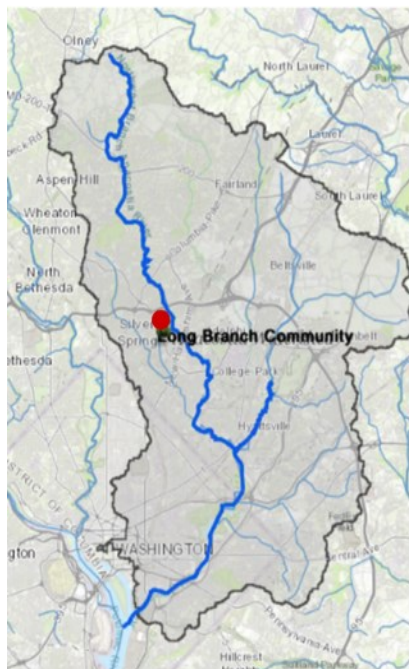
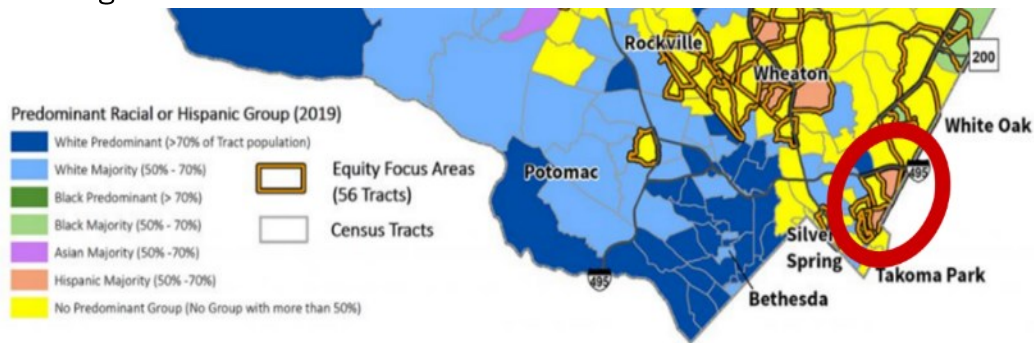
Concurrent with our Water Keepers of Little Hunting Creek work, we partnered with environmental and planning organizations to create a coalition called [Fairfax Healthy Communities](#), with the vision of “a Fairfax County where people can live, work, and play in connected communities that are healthy, sustainable, and inclusive.” Over time, these two initiatives had opportunities to influence one another. When Gum Springs community leaders reached out to share concerns about specific issues with the EMBARK plan (the placement of a traffic light and safety concerns regarding a bicycle underpass), Nature Forward brought these concerns to Fairfax Healthy Communities seeking support for Gum Springs’ priorities in the planning process. When the South County Task Force and Fairfax NAACP raised concerns about maintaining affordable housing and notifying renters of proposed zoning changes, Nature Forward supported these calls and presented these concerns in our outreach activities to residents of such renter communities.

³ <http://www.livehealthyfairfax.org/index.php?module=indicators&controller=index&action=socionneeds>

We changed our advocacy priorities in response to what we learned from communities. We actively listened while delivering fun activities and information about nature and the environment that families and community leaders enjoyed. These relationships strengthened and grew and inspired us to get more deeply involved in communities elsewhere in the Washington, DC region.

Long Branch Neighborhood, Montgomery County, MD

The first place we looked to replicate our Northern Virginia learning and success was in Long Branch, MD. This unincorporated community sits northeast of Takoma Park and on the eastern edge of Montgomery County. It has been home to immigrants since the 1980s and is well-known for its international supermarkets and Central American restaurants. This neighborhood is comprised of denser housing than most other areas of Montgomery County. Large apartment blocks provide affordable residences close to bus routes for new immigrants. The neighborhood's close proximity to Washington, DC, makes it a good place for newcomers to get an economic foothold.



Location of Long Branch Project. Clockwise from the top: Location of Long Branch, Silver Spring, MD in red circle in relationship to Montgomery County, MD map highlighting Equity Focus Areas and Predominant Race or Hispanic Origin (M-NCPPC); Aerial image map of Long Branch neighborhood, showing elementary schools, Swimming Pool (co-located with Community Center), and Library; Map showing the location of Long Branch Creek and community within the Anacostia River watershed.

CASA de Maryland operates a service center in the neighborhood to help new residents with immigration issues and provide after school/summer youth programs. Montgomery County's strong public school system provides additional community support, with a YMCA-led *Linkages to Learning* program (headquartered at nearby Rolling Terrace Elementary School) that connects families to needed resources. African and Central American immigrants mingle throughout the school system, housing, parks, the Long Branch Community Center, library, and pool.

Like the Route 1 Corridor, the Long Branch community is undergoing change. It will soon host two new light rail stations for the Purple Line, an above-ground east-west transit project designed to connect lower-income communities on the east side of Maryland's DC suburbs with job centers on the west side. While Long Branch community members may benefit from the new Purple Line, they are already experiencing rent increases and gentrification pressure from newer residents and businesses who hope to locate close to transit. The long-delayed Purple Line construction process has damaged local businesses that have lost parking and street access for years. Also like the Route 1 Corridor, the Long Branch neighborhood has several stream valley parks and natural areas. The community is named after Long Branch the stream that flows right through the heart of the neighborhood through a scrubby forest, past the library and community center, and then winds through homes with a paved accessible multiuse path for residents to use. Long Branch is a tributary of Sligo Creek that drains into the Anacostia River. Sligo Creek boasts one of the most active volunteer-led watershed groups in the region, Friends of Sligo Creek.

