

# Cities Connecting Children to Nature



## YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

### **Strategy:**

Develop and strengthen youth leadership skills and elevate youth voices in city planning processes

### **Who is Engaged:**

Youth and young adults ages 15 to 24+

### **Key Benefits:**

Inclusive and effective city plans that reflect youth input; enhanced youth civic engagement; increased diversity of youth engaging in nature activities

### **Related City Priorities:**

Equity & inclusion; youth civic engagement; stewardship and volunteerism

**By including youth voices** and leadership development into planning and implementation processes, cities create strong and relevant plans for increasing equity in nature access. Through these activities, youth contribute to a positive vision for their cities and help to implement that vision. Youth leadership development activities that connect children to nature can also yield broader benefits, including youth civic engagement, stewardship, and skill development. Youth development initiatives can also support workforce development and green career pathways.

## YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

**Youth leadership development** training programs provide youth with personal growth opportunities and leadership skills. These programs often seek to overcome inequities in nature connection by recruiting low-income participants and youth of color, providing free or reduced tuition based on need. For example, the Children & Nature Network’s [Natural Leaders](#) initiative trains, supports and mentors regional cohorts of diverse young leaders (ages 18-29) to support community participation in the outdoors and advocate for equitable access to nature. Natural Leaders Legacy Camp, a multi-day intensive training, focuses on leadership development and community organizing to support young leaders in developing and implementing action plans for their cities. Since its creation, Natural Leaders and its partner program, [FreshTracks](#), have trained more than 450 young leaders and provided them with seed funding and ongoing mentorship for stewardship projects in their cities. CCCN sites have begun to implement youth leadership opportunities. For example, Natural Leaders are closely engaged with the implementation of the Nature Smart Libraries initiative in Saint Paul, MN and are connected with CCCN efforts in Grand Rapids, MI and Gary, IN. Additionally, Louisville drew upon the SummerWorks program to employ and train 13 teenage park stewards who in turn provided support for summer nature programming for 130 children.

**Cities Connecting Children to Nature** (CCCN) is an initiative of the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network, made possible with support from The JPB Foundation. [CCCN](#) helps city leaders and their partners ensure equitable opportunities for children to play, learn and grow in nature, from urban parks and community gardens to the great outdoors. Find more planning resources at the [CCCN Resource Hub](#).

## YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**Youth voices** provide crucial input into city planning processes for connecting children to nature, helping tailor strategies for young constituents. Cities have found these voices difficult to reach with traditional town halls and surveys. In order to include youth voices effectively, cities do well to enlist youth as leaders within community planning processes. For instance, as part of the [Madison, WI CCCN](#) planning process, the public health department employed four high school students to interview local youth about their connection—and barriers—to nature. The findings informed the City’s CCCN plan as well as related future City plans. Likewise, Grand Rapids, MI conducted ongoing [youth forums](#) for its park master plan and will employ youth as community ambassadors as part of the implementation of that plan. Many cities create formal roles for youth to advise municipal government such as [Austin’s Youth Council](#) and [Louisville’s Youth Implementation Team](#). For more on Authentic Youth Civic Engagement, see NLC’s [Guide for Municipal Leaders](#), as well as the [CCCN Youth and Resident Engagement Guide](#).



	Youth Leadership Programs	Youth Civic Engagement
<b>Who</b>	<p><b>Target Audience:</b> Youth 15-24+</p> <p><b>Implementers:</b> Nonprofit program providers in conjunction with City staff</p> <p><b>City Roles:</b> Recruitment, guidance to align youth leadership project with city plans, mentoring</p>	<p><b>Target Audience:</b> Youth 15-24+</p> <p><b>Implementers:</b> Public agencies conducting planning</p> <p><b>City Roles:</b> Recruitment/placement for summer jobs programs or public forum roles; support for ongoing involvement via Mayor’s Youth Council or similar mechanisms</p>
<b>What</b>	2-day to year-round outdoor leadership and civic leadership trainings	Youth provide input and stipended assistance to planning processes
<b>Why</b>	Build youth connection with nature and capacity for local leadership	More effective plans and increased youth civic engagement
<b>How</b>	Connect service providers in your city region with other youth-serving organizations to identify key participants.	Develop a Youth and Resident Engagement plan as part of City planning process. Seek opportunities to include youth voices.