

handout 2-11-16



Madison 1 of 7 cities selected for national nature initiative

Effort will focus on engaging youth and families of color with nature activities

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Published On: Feb 11 2016 08:59:05 AM CST



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Madison will play a vital role in a national plan to make nature more accessible to children who live in cities.

Noted for its long-standing traditions of outdoor recreation and environmental conservation, the Wisconsin capital city was named among seven U.S. cities to participate in a long-term initiative to explore ways in which local municipalities, private institutions and nonprofit organizations can create opportunities to better connect kids with the great outdoors.

Selected by the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education & Families and the Children & Nature Network, Madison already offers a variety of cultural and natural resources that help to facilitate the needs of its citizens to spend time outside. But local officials recognize the need to do more to make the outdoors available to everyone.

“Madison has a wealth of urban nature, but not all Madison kids get a chance to enjoy it. This initiative will move us in the right direction,” Mayor Paul Soglin told Madison365. “As we utilize the equity lens in the city, I am particularly pleased that this effort will focus on youth and families of color who don’t always have access to the natural places in our city with nurturing and educational activities.”

Working in conjunction with area groups dedicated to experiential education in the outdoors, this national initiative aims to assess and evaluate a system of best practices. Members of the seven-city cohort will analyze barriers that limit access to nature. The cities include Saint Paul, Minnesota; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Providence, Rhode Island; Louisville, Kentucky; Austin, Texas; and San Francisco, California. They will take part in a strategic planning process that will result in the development of implementation plans by August 2016.

Each city will then be eligible for additional grant funding and program assistance through October 2017. Cohort organizers hope that from this process will come models of youth engagement that can be replicated across the country.

“These seven cities are on the leading edge of the children and nature movement,” said Children and Nature Network co-founder Richard Louv. “Mayors and city leaders are in a unique position to create opportunities for all children to grow up with nature as part of their everyday lives, and, in fact, could help define the nature-rich city of the 21st century.”

Mary Michaud, division of policy, planning and evaluation director at the Madison & Dane County Department of Public Health, said access to nature is critical to the growth and development of young people throughout all walks of life. Leading the planning initiative for the city of Madison, she said a conscientious effort to get kids outside can go a long way toward improving the overall health of the community.

“There is good research evidence that connecting children and families to nature can support multiple paths toward well-being,” Michaud said in an email. “Children need outdoor play, and people feel better physically and emotionally. Neighbors get to know one another. It’s only through diverse partnerships and strong youth leadership that these efforts will flourish.”

Throughout the seven-month planning phase, the primary goal will be to define a shared vision among many different organizations in the Madison area on how best to ensure that all children have the opportunity to spend time in nature. A major piece of this approach, Michaud said, is to identify what is working and build on it.

“Youth should lead and fully inform that vision,” she said. “After that, our goal is to develop a sustainable plan to commit community resources to this vision.”

Madison-area organizations serving youth who may not have opportunities to spend time in nature are encouraged to participate. The planning program will host a kickoff event on March 5, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. at the Warner Park Community Center.

“We are especially interested in cultivating youth voice and leadership in this initiative,” Michaud said.

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