For years, residents have had mixed feelings about accessing the stream valley park and its pathways. Parents told *Linkages to Learning* staff that they are interested in having safe places for adolescent children to play basketball, soccer, or



Unightly trash along the banks of Long Branch. All three of our primary communities deal with significant litter problems. Little Hunting Creek, for example, has the designation of "trashiest stream in Fairfax County." Photo credit Lisa Büttner.

skateboard independently nearby. Parents prefer outdoor play for their kids as opposed to trips to the mall (which require money) or to being attracted to gang activity. But parents remain unsure if the stream valley park is safe for their families. People without homes have lived under some of the stream crossing bridges and in the woods near the stream. Residents and commuters have left unsightly litter, including broken bottles, old mattresses, and shopping carts in the stream. Some parts of the trail lack nighttime lighting, making them feel unsafe after dark. Unfiltered stormwater outfalls occasionally discharge water with odd colors into the stream, making residents unsure if the stream is safe to touch or a safe place in which their children can play.

Nature Forward began to work in Long Branch because our geographic and demographic research identified it as having similar opportunities and risks as the Route 1 Corridor communities. In addition, our Environmental Education department had already made connections in the neighborhood. Our staff established relationships with teachers and administrators at Rolling Terrace Elementary School and led bilingual family nature walks at a Montgomery Housing Partnership affordable housing complex nearby.

We worked through these initial contacts and eventually connected with a neighborhood group called CHEER (Community Health through Education, Empowerment, and Research). We worked with CHEER to submit grant applications to the Chesapeake Bay Trust to fund environmental education engagement and outreach programming in the neighborhood. The first year of the project was called “**What Lives in Long Branch? / ¿Que vive en Long Branch?**”. Over time, the outreach program developed into an environmental leadership training program and was renamed “**¡Sí Se Puede! (Yes We Can!)**” Learn more about the evolution of the Sí Se Puede Project on page 25.

Oxon Run Park, Washington, DC

With early successes in Virginia and Maryland a mission to serve residents throughout the DC Metro region, we actively sought a DC location to replicate this outreach model. In 2019, we hired a dedicated DC Conservation Advocate to develop partnerships and explore issues of importance to communities east of the Anacostia River in majority-Black Wards 7 and 8. Topics included Anacostia River cleanups, a pedestrian bridge crossing proposal at the National Arboretum/Kenilworth area, toxic remediation and redevelopment at Poplar Point, accessibility and nature protection issues at Oxon Run Park, and the climate and health impacts of methane gas leaks. As Nature Forward built connections, we became a dues-paying member of the Anacostia Park and Communities Collaborative (APACC) and the Anacostia Coordinating Council (ACC) and grew our network of partners active in these and other issues.

We knew we wanted to open a community-based program in Ward 7 or 8, but needed a location and a partner deeply embedded in the community. We reached out to Ronnie Webb, Executive Director of The Green Scheme, a DC-based organization focused on nutrition, access to healthy food, and environmental education for communities of color. Nature Forward’s Director of Conservation, Eliza Cava, had a personal relationship with Ronnie going back to 2013 when they were co-fellows in the Washington DC Environmental Leadership Program. Nature Forward hosted Ronnie as a panel speaker at the 2020 Taking Nature Black conference. The timing of



Friends of Oxon Run Chair Absalom Jordan, Jr., standing on the bank of Oxon Run near The Well urban farm. Photo credit Eliza Cava..

their reconnection was fortunate: The Green Scheme had just agreed to become the educational programming partner with DC Greens at a new urban farm to be built in Oxon Run Park, home to Oxon Run stream, in Congress Heights, Ward 8. Oxon Run is home to the group Friends of Oxon Run, and contains rare magnolia bog forests in its watershed but also has long sections trapped in a concrete channel. Oxon Run is slated for DC's largest-yet stream restoration to begin in 2023, which will be a powerful opportunity for community members to contribute to the city's decision-making around the project.

The planned farm, called The Well at Oxon Run, would become a hub for environmental education and food justice engagement, and it would be located steps from a concrete channelized portion of Oxon Run. Together, Nature Forward and The Green Scheme successfully applied for a grant from the DC Department of Energy and Environment, via the Chesapeake Bay Trust, to set up the **“Ward 8 Water Watchers”** program centered around Oxon Run and The Well. The grant required that The Green Scheme be the primary grant recipient (and became a first-time Chesapeake Bay Trust grantee) and that Nature Forward receive funds as a contractor.



Location of Ward 8 Water Watchers project. Clockwise from top: Aerial map of the neighborhood, showing in red text the primary activity locations and in white text key neighborhood names and landmarks; locator map showing focal area within the Oxon Run watershed; demographic map showing the high (90+) African-American population of the neighborhood.

Early project planning questions

While each of our project locations and partners are unique, many of the elements of our programming and partnership begin with a toolkit of common questions and decisions to make. We approach a partner community or watershed organization (or they approach us) with the desire to co-create an environmental education/community conservation initiative, centered around natural spaces and in watersheds, near communities historically excluded from parks and enrichment opportunities. Once we agree to work together, we have a series of early decisions to make:

“As a representative of a partner organization, it has been a pleasure to work with such a passionate and knowledgeable team at ANS. As a community member, I am grateful that I am now aware of the real condition of the environment in our community and, even more important, I am positive that we can advocate and work for a healthier and thriving community.”

— Vanesa Pinto, Empowerment and Leadership Development Coordinator at Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research (CHEER)

- **Which community members will we specifically seek to reach?**

Examples:

- Do we center on a school/family matrix? residents within a particular multifamily housing community? or residents near a particular stream?
- Do we target families with children of all ages? Focus on families with children in middle school and up?
- Which racial/ethnic demographics do we want to reach? Do we focus on just Latine (Hispanic, Latino/a/x) or all immigrant communities?

- **Which location will be the most comfortable for our target audience?**

Examples:

- When public spaces exist, do community members feel safe there? If not, is it possible to make it safer?
- If no public spaces exist, can we work with a community to use their space (e.g., a private community center, private open space).
- If we hold an event in a private location, will members from other target communities feel safe and welcome?
- Are the locations accessible for community members to reach on foot or by public transportation? If not, can we facilitate carpooling or provide shuttle service?

