Green City Force: Service Years as a Pathway to Stable Careers

For young adults without Bachelor’s degrees, good paying jobs have become increasingly out of reach. Too many young people find themselves working low-wage, dead-end jobs with little hope for career advancement. Green City Force (GCF) changes that for 18 - 24 year old high school graduates who live in New York City public housing. Green City Force prepares young adults to succeed in their chosen careers by engaging them in full-time AmeriCorps national service, training, and work experiences related to the clean energy economy. In doing so, Green City Force encourages them to lead socially and environmentally responsible lives. GCF is working towards a "green city" built on principles of sustainability, social, economic and environmental justice.

Green City Force AmeriCorps Members lead projects that improve sustainability and environmental health in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments. NYCHA is a “city within the city,” housing over 500,000 people. Young public housing residents are uniquely positioned through leadership, training, and service, to drive change in their own communities while building skills and experiences to help launch careers and achieve economic prosperity. Recently, in partnership with the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice and the housing authority, GCF has focused recruitment and service projects in the 15 highest-crime neighborhoods in NYCHA, as well as those identified as priorities for creating open space and access to healthy food.

To date GCF has engaged over 400 NYCHA residents in our corps to support sustainability initiatives developed in partnership with the Housing Authority. GCF’s programs are supported publicly by local city state and federal grants, privately by corporate, foundation and individual donations, and internally by fee-for-service income. In the GCF Urban Farm Corps, made possible with support from The Corps Network, Members serve 10-month terms to build farms on NYCHA properties and increase public housing residents’ access to fresh produce. This service is part of the NYCHA Urban Agriculture Initiative, a partnership between NYCHA, the Fund for Public Health in NY and GCF, and a component of the NYC Mayor’s city-wide Building Healthy Communities Initiative. In GCF’s 6-month Energy Corps, supported with funding from the Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS), AmeriCorps Members drive the Love Where You Live campaign to educate thousands of fellow residents about energy and water conservation.
The *Love Where You Live* initiative illustrates how GCF uses service years as the first step in a sectoral training strategy for young adults in public housing. In the spring of 2016 GCF's 50 Member Cohort 11 brought the *Love Where You Live* challenge to seven NYCHA developments in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx. The campaign directly reached 6,400 public housing residents from over 2,300 apartments. GCF AmeriCorps Members educated fellow NYCHA residents about saving power and water and proper recycling practices. They distributed free “Eco-Kits” with energy efficient light bulbs and tools to help residents weatherproof their apartments. The 7,387 CFL bulbs that GCF AmeriCorps Members installed and issued are projected to reduce residents’ average power use from 243 to 63 Kilowatts per hour. The campaign left developments cleaner and greener, while members are prepared for professional careers.

Corps Members train in electrical and carpentry skills to prepare them for the GPRO certification.

GCF employs sectoral training strategies geared towards career paths in green buildings, encompassing jobs related to building efficiency, sustainable energy and greening open space. Members in both cohorts receive training in environmental literacy and green construction practices, and take courses to prepare for the Green Building Professional (GPRO) certification, acquiring skills and qualifications required to secure jobs with opportunities for advancement. Urban Farm Corps Members receive additional training in composting and organic food preparation. In addition to these workforce development trainings GCF Corps Members develop their interpersonal and life skills while working in teams. Corps Members hone communications and problem-solving skills at community meetings where staff facilitate open discussion about the challenges, problems, and successes that Corps Members encounter while in service.

On average, GCF graduates 80% of members from our rigorous program. Employers cite GCF alumni as stand-outs. 80% are working or in school, and GCF continues to work with our alumni to support their advancement along career paths. Some members also continue with GCF after graduating as energy auditors and apprentices at EmPower, GCF’s fee-for-service partnership with the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. In 2016, GCF and employer partners L&M Development Partners, the Association for Energy Affordability, Con Edison and NYCHA’s Resident Economic Empowerment Services teamed up as part of the JobsFirstNYC Young Adult Sectoral Employment Project (YASEP), to design clear career pathways for GCF alumni in the green building sector.
GCF Alumni go on to careers related to green building and landscaping. GCF graduate Krystal Ruiz went on to work as a solar installer at Grid Alternatives, Alumna Dania Williams is now a porter at C&C Apartment Management, and Alumnus Terrell Fulwood is a Technician at the Association for Energy Affordability (AEA). From the Urban Farm Corps, Alumni Domingo Morales went on to become an Organics Recovery Coordinator at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and Abdu Rodney continued on to work at Future Green Studio landscaping.

In the words of GCF graduate Miguel Rodriguez, “I learned building science and earned a national certification. Green City Force made me see that I am a part of the solution. That changed my life. I found my passion: renewable energy.” GCF wants to make Miguel’s story true for thousands of young people in New York and beyond.

Lisbeth Shepherd is the Founder and Executive Director of Green City Force. She is a nationally recognized social entrepreneur, an Echoing Green alum, and co-founder of Unis-Cité, the leading national service program in France. For more information about Green City Force contact info@greencityforce.org.