

## LEADERSHIP ACADEMY: CONNECTING CHILDREN TO NATURE REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

**WHAT:** Join National League of Cities (NLC) and Children & Nature Network (C&NN) for a two-day convening in October 2015 to develop strategies and initiatives promoting stronger and more equitable connections to nature and the outdoors for children.

### **Why focus on children and nature?**

A new movement is taking shape to help all children make stronger connections with nature. Cities and their community partners stand at the forefront of this movement, which has developed in response to the rise in children's time on electronic devices, minimal time spent in unstructured outdoor play, and higher rates of emotional and physical illness, including childhood obesity. It has also formed in response to concerns about the potential lack of informed and dedicated environmental stewards in the next generation, which must urgently address climate change and pressures on ecological balance. Finally, much more remains to be done to connect low-income children and children of color with nature, and cities have an important role to play in closing this "nature gap."

### **Purpose of strategic partnership between NLC and C&NN**

In 2014, NLC entered into a strategic partnership with Children & Nature Network, the leading national organization supporting the creation of "nature-rich cities" by convening youth, families, community groups, and leaders to increase young people's engagement with nature, and by sharing research, insights, and practical examples on this topic.

City leaders can adopt more central roles on their own and in collaboration with C&NN and NLC. This includes prioritizing equitable and abundant access to natural spaces and outdoor recreation opportunities through projects such as green schoolyards, revision of zoning and land use policies, and engaging with community coalitions to maximize opportunities for children to spend more time in nature. Coordinated efforts between city departments and partners such as school districts and community-based organizations can maximize benefits to both young people and their communities. Benefits include:

- Improved health outcomes
- More creative and unstructured play in nature
- Greater self-esteem, focus, cooperation, and executive function
- Stronger academic skills, achievement, and engagement
- Increased opportunities for social and emotional learning
- Cultivation of a long-term connection with nature, improved ecological literacy, and a strong ethic of environmental stewardship

### October 2015 Leadership Academies

The NLC Institute for Youth, Education, and Families and Children & Nature Network [launched](#) the Cities Promoting Access to