- **What communication choices, cultural lenses, and signifiers should we include within our planning choices?**

Examples:

- Do we sensitively collect data when immigration status is a concern?
- Are we managing language interpretation properly? Prioritizing spoken language over written communication? Are we asking people to use unfamiliar apps or technology and if so, can we provide resources and training?

- Are we providing culturally-relevant food and music choices at festival-style events?
- Have we ensured that many or most of the leaders and educators delivering planning and programming reflect the demographics and speak the language of the community?
- Have we taken into consideration holidays important to the community? School schedules for families with children? Work schedules for working parents and stay-at-home parents?
- During the pandemic, have we assessed the comfort level or participants to be with others outside vs. indoors?
- Does our equipment help activities feel more accessible (i.e., when working in the African-American community, we learned to consider the importance of “sneaker culture” and purchased extra pairs of bright yellow overboots for protecting peoples’ shoes).



Our signature yellow overboots have become a visual identifier for many of our in-stream activities. While the boots need to be carefully washed, dried, and stored if moved between streams to avoid spreading pathogens, they need less care if always used in the same stream. For Ward 8 Water Watchers, the yellow boots were VERY popular with children and young adults concerned about protecting their shoes (especially those most invested in “sneaker culture”). We purchased yellow boots that are now stored onsite at The Well at Oxon Run.

- **What other community-relevant issues intersect with watershed and natural space protection that we could include as we design our programming and curriculum?**

Examples:

- What are peoples’ feelings about physical safety in parks (e.g., in some situations, residents who use the parks may be struggling with alcoholism, homelessness, and drug use)? Unsightliness of trash and litter? Physical state of park infrastructure?
- Do community members have access to healthy food and nutrition (All three of our programs have included food distributions, generally organized by partner organizations)? Are they concerned about clean drinking water? Rises in rent prices? Transportation and redevelopment impacts?

Critical importance of partners

We originally conceived the role of partners as simply an add-on, contracting out the recruitment of community members to events that we would conceive, plan, and execute. We quickly learned that effective and authentic partnership was much more significant. Our process now involves co-creating and co-designing with partners and, over time, with com-

munity members themselves - everything from the primary programming locations, curriculum focus, recruitment strategies, and project emphases.

Establishing relationships

In order to form authentic partnerships, Nature Forward establishes relationships with new partners in advance of desired programming. We try to work with both community-based organizations and other hyperlocal environmental groups, such as a watershed organization or friends of a park group. Sometimes, identifying partners has meant working through our existing networks in ways we hadn't before considered.

On more than one occasion we have considered working in a new area or designing a new program but waited to do so or deferred applying for a grant in favor of building a stronger relationship with a partner organization first.

What partners bring, what Nature Forward brings

While our community-based partner organizations may have expertise in other areas, they may not have experience in environmental education or environmental decision-making. Many have not received environment-specific grants before. Our staff serves the entire Washington, DC region, and, as a result, our direct relationships with individual community members in any given location are few. Our partner organizations have these direct relationships with community members, as well as connections to local political representatives, district staff on public works or recreation matters and local government agency staff assigned to work in that area. Church pastors, school principals, and other local community leaders have been critical to our success.

While Nature Forward brings the environmental programming expertise, we can successfully



Nature Forward MD Conservation Advocate Denise Guitarra (right) with CHEER Empowerment and Leadership Development Program Coordinator Vanesa Pinto (left) and daughter. Photo credit Nature Forward, 2021.

implement our programs only when able partner organizations co-create the activities and outcomes that best serve the needs of their hyperlocal community. We work with a variety of different types of partner organizations, but our partner CHEER has given us the language of “community-based” organizations. According to CHEER, a Community-Based Organization is one that is driven by community residents in all aspects of its existence:

- priority issue areas are identified and defined by residents,
- solutions to address priority issues are developed with residents, and
- program design, implementation, and evaluation components have residents intimately involved, in leadership positions.

Using the “community-based” model leads an organization, or a partnership, to focus on helping build community capacity using an asset-based community development approach. Knowing the community's

strengths makes it easier to understand what kinds of programs or initiatives might be possible to address their needs. When efforts are planned on the strengths of the community, people are likely to feel more positive about themselves and believe they can succeed as the protagonists of the change.

Nature Forward also has a robust policy and advocacy program, led by our same staff who lead these outreach efforts. Our experience analyzing land-use plans, advocating for legislation, communicating with decision-makers, and leading advocacy training workshops help us build connections and advocate for community members in the long term.



Nature Forward VA Conservation Advocate Renee Crebe (kneeling) with (right to left) Fairfax County Supervisor Rodney Lusk, State Senator Scott Surovell, Delegate Paul Krizek, Supervisor Daniel Storck. Ben Israel/Nature Forward, 2021.

Funding for partners

Multiple organizations working closely together can be more expensive for grant funders than simply providing funds exclusively to one organization. In fact, one of our early applications was rejected based on the higher than usual cost per person reached. Putting our heads together with leaders from another group means twice the staffing hours, and therefore more expensive projects. When funders have seen the high effectiveness of our co-created projects, they have supported us putting the model into practice. We are grateful that our funder community, both local governments (through the Chesapeake Bay Trust) and private foundations, have funded made the projects possible.

In our experience, providing funding for partners is the best way to reach new audiences and build capacity and confidence within partner organizations. Communities of color, poor communities, and immigrant communities have been hard for traditional environmental organizations to reach, because of our own demographic makeup, locations, and historical relationships. As one of Nature Forward' board members said to us early in the development of the Long Branch programming, "new customer growth is more expensive than existing customer retention."

