

Wilmington Builds Next Generation of Environmental Stewards

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By Martha Corrozi Narvaez

Today's youth may understand global environmental threats, but their connection to their local environment and their role in it are diminishing. Schools teach broader environmental concepts but they overlook or neglect the value of personal experience in one's local environment. Focusing on getting youth outside to touch, feel and see what is in their neighborhood awakens appreciation for and connection to the outdoors and the environment. Research suggests added benefits to connecting our youth with nature include reducing childhood obesity and increasing community pride and awareness.

Using existing youth employment and environmental programs across the nation as a template, **Wilmington, Delaware's Green Jobs program** was established so that youth have opportunities to transform the city into a greener, cleaner and safer community. Participants engage in meaningful environmental experiences through employment, education and mentoring. Particularly noteworthy are the collaborative efforts among government, nonprofits and academic institutions that make this program operate.



The Incentive

Largely urbanized, northern Delaware is home to Wilmington, the state's largest city. With a population of more than 70,000 people, this area accounts for high water demands, wastewater loads, urban/suburban pollution loads and floodplain damage. The city must comply with federal regulations to maintain its sewer system. It also must meet **federal Clean Water Act requirements** for water quality, including public education and outreach requirements, which creates an impetus for initiatives like the Green Jobs program. Green Jobs provides the city with the mechanism to fulfill some of these requirements, achieve additional citywide initiatives and provide a unique youth employment program.

A Program Is Born

In summer 2010, **Delaware's State Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control** (DNREC), the City of Wilmington and the University of Delaware Water Resources Agency discussed a federal grant opportunity and possible youth employment program focused on the environment and water resources. This discussion became the impetus for the Green Jobs Program; the idea was to bring environmental topics, hands-on experiences and environmental careers to urban youth in Wilmington. Not only would it target youth not typically exposed to this type of experience but it also would help the city meet the public education and outreach requirements of their regulatory programs.

Upon city approval, the University of Delaware's Water Resources Agency took the lead and invited local partners to participate in this city program. Participants at the first meeting included representatives of local and state government, environmental organizations and local nonprofit organizations. Interest was high and each organization committed to providing program interns with a rich and relevant work experience coupled with education that introduces them to environmental issues and careers. The Green Jobs Program officially began in 2011.

The city's Youth Employment Program provides employment and work etiquette training and transportation to and from each organization's job site. Green Jobs interns, 14-18 years old and chosen by lottery, are selected based on interest in the program and successful completion of an interview. The program runs for six weeks with participants averaging 25 hours per week. Participants earn minimum wage paid by the city. A counselor serves as a mentor and intermediary between the interns and their host organizations.

Key to the program are the participation and coordination of eight project partners, which include nonprofit, local and state government and academic entities. They host interns for multiple days throughout the six weeks, exposing them to different environmental careers and issues through a variety of activities. Individuals within the partner organizations also serve as mentors.

Hands-On Experiences

Green Jobs focuses on bringing urban youth outside so they are exposed to environmental issues and careers. Host organizations work hard to ensure they leave the six-week program with a greater understanding of the local environment, ways to improve it and their individual impact on it. Program activities and topics emphasize water issues given the initial need to meet federal water quality requirements and Wilmington's location at the confluence of Brandywine Creek and Christina River, about 90 miles from the ocean.

Primary focus areas of the six-week program include:

- Stormwater and watershed management, including activities such as riparian or raingarden planting, storm drain marking, and clean water education and outreach.
- Educational topics like estuaries, climate change, nonpoint source pollution and aquatic biology such as freshwater mussels, macroinvertebrates and freshwater fish.
- Recreation topics, including fishing skills, fishing responsibly and canoeing.
- Drinking water (source and treatment) and wastewater (fate and treatment) specific to the local area.
- Trail maintenance like path clearing, weed-whacking, mowing, pruning and brush removal.
- Marsh restoration, including invasive plant species removal and planting and care for native plants.
- Community gardening and farming and the concept of local and sustainable foods.

Professional development is critical to this program. Host organizations introduce interns to environmental positions, including naturalists, zoo careers, county conservationists and planners. Interns also are introduced to such career-oriented skills as resume writing, public speaking and geographic information systems (GIS) training. Journaling, nature photography and mentoring are other pieces added to the program as it has evolved.

Endorsed by various local public administrators, the Green Jobs program has been extremely successful in its first four years. It provides new and exciting hands-on opportunities and work experience to youth in the City of Wilmington. As one past participant noted, “I know that it helped people and the environment, too; that made me feel good.”

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