



## WPP Green Corps Lessons Learned

The inner-city environment is a far more significant factor in unemployment than once thought. In fact, the work of Washington Parks & People and its community partners is emerging as an essential response to some of the barriers to employment identified in communities located east of the river. These barriers can be reduced and, in some cases, eliminated through the Green Corps.

1. **Obesity/ Hunger/ Malnutrition** – Disinvestment in public lands east of the River creates a public disconnect with the land that makes it difficult for people in many communities to walk, run, and play, increasing the already high obesity levels in Wards 7 and 8. In many communities where healthy produce is not available, community gardens are non-existent, making real nutrition and hunger solutions that much more elusive. Bringing new life to the land is a key need for countering both obesity and malnutrition.

2. **Health and Fitness Disparities** – Many low-income residents of Wards 7 and 8 spend a large portion of their time dealing with health care challenges, undermining sustained employment. Such health disparities are exacerbated in places where park disinvestment makes basic health all the more difficult to achieve. Investing in parks boosts healthy living, disease prevention, and total community wellness.

3. **Addiction** -- Substance abuse, already boosted by general poverty, is even more entrenched in many places in Wards 7 and 8 where public space is infused with substance abuse and uncontrolled drug markets. Replacing such activity with positive, programmed green spaces opens a door for people to break the cycle of addiction.

4. **Physical, Mental, and Emotional Disabilities** – For people suffering with any kind of disability, the already difficult health and environmental disparities in Wards 7 and 8 make sustainable access to employment even tougher. Park reclamation can help people reclaim their lives and work access by making it possible to begin to surmount disabilities.

5. **Discrimination** – Environmental injustice and discrimination in Wards 7 and 8 hamper every aspect of employment access, moving work centers and investment away from the communities where people live and further isolating many communities from work opportunities across the city and region. Investing in parks and environmental justice attracts and leverages a wide range of other investment and jobs and lifts opportunity for all to surmount discrimination and have a better life.

6. **Youth** – For many youth in Wards 7 and 8, disinvesting in parks means condemning not only much of their play either inside or in concrete-bound areas, but also much of their learning, socialization, civic engagement, and vocational and life skills development, which adds to the difficulty they already face in getting jobs. Disconnect with nature fundamentally impairs cognitive development, physical health and wellness, education, and understanding of the world. Investing in park programming provides youth of all ages with new avenues for expeditionary learning,

community integration, empowerment, multicultural understanding, inspiration for life and work, and access to real jobs and expanding career and enterprise tracks.

7. **Violence and Crime** – For many Ward 7 and 8 residents struggling to find, access, and sustain employment, fear, crime, and violence are often significant impediments. Investing in parks produces safe havens where people can dream of more than survival. Parks & People has found that connecting people together with nature has powerful calming and community-building impacts, and provides youth with a critically needed sense of the value of all life, including their own.

8. **Criminal Record** – In many low-income areas in Wards 7 and 8, a majority of families have someone who has been accused or convicted of a crime. The stigma that comes with this can inhibit employment and training and further entrench recidivism. Park-based green job training provides people with an avenue to rebuild their pride as well as their employability.

9. **Social and Physical Environment** – Marvin Gaye, whose soulful messages about violence and environmental disintegration first sprang from Ward 7's Watts Branch stream valley, understood the powerful ways that a negative environment could hold people back and entrench poverty. In the once destitute neighborhoods lining Marvin Gaye and Oxon Run Parks, the park rejuvenation has sparked broader reclamation, creating a positive surrounding for advancing opportunity.

10. **Transportation Disconnects with Employment Centers** – Many Ward 7 and 8 residents need greenways in their communities to shorten commute times. Parks & People's efforts in Marvin Gaye and Oxon Run Park are beginning to make work more accessible for thousands of residents.

11. **Child Care and Other Care-Giving Responsibilities** -- In rebuilding Ward 7 and 8 communities, parks expand options for child care, youth programming, and shared care-giving, as well as improved health for the care-givers themselves.

12. **Disempowerment and Fatalism** – Where there previously had been decades of entrenched disuse, dumping, and drugs, parks are now helping people find new strength in their communities and new options for better lives. The massive visual and programmatic transformation of places like Marvin Gaye and Oxon Run Parks is changing the way people view their communities, their lives, and their power. In leading the park-based transformation of drug markets into farm markets, of crime centers into cultural centers, and of dumping grounds into environmental restoration grounds, Ward 7 and 8 residents are discovering that there is very little that they cannot do.

13. **Lack of Information Access** – Park revitalization is helping many Ward 7 and 8 residents to surmount long-standing isolation to come together in restored parks and places like WPP's Riverside Center and exchange information on funding, training, job, and enterprise opportunities.

14. **Peer Pressure/ Cultural Identity** – The physical appearance and social setting of many low-income Ward 7 and 8 communities has entrenched the perception among some that traditional success has no place in these communities, that community improvement will only lead to displacement, and that personal success is some kind of cultural betrayal. Now residents adjoining Marvin Gaye Park are finding that creating beautiful and inspiring public green places where the

community can celebrate its assets actually strengthens cultural identity, empowers the fight against displacement, and supports people in working together to seek better jobs and lives.

15. **Insufficient Mentors** – For far too long in many Ward 7 and 8 communities, negative mentors – criminals, dealers, addicts, -- have effectively controlled vast areas of public green space. Now Marvin Gaye, Oxon Run, and other Ward 7 and 8 parks are becoming places to shine a light on neighborhood heroes who exemplify what life can be.

16. **Crisis Intervention** – Many low-income residents of Wards 7 and 8 are living with frequent crises that imperil their employment and even their survival. Parks & People's community park partnerships are helping to counter this challenge by both supporting direct crisis intervention by groups like Project Blessings for Hurting Parents and by advancing broader place-based reforms, such as those above, to enable more shared community response and to mitigate and even prevent some future crises.

17. **Inertia of Poverty/ Bureaucratic Requirements** – Poverty carries with it additional bureaucratic burdens that further entrench it, with people having to take time off from work simply to resolve issues with their benefits. Amid such inertia, the dramatic community transformations of places like Marvin Gaye and Oxon Run Parks is helping to empower people to surmount other obstacles in their lives.

18. **Declining Economy/ Shifting Workforce** – The recession takes a harsher toll on those who are already poorer. But the shifting workforce holds a vast opportunity, as DC's coming green economy will include, according to the DC Office of Planning, over 150,000 jobs in the next few years. While much of the national green jobs dialogue has focused on green building and energy, green space and infrastructure are at the center of 50 career and enterprise tracks, with parks as a vital gateway to these. The vast proportion of public green space in Wards 7 and 8 makes this an ideal site for advancing this park-based economic renewal.

19. **Job Readiness/ Soft Skills, Literacy, and Education** – Basic job readiness is a fundamental obstacle to employment. In helping people to surmount the above challenges, parks are helping to boost the employability of Ward 7 and 8 residents.

20. **Job Ability/ Hard Skills** – The majority of green space work in DC is contracted out to suburban firms, leaving many residents to stare as people from many miles away are paid to take care of the green spaces across the street from their homes. Parks & People's DC Green Corps is an urgently needed program to advance, in places like Wards 7 and 8, the specific environmental job skills, workforce development, leadership development, and job placement and enterprise development that will be needed in the green economy.

Additional issues found:

- Youth Abandonment
- Abuse (sexual, physical, verbal)