Partners vs Community Members and Looking for Natural Leaders

When we refer to "partners," we are usually speaking of appointed community leaders – typically the staff or board members of a community-based nonprofit or watershed organization. Working closely with a local community organization is an important step towards but is not the same as engaging "the community." It is important to be exploring and look-

At one walk along Long Branch, two Nature Forward staff members encountered a woman caring for children next to the stream who clearly had a passion for the environment. She spoke about the stream's importance to her and her desire to help it for nearly an hour, in Spanish. We exchanged contact information and she became one of our first participants and eventually was paid a stipend to help recruit and support other community members in the program.

ing for "natural leaders" in the community from the beginning because they can be advisors or guides when it comes to outreach strategies later on. These natural leaders will be the ones who have great, community-relevant to promote participation, engagement, and eventually community leadership, and they will be the ones that can continue the development work with other adults and even better with youth and children. Promoting leadership at every level should be a priority.

One lesson learned during our first Long Branch project was to give community members more time to reflect and share during our events. At one event, an Nature Forward staff member was using a megaphone and one of the participants took it and spoke about her concerns about the environment. After that, some of us reflected that it would have been good to have encouraged the participants to speak out more often and from the very beginning. Since then, we have worked directly with individual residents to design the programs.

One powerful thing that we have learned from community members is **the power of stories**. Immigrants may recall relationships with rivers from their youth or their home countries. Black Washingtonians with long memories of the city may recall when streams were free-flowing and the land less developed. These memories and stories provide an emotional connection that can become a key motivator for participation in Nature Forward programs.

Involving Local Government

Involving local government agencies not only provides additional resources, but helps to build synergy toward mutual goals. Valeria Espinoza from Montgomery Parks says, "Being a part of the Sí Se Puede project has helped bridge a connection between participants and government staff. Seeing participants enthusiastically offer their input for the upcoming renovations at their parks directly to park planning staff was a very special moment. Without Nature Forward's ability to form a long-term relationship with the community while also building strong partnerships with Montgomery Parks this engagement may not have been possible."

Project Structure & Programming

Early engagement

Nature Forward is a membership-based organization that serves the entire Washington, DC region. However, our members are concentrated in some areas (i.e., lower Montgomery County) more than others, and we do not have staff or volunteers dedicated to serving specific locations or sub-regions. Effective early engagement requires research and approaching potential new partnerships in a spirit of great openness and collaboration. This has looked like:

⁴ Conduent Healthy Communities Institute. Live Healthy Fairfax: SocioNeeds Index Suite. 2021 Health Equity Index . Available at <https://www.livehealthyfairfax.org/indexsuite/index/healthequity>.

⁵ Watershed Restoration Suitability & Equity Maps. Montgomery County DEP. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/water/restoration/equity.html>.

- **Demographic and geographic research.** Online research can help identify streams, parks, and neighborhoods where our work might be of value. Using tools such as county resource allocation maps^{4,5}; census data to identify low-income communities and communities of color; county stream health inventories to find streams in need of help; aerial imagery to scope potential park and stream access points suitable for engagement activities; mapping libraries, churches, community centers, and schools that could serve as potential programming hubs.



A multifamily apartment complex in Long Branch. The stream is just to the right of the vegetated buffer in this image. Children from this complex can easily reach the banks of the stream and play in it while adults watch from porches and the sidewalk nearby, something we observed in early scouting walks of the neighborhood. Photo credit Nature Forward/Eliza Cava, 2018.

- **Scouting stream and park access sites to determine their suitability for engagement events.** We consider factors like public transit access and parking, safety of approach down the stream bank and in a stream channel, space nearby to gather people and folding tables, access to a path or trail for nature hikes, cover from weather, visibility from the street, bathroom availability, and more.
- **Walking through parks and along trails and speaking to visitors.** A low-tech, on-the-ground approach can be to visit a site firsthand and speak to visitors about their thoughts on the parkland and what they might like to see happen there.
- **Attending community, coalition, and planning meetings.** Understanding local issues and meeting local residents in these settings can help build relationships and familiarity, even if we do not know if we can focus policy or outreach work in the community in the future.
- **Attending neighborhood fairs and events.** Even hosting a table with simple environmental activities to introduce ourselves can be an opportunity for connection.



Nature Forward Maryland Conservation Advocate Denisse Guitarra and a Nature Forward volunteer with a table full of activities and information at a neighborhood fair. Photo credit Nature Forward, 2021.

- **Proactively seeking new relationships.** Reaching out to social-service organizations centered in a neighborhood and discussing opportunities for partnership.
- **Revisiting partnerships, even after being turned down,** by inviting potential partners to a nearby event so they can see what the possibilities might be, could initiate new bonds.
- **Sharing information.** Forwarding opportunities including grants, government announcements, planning open houses, etc. to potential partner organizations can spark new ideas or demonstrate commitment.

“This community faces many barriers. For example, people never went into Oxon Run until the Audubon Naturalist Society showed up and said ‘Let’s go!’”

— Jaren Hill Lockridge, Director of The Well at Oxon Run



Year 1 of Ward 8 Water Watchers included a "Who Lives Near Oxon Run?" day where we brought Nature Forward staff photographer to take portraits of attendees at the future site of The Well at Oxon Run. Attendees were given the opportunity to download and keep their professional portraits. Photo credit Nature Forward/ Ben Israel, 2021 .

- **Supporting partner advocacy campaigns.** Environmental health can take on a broad definition. Consider supporting partner advocacy campaigns on issues important to their organizations and community members by signing onto comment letters or contributing research or statements.

Year 1 – Building relationships and having fun

Our first-year activities are low-commitment, high-fun activities for community members. In collaboration with our partner organization(s), we plan and execute a series of events designed to connect people to their streams and parks through culturally-appropriate, hands-on, family-friendly, tailored activities. Examples of these activities include:

- **Conduct a local watershed nature walk.** These walks encourage community members to share what they know about land use in the neighborhood, using a large-format aerial watershed image map as a visual aid.



