

Key Issue #13: Increasing Diversity for Social Justice and Inclusivity

In order for significant headway to be made in addressing these key issues in the next ten years, it will be imperative to increase diversity within the urban forestry profession as well as to increase diversity in citizen leadership and engagement. For community forests to be stewarded by their communities, their communities must assume ownership of their forests. Residents of all ages, cultures, race, and gender need to relate to their own neighborhood trees, and understand that these trees are part of a larger whole that creates a healthier community. Whether business owners, property owners, homeowners, tenants, commuters, or youth, all have a role and all need to be engaged. Achieving diversity in both the profession and citizen leadership and engagement is seen as a pivotal baseline, without which urban forestry will continue to struggle to achieve its other key goals. In order to do this, thought leaders noted that working through existing NGOs, community groups, schools and churches is key to engaging people in underserved communities, as is increasing awareness of the importance of UCF. Meeting people where they are and connecting to what is important to them is key to increasing both awareness and canopy cover particularly in underserved communities. Additionally, increasing the number of UCF training programs in African-American colleges, as well as in urban areas and new venues in partnership with established community groups and NGOs, was suggested as a means to increase diversity in the field.

IDEAS FOR ACTION - Gaps, Needs, Opportunities

- Focus on underserved communities as a top priority in the next Ten-Year Urban Forestry Action Plan.
- Increase the capacity of USFS staff members to work in underserved communities where the USFS has not traditionally had numerous programs. Expand UCF programs to connect USFS staff with community groups and nonprofit organization leaders in urban areas and to increase capacity for collaboration.
- Initiate a dialogue about the nature, extent and impacts of institutional racism in UCF, a term describing differential access that stems from the perpetration of existing networks of influence. The challenge of institutional racism is that it appears as if collective action is being taken, but with no individual, identifiable perpetrator. The goal of the dialogue would be to raise awareness about this difficult issue while enabling people to discuss it in a safe and open manner.
- Develop partnerships with the human health, food justice and environmental justice movements to learn from their knowledge about community empowerment and how to work effectively in underserved communities.
- Develop relationships and work with existing nonprofit organizations, school, church and community groups to building partnerships and opportunities to collaborate around UCF in underserved communities and especially low-canopy or low-income areas. Invest in these existing nonprofits to expand their capacity for UCF programs, including their ability to educate their communities, establish and maintain urban

forests, and address other UCF opportunities and challenges. Use their communication streams and networks to learn and develop culturally appropriate engagement methods for UCF.

- Direct UCF funding to underserved communities and low-canopy neighborhoods. Focus on UCF expansion and maintenance in low-canopy and low-income neighborhoods.
- Use fruit tree giveaway and planting programs as a means to engage community members in urban tree planting and possibly as a means to also plant larger shade trees (*connected with Key Issue 9*).
- Develop “shovel-ready job” UCF opportunities, similar to the Civilian Conservation Corps, to find green job placement for unemployed or underemployed citizens in urban forest tree planting, maintenance, data collection and program collaboration. Often, underserved communities have the highest levels of under-employment, thus training in specific aspects of urban forestry would offer an excellent way to engage and build awareness while also building stewardship capacity and real job skills. Offering bilingual training will also help expand access. Lastly, training programs for youth will develop youth confidence, leadership and job skills while also serving as a prime avenue for educating parents.
- Focus on strategies to make urban forestry conferences and volunteer and professional opportunities in the field more inclusive and diverse at the community, state and federal level. These need to be long-term sustained efforts for real change. For example, create more scholarships made available to youth of color to attend UCF conferences. Another example is to create more UCF internship opportunities focused on youth from underserved and low-income communities.
- Use communication and outreach means that are familiar to those in diverse communities around UCF opportunities, noting that these communication means may not be ones that USFS or UCF professionals commonly use, such as face-to-face engagement, social media, and community group outreach. For example, one UCF nonprofit organization has very successful block parties with music from different cultures, speakers, and where they also plant and maintain urban forests during the block party.
- Utilize the program EnviroScreen as a way to highlight underserved neighborhoods and provide an opportunity to direct funding to places of greatest need.
- Provide training for urban foresters to gain skills in asset-based approaches for more effective community outreach. One example of a successful program is MERGE – *Methods to Engage Residence and Grassroots and the Environment*. Important features of asset-based approaches are that urban foresters would work with established networks of trust and channels of communication (e.g., nonprofits, schools, churches), and facilitate the identification of neighborhood needs and strengths, building on these in ways identified by the neighborhood (e.g., starting with fruit trees), as opposed to coming in with pre-established goals and plans. One

example of success was an effort in a low-income Los Angeles neighborhood to interest residents in tree planting by beginning with fruit trees. Another example of a successful approach is the Western Watershed Alliance (WAWA) initiative to work in blighted urban neighborhoods and tackling core environmental issues like controlling mosquitoes and stream bank restoration

- Identify policy barriers for effective engagement in underserved communities, such as zoning ordinances.