

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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By Courtney Hutchison

For anyone driving through New Haven, Connecticut's Dixwell neighborhood, "urban forest" would not be a term that comes to mind. Like many other low-income neighborhoods in the area, Dixwell has sparse tree cover and lacks the parks and green spaces that have been shown to reduce pollution and improve quality of life in urban environments. Residents also struggle with [food insecurity](#), [poor health outcomes](#), and [high rates of unemployment](#).

Though these economic and environmental challenges may not seem interconnected, they are at the heart of an innovative initiative that is bringing employment opportunities, environmental awareness, and new tree growth to low-income communities and communities of color throughout New Haven.

Led by Urban Resources Initiative (URI), a local nonprofit that promotes environmental education and urban forestry, the GreenSkills Project provides paid employment and workforce training that targets youth of color and people returning from prison. GreenSkills is one of a growing number of urban initiatives across the country that are leveraging green infrastructure jobs to bring economic opportunity to workers that need it most.

"We view the local environment and the broader needs of the community as intricately linked, and we want to make sure our work is meeting the biological and social needs of the New Haven community," said Colleen Murphy-Dunning, program director, at URI and the Hixon Center for Urban Ecology at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

For most of its 25-year history, URI had supported small urban forestry projects driven by volunteers' priorities and labor; but when New Haven Mayor John DeStefano Jr. enlisted these volunteers in 2009 to help plant 10,000 street trees in 10 years, the staff were concerned with making this project serve the community.

"Residents from lower-income communities who volunteer with us were worried about crime in vacant lots, recidivism, and long-term unemployment," Murphy-Dunning explained. URI was already providing paid work to local teenagers through its GreenSkills program at that time, but after these community discussions, "we recognized a very big need in the community to provide paid work that could help returning citizens transition into the workforce," she added. URI partnered with local nonprofits that provide transitional job programs and other support for returning citizens to assist in hiring.

Today, GreenSkills hires 30 to 40 interns each season, including youth and returning citizens, who earn \$10 to \$12 an hour planting trees and working on other urban forestry projects, such as building storm-water management systems. Workers are trained in tree identification, planning techniques, and the role that green infrastructure — the broader network of green spaces within an area — play in improving air quality, reducing storm run-off, and providing other health and ecological benefits.

"Some of them go on to work in landscaping or other related fields, but for many the biggest impact is that they gain a deeper understanding of the environment they live in, while building transferable job skills and providing a valuable service to their community," Murphy-Dunning said.

Green spaces as a site for community reinvestment

The need to manage forest resources within urbanizing areas, whether single trees on the sidewalk or groves of trees on private land, dates back to the early 20th century in the United States. As urban spaces have grown, multiple aspects of what is known as "green infrastructure" — vegetated planters, parks, trees, and other green spaces — have been increasingly recognized as vital aspects of city environments.

Green infrastructure reduces pollution, provides storm-water filtration, regulates temperature, and offers habitats for birds and other wildlife. The benefits to residents are manifold: [numerous studies](#) have linked robust green infrastructure to increased physical and mental health, safer streets, and tax dollar savings. For example, the 32,000 street trees in New Haven save the city an estimated [\\$4 million each year](#) by improving air quality, reducing temperature, and absorbing storm water.

As organizations like URI are showing, the social and economic benefits of urban forestry also extend to the local job market, where necessary investments in green infrastructure can provide historically underinvested communities with much-needed pathways to employment.

Targeting these communities poses a crucial opportunity to enhance equity and inclusion, because these neighborhoods are often grappling with the dual challenge of economic and environmental disinvestment. Many existing urban policies and plans have excluded low-income communities and communities of color from urban forestry investments. Lacking adequate tree cover, parks, and other green spaces, these communities often suffer from lower air and water quality, higher rates of respiratory illness, lower rates of physical activity, and higher levels of stress.

A recent study, [Jobs and Equity in the Urban Forest](#), showcases the small, but growing range of policies, programs, and investments that — like GreenSkills — are harnessing jobs in the urban forest to build opportunity within low-income communities and communities of color. The study is co-authored by [Ecotrust](#), a Portland, Oregon, nonprofit

that promotes environmentally sound economic development, and PolicyLink, in partnership with Portland green infrastructure contractor, [Verde Landscape](#).

"The number of jobs in green infrastructure is growing, but this growth is often not made accessible to disadvantaged communities," said Noah Enelow, senior economist at EcoTrust and co-author on the study. "We wanted to understand the barriers and opportunities that exist for creating pathways into the green infrastructure workforce for workers within these communities."

Drawing on examples from across the country, including URI's GreenSkills program, Jobs and Equity in the Urban Forest highlights state and local policies, workforce development initiatives, and social impact business enterprises that are ensuring that historically underinvested communities benefit from jobs in green infrastructure.

Economic opportunity in urban greening

Though the total number of jobs in green infrastructure is not large relative to the economy, the green infrastructure field is significant and growing, especially as America's urban population continues to grow. Moreover, green infrastructure offers a relatively inexpensive means for job creation, according to an economic impact analysis included in Jobs and Equity in the Urban Forest.

The analysis focused on Verde Landscape and found that for each \$1 million of direct economic activity generated by the company, 16 direct jobs and 23 total jobs were created in the Greater Portland metropolitan region. These job opportunities in turn provide positive benefits to the broader economy: each \$1.00 in output by Verde Landscape generates \$1.88 in output within the Greater Portland economy.

As an industry, green infrastructure has not typically been geared toward workers from disadvantaged communities. Access to these jobs, including opportunities for training, education, and apprenticeship, are often lacking within historically underinvested communities. However, where city officials and programs in the public and private sector have made inclusion a priority, significant progress has been made in increasing equity and impact through green infrastructure jobs.

For example, targeted outreach to communities of color and low-income communities — such as GreenSkills' targeting of high schools based in communities of color or Philadelphia's requirements for diversity in hiring and contracting through its Green City, Clean Water program — have succeeded in making jobs in the green sector more accessible and inclusive.

As Enelow explained, green infrastructure projects that integrate an equity agenda provide local leaders with a win-win opportunity that benefits the environment, the community, and the economy. "Across the country, people are using targeted investments to make sure that underinvested neighborhoods benefit from their own greening process — both environmentally and economically," Enelow said.