Nature Forward's free Creek Critters® app walks you through finding and identifying the small organisms – or critters – that live in freshwater streams and creating stream health reports based on your findings. We use Creek Critters® with groups to create facilitated, immersive water monitoring activities as a tool for education, community science and engagement.



Photos from field trips and activities throughout our program areas. Photo credits Nature Forward.

- **Play a game.** Participants learn about litter in stormwater runoff through games such as “We All Live Downstream,” an adaptation of the Project WET lesson “Sum of the Parts”.
- **Use Nature Forward’s Creek Critters® smartphone app.** Nature Forward’s free app helps residents collect and identify stream organisms. The app teaches users what lives in the stream and how the presence or absence of sensitive organisms indicates stream health.
- **Engage participants in litter pickup or tree planting.** Hands-on activities build community and provide opportunities to listen to community concerns about the stream while discussing the importance of working together to care for the stream and community.
- **Facilitate a conversation about community health and stream health.** Making connections between environmental and personal health can help lead participants to identify with the stream and see it as an asset of their community. This type of conversation provides an opportunity to ask community members what is most important to them to help make their community and their stream healthy.
- **Offer art supplies and make posters.** Invite participants to be creative and express what they learned in a way that they can display new knowledge in their community to spread the message to others.
- **Connect to the larger watershed.** Visit a location upstream and/or downstream to bring home the message of watershed connectivity. For **What Lives in Long Branch? / ¿Que vive en Long Branch?**, community field trips went to Little Paint Branch in the upper part of the Anacostia watershed and on a boat ride on the mainstem of the Anacostia River. For **Water Keepers of Little Hunting Creek**, our field trip went to Huntley Meadows Park. For **Ward 8 Water Watchers**, we created a virtual field trip video called “What’s Up with Oxon Run?” that toured the entire stream



Dance Exchange educators and event participants “dance” the flow of untreated runoff into a storm drain and onto the stream. Photo credit Nature Forward/Lin Orrin, 2021.



Planting a ceremonial tree at the final Waterkeepers of Little Hunting Creek Day of Action. Photo credit Nature Forward/Ben Israel, 2021.

length and its cultural and ecological components, and later brought participants on an Anacostia River boat ride.

- **Host a clean-up, but not too many.** We have partnered with Friends of Sligo Creek, Ward 8 Woods, and local property management companies to facilitate stream litter clean-up activities. One thing we are careful to do is not over-emphasize trash pickup: when working with Black and Brown communities, we want them to have lots of opportunities to enjoy nature first and not feel that all we are asking them to do is unpaid labor. Trash pickup can be a dirty job, and people should be paid for their work doing it (as DC-based Ward 8 Woods pays its staff to do, including citizens returning from incarceration). That being said, community members often enjoy volunteering for a trash cleanup as long as it is one activity out of many that collectively build joy and pride in caring for the stream.



Recruiting in the community context: placing flyers in bags at a food distribution event and on a public message wall near a grocery store. Photo credits Nature Forward/Denisse Guitarra, 2021.

- **Close out with an action-oriented event.** Our first year of activities always closes with an action-oriented event, where participants are invited to meet with government officials, community service providers, and other parents and neighbors to share what they have learned and ask questions about how to better care for the watershed. For example, at **Water Keepers of Little Hunting Creek**, our first year culminated in a community action fair organized alongside a food distribution event. More than a dozen partner organizations were invited to table. We added a food truck and DJ, and held a ceremonial tree planting with local politicians. Please check out this [wonderful video about the Water Keepers project](#), prepared by the Community Foundation of Northern Virginia.

Year 2 – Deepening trust and connections

In our second year of engagement with a community,⁶ we often repeated much of the programming from the first year with the goal of bringing in new families and engaging more deeply with our partner organizations to connect more deeply with community needs and concerns. Activities that we brought into communities included:

- Bilingual watershed and nature walks led by Latine naturalists.
- Black Master Naturalist leading students and families through interactive Water Quality sampling with Creek Critters app in Oxon Run Park.
- Delivering “Moving Field Guide” experiences that are interpretive movement sessions led by artists from Dance Exchange, where participants create movements to illustrate



Staffing for Success: Our team at Nature Forward is racially and ethnically diverse, and we strive to ensure that the leaders we put in front of community members look like them. We reach beyond our own department within the organization to hire time from our environmental educators of color, work with our partners who directly represent communities like themselves, and hire contractors to help us achieve better representation. Clockwise from top left: Raquel Pinto (right, eyes closed) leads a forest bathing activity during Latino Conservation Week; Charles Johnson teaches about benthic macroinvertebrates in Oxon Run; a leader from one of our community partners helps children glue on storm drain labels for Little Hunting Creek; Jamoni Overby, our DC Conservation Advocate, walks with The Green Scheme leaders Ronnie Webb and Jerome Nesbitt; and Gina Ghertner, one of Nature Forward’ excellent environmental educators, sets up an art table to create caddisfly “cases” at an activity fair.

⁶ Because of the impacts of Covid-19 and discontinuity in grant funding, year 2 was not always conducted immediately after year 1.

watershed concepts, like stormwater runoff and stream buffers. Participants finish the session by combining their movement elements into a culminating dance.

- Discussion of healthy food and nutrition facilitated at an urban farm or alongside produce distribution events.
- Opportunities to use virtual reality technology led by Minority Tech. Families virtually “planted” trees around a real landscape and then watched them as they grew using virtual reality. We later planted real trees in the same place in partnership with Casey Trees.
- Labeling storm drains to educate the public on where water goes and keeping pollution out.
- Tabling/fair event for community members to learn more about organizations and opportunities to get involved in their watershed. Participants could earn stamps on a “passport” for visiting the tables. Multiple community organizations engaged attendees in activities and shared relevant information and resources.
- Include government agency representatives from environmental, health, parks, public works, and public safety offices, in both larger “fair” settings and smaller walks or meetings.



A teacher at a charter elementary school associated with a nearby community center is excited to become a W8WW Ambassador and eventually bring her own students into Oxon Run on her own. Photo credit Nature Forward/Ben Israel, 2022.

Challenges and stumbling blocks

Of course we encountered challenges throughout our outreach programs. Common ones have included:

- **Difficulty recruiting community members and predicting event size.** Following our partners’ recommendations, we have not required advance RSVPs for attendance at our events. For example, concerns about immigration status may keep people from replying. Instead we relied on posting flyers, calling, and texting participants, sharing invitations with listservs and on social media. We communicated via local leaders like Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners and attended weekly food distributions to invite and talk with participants in person. Recruitment has taken extra staff time and meant it is difficult to plan for an expected number of attendees. We found ourselves both overwhelmed and/or disappointed by turnout at various times.
- **Ensuring parents or guardians attended events with their children.** Particularly when we are hosting events on the grounds of an apartment community, families can be comfortable having their children engage in activities unsupervised. However, due to lia-

bility concerns, Nature Forward is unable to work with children without a guardian present. We have had to work with our partners to build guardian capacity (e.g., pair with an after school program), to clearly communicate this limitation to participants, or to incentivize guardians to accompany underage children to our events.

- **Language interpretation can be a challenge.** We have worked hard to hire and budget for interpretation, but trained bilingual staff or interpreters are costly and not always available. We have also invited children to interpret for their parents (and occasionally offered the children stipends or Service Learning credits⁷) or tried to ensure that partner organizations have staff with interpretive capacity as a redundancy system.
- **Weather conditions do not always cooperate and rescheduling** is common in our region, especially for heat advisories and summer thunderstorms. We have had to cancel or reschedule numerous events and recruiting for the makeup date can be particularly challenging.
- **Capacity challenges within our partner organizations.** Nature Forward has a larger budget, program staff, and back-office capacity than most (but not all) of our partner organizations. Even with those organizations who are comparable or larger than us in budget (i.e., Good Shepherd Housing), community engagement around environmental issues is relatively low on their priority list compared to meeting peoples' basic needs. Nature Forward supports our partners by dedicating our own staff time to partner events such as food distribution; handling more of the administrative tasks of a grant such as proposal writing, budget management, and reporting (even when we were not the grantee); and taken the lead on scheduling meetings, taking minutes, managing receipts and contracts, etc. We have been explicit with partners that we intend to do these support tasks and see it as part of the value that we bring to the partnership. Over time our goal is to transfer access to funding, power, and responsibility for the projects to our partners while helping them grow their capacity to do so if they can absorb the additional workload.



A Sí Se Puede project participant helps give a presentation about their recycling survey results to county environmental and Parks staff. Photo credit Ben Israel/Nature Forward.

Year 3 – Empowering communities

In our third year in each project, we focus on empowering communities to become their own project leaders and take action in their communities. Our goal is to encourage and support community members and our community partnering organizations to take more of the lead in conducting the project more than we did in years one and two.

⁷ Students are often great interpreters for their parents - and having willing students serve in this role can be an effective way to promote communication during event activities. At times, this is an opportunity for parents to understand what their children have been learning in school (e.g., Montgomery County Public School Grade 4 students share what they've learned through their watershed units with parents and siblings).

In Maryland

For year two and three of “**iSí Se Puede!**”, 10 Long Branch families took the lead identifying, researching, and designing their own solutions for taking action while bringing the larger community along. Using the common environmental education framework of a Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience (MWEE), we helped our lead families focus on three components – issue definition, outdoor field experiences, synthesis and conclusions, and an environmental action project.

Throughout the project we used a model combining the strengths of our two organizations. Nature Forward brought experience in offering environmental education, MWEEs, watershed stewardship, and community action training. CHEER led family group sessions an empowerment and leadership development model utilizing the dialogical method of discussion groups.⁸ This model includes a facilitator who encourages conversation, questioning, and sharing one's interpretations with everyone in the group. Through dialogue and collective reflection, the group of participants transform their various observations and opinions into critical knowledge. In this method, all teach and all learn.

The families followed the MWEE model by starting out by asking “I wonder...?” questions of what environmental issues they have seen in and around Long Branch stream. The community identified multiple issues and wondered how to solve them. After many months of discussion, the families narrowed down the list of issues and identified litter reduction and increasing recycling rates as their top priority. The families learned about recycling and litter reduction by inviting Montgomery County staff to share information and resources both virtually and in person. The families assessed the litter and recycling situation of the apartment buildings closest to the stream by conducting a small survey they delivered in-person, in multiple languages, by knocking on the doors of 36 apartment units. They learned that many people lacked recycling bins and education on how to recycle, and they worked with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to distribute household blue bins to residents who needed them. They plan to improve signage in the central collection area as well and continue working with DEP staff to improve multi-family recycling processes.

The “**iSí Se Puede!**” families shared their survey results at a July 2022 Latino Conservation Week event at Long Branch Park and at a presentation in September to Parks and Environmental agency staff.

In Virginia

For **Water Keepers of Little Hunting Creek**, we are entering our second year collaborating with residents of neighborhoods along Little Hunting Creek. Through its “COMMUNITY+” initiative, our partner United Community has worked to determine residents’ concerns and build their capacity to improve equity and reduce disparities in health, safety, economic strength, child and youth well-being, and neighborhood livability. United Community conducted surveys of the residents, identified residents who serve as neighborhood ambassadors and is now forming five work groups focused on issues important to res-

⁸ Vanesa Pinto, CHEER. “We Learn From Each Other: The Dialogical Method.” Published Jan. 17, 2017. Available at: <https://www.communitycheer.org/single-post/2017/01/17/We-Learn-From-Each-Other-The-Dialogical-Method>.

idents. Nature Forward Virginia Conservation Advocate Renee Grebe is participating in the Neighborhood Livability Work Group, which began meeting in early 2022. The COMMUNITY+ framework provides a perfect entry point for Nature Forward to connect more residents to Little Hunting Creek, connect the concepts of a healthy environment supporting healthy people, train them to participate in government processes, and engage them in important decision-making conversations for Route 1 redevelopment, particularly in terms of improving land use, expansion of tree canopy, better stormwater management. As Embark Richmond Highway moves from a concept plan to a more detailed on-the-ground reality, there will be ample opportunities for speaking with decision makers.



Former Nature Forward Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate Monica Billger leads a community advocacy workshop on the EMBARK Richmond Corridor. Photo credit Nature Forward, 2018.

In Washington, D.C.

For **Ward 8 Water Watchers 2.0**, we are designing a “W8WW Ambassadors” program that will train 3-5 community leaders to be ambassadors who can organize and conduct their own outings with youth, church, school, or other facilitated groups. Ambassadors will have use of a lending library of nature/watershed stewardship educational materials stored at The Well at Oxon Run. The Ambassador training and the lending library of nature/watershed educational materials, along with instructions for their use, will draw on Nature Forward’s experience in guiding parents in helping their children to experience nature, including sharing our Parent Guide: [How to Help Children Fall in Love with Nature](#), which we will share with the Oxon Run parents. The curriculum/guidebook and training for community organizations will draw on Nature Forward’s deep experience in leading workshops and trainings on environmental topics. Ambassadors will be provided with stipends to compensate them for their training and leadership time.

Evaluation

Over time, we have used several different methods to evaluate participants’ increased knowledge about watershed issues. The images on the next page show some of our creative methods of knowledge evaluation—using sticker charts (with different colored stickers for before and after an activity to test the gains from that activity) and voting boxes. These tools don’t require high levels of literacy. We have also used written surveys, oral focus groups, interactive question-and-answer sessions, and one-on-one conversations with individuals to evaluate their knowledge and suggestions for program improvement.

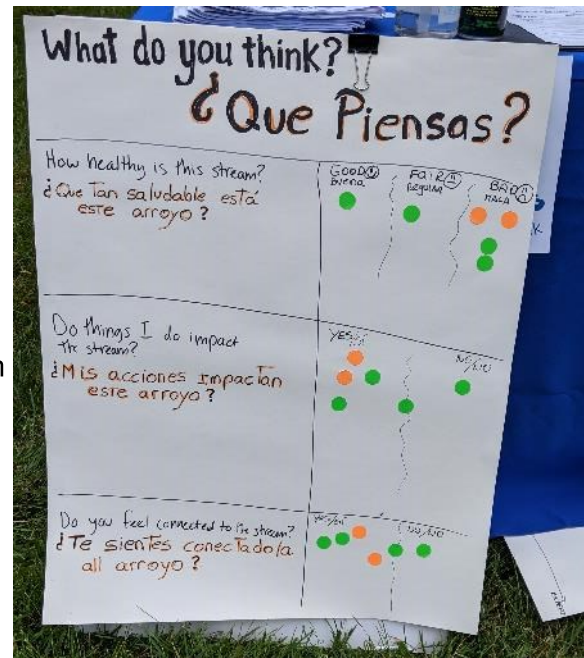
To evaluate the MWE program we provided during the Sí Se Puede project, at each major step of the project we used an audit tool from the Chesapeake Bay Program’s “An

Educator’s Guide to the Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience (MWEE)⁹ to determine the degree to which the project met the definition of a MWEE, adapting the tool to a community context. In addition, we used guidance prepared by the University of Michigan and eeEvaluations¹⁰ to assess our results in terms of Watershed Literacy Outcomes and Environmental Stewardship Outcomes. We asked open-ended questions at the end of some of the group gatherings, such as “How would you complete this sentence? I never realized that” Or “What were your favorite and worst experiences during this part of the project?”

One of our primary goals is to increase participants’ comfort levels and confidence in taking action and speaking about watershed and community issues. To evaluate this goal, we pay special attention to observing the final action-oriented events. Do project attendees actively participate in this final event? Do they take a turn speaking? Do they contribute to planning or organizing the event? Do they demonstrate changed behavior and a willingness to educate others, such as by using reusable food and beverage containers?

Year 4 & Beyond – Transferring Power & Access to Funding

Our goals for Year 4 and long-term engagement are to begin to withdraw the level of intensive interaction with our communities. Having met our goals for connecting these neighborhoods to more resources, funding opportunities, and partners, we will applaud residents and local leaders as they continue to champion for their local environment. Nature Forward will plan to play a consultative role, offering support when requested and ensuring that our partners and grassroots community members have regular access to opportunities that we encounter that could benefit them.



Creative methods of knowledge evaluation. These tools can be used to gather insight pre- and post-activity into the participants’ knowledge levels without requiring much time or high degrees of literacy. Photo credits Nature Forward/ Denisse Guitarra, 2019 (top) and Lin Orrin, 2021 (bottom).

⁹ <https://www.cbf.org/document-library/education/teachers-guide-to-meaningful-watershed-education-experience.pdf>. Pgs 28-35.
¹⁰ <https://www.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/document/2019/Jun/PDF%20-%20Guidance4MeasuringStudentMWFEE-Outcomes%20-%202008-2014%20-%20NOAA.pdf>.

We are beginning the transfer of power model with Long Branch Year 4, which has just started at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year and will continue into summer 2023. In Year 4, our partners CHEER and Defensores de la Cuenca, with Nature Forward in support, will lead a group of high schoolers in designing and delivering their own action project. We will recruit (and pay) 18 high-school-age BIPOC youth from the Long Branch community who are willing to commit to planning and implementing their own litter reduction projects. We will conduct eight, two-hour dialogue and training sessions (on topics such as litter, water quality in Long Branch Creek, reducing litter, behavior change, forests/trees, equity, problem solving and community organizing), with longer sessions for field trips. Training will be followed by 8 mentoring sessions held while participants are designing and implementing their litter projects. The sessions won't be just a one-way transfer of information. We will encourage the participants to contribute their prior knowledge, skills and valuable lived experiences, following CHEER's assets-based dialogical method. Using this method, all teach and all learn.



Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate Renee Grebence emcees a prize raffle, backed up by a local DJ, at the Waterkeepers of Little Hunting Creek Day of Action. Photo credit Nature Forward/Ben Israel, 2021.

Lessons Learned

- **Start from your own organization's "why".** Why are we doing this? Who is benefiting from this (organizations, community members, the environment)? What does success look like? Where is our target focus? How does it align or not align with who we are and our organization/program mission?
- **Invest the time to build relationships.** Time spent building relationships will create stronger partnerships with community organizations, even an activity is outside your mission or program area. Community-based work is time consuming, especially when first coming into a community. And, grant funding is competitive. Preparing grant applications collaboratively with community partners is challenging and time-consuming.
- **Choose your community carefully and adapt to its needs.** Recognize that every community will be different and adapt your project as needed. Include multiple local partners committed to the specific community and land-



Nature Forward Conservation Outreach Manager Gregg Trilling and a volunteer prepare for a macroinvertebrate sampling activity at Oxon Run. Photo credit Nature Forward/Ben Israel, 2022.

scope. Consider developing a set of criteria for selecting a community with which to work. One criterion could be to pick a community where you have already spent time to build relationships and establish trust. Empower the local partner(s) to take over the project, over time.

- **Listen with an open mind to create new opportunities.** Keep all options open and be flexible when new, creative, and innovative ideas come from any of your community partners or community members. Give them many opportunities to express themselves and drive the process.
- **Staff and compensate for success.** Recruit, hire, and retain outreach staff whose own identities reflect some or all of the demographics of the communities you seek to serve. Compensate partners fairly for their time. Provide stipends with real value to community members serving as interpreters, providing childcare, or catering food. Hire contractors or recruit skilled volunteers to fill gaps in your organization's capacity (e.g., interpreters, leaders for nature walks).
- **Be flexible.** Co-create programming that meets community needs, interests and empowers them to become leaders of their own. Define the grant deliverable in your proposal to include a strong community-led or community-designed component. Offer family-friendly activities that engage people of all ages. Be prepared to offer activities in the afternoons, evenings, and on weekends.
- **Attend to basic needs.** Be creative about meeting people's basic needs so they can be fully and comfortably present in your events. Provide food, childcare, transportation, language interpretation, etc.
- **Recruit creatively.** Organic/word of mouth recruitment is often the most direct and sustainable way to bring in more people to the program. Get-



Former Nature Forward DC Conservation Advocate Ari Eisenstadt speaks with a community member at an event held at Oxon Run, at the future site of The Well urban farm. Photo credit Nature Forward/Ben Israel, 2021.



At our very first What Lives in Long Branch? event, we did not know how many people would show up. Over 40 people came and enjoyed catching critters in the stream! Photo credit Nature Forward, 2019.

ting the project participants to help with outreach sometimes proves more effective than relying solely on our grassroots community partner organizations, which tend to have many ongoing projects at the same time.

- **Be relevant.** Create culturally appropriate messaging that resonates. Include language interpretation, music, and art. Use or create cultural signifiers like a catchy project title, logo/branding, protective boots, etc.
- **Target communication to your audience.** Identify which communication channels work best. Collect contact information and communicate back with participants via the platforms that are most effective and feel safest to participants. This is often not email. Consider WhatsApp groups, setting up Facebook and Instagram accounts, and posting flyers at community centers.
- **Lead with engagement; build towards leadership.** Historically excluded communities often first appreciate a simple invitation to *Enjoy* their nearby nature in a new way. After that, they may be interested to *Learn* much more. Eventually, you will encounter community leaders who are excited to develop their own environmental and planning leadership skills and help to *Protect* the valuable resources that surround them. Structure leadership development and training opportunities to mutually meet your, your partners', and your participants' goals.
- **Be sensitive to context in evaluation.** Keep written surveys short or allow them to be done orally. Use creative tools (like asking people to drop poker chips into cans) to evaluate knowledge. Set up focus groups to give people a chance to provide feedback in a more relaxed, in-depth way. Focus groups also strengthens relationships.



A Long Branch resident distributes recycling information to her neighbors. Photo credit Nature Forward/Denisse Guitarra, 2022.

Conclusion

Our three ongoing grassroots community outreach programs – along Long Branch in Montgomery County, MD; near Oxon Run in Washington, DC; and along Route 1 and Little Hunting Creek in Fairfax County, VA – will continue to evolve as we and our partners involve more local residents in supporting and advocating for improved environmental and public health conditions in their neighborhoods. All of the programs will continue to engage historically-excluded residents by getting them out to their local streams, facilitating a visceral connection through stories and memory, and emphasizing the importance of protecting streamside parks for climate resilience.

We will continue to seek community input into what issues are addressed and will build residents' skills in how to engage in land and watershed protection. Through their lived experi-

ences, residents know which problems are the highest priorities and what types of interventions will work best in their neighborhood.

Over time, we will build the capacity of local partners to take over community outreach programming in the future, with Nature Forward providing assistance as needed. We will stay “on call” to these communities into the future, as we always have been for wealthier, whiter communities where many of our members have historically lived. We will replicate our programs in new areas, by training others to use our strategies and by seeking new grant funding to develop programs and partnerships elsewhere around the Washington, DC region (for example in Prince George’s County, MD).

In this way we are making Nature Forward a more truly regional organization, and sharing some of our wealth, class, and racial historical privilege with others, and listening carefully to learn how, why and when local communities want to engage in the fight for nature protection and environmental justice in their neighborhoods. We believe other organizations can also undertake effective, equitable community outreach by replicating our model and tailoring it to the communities that they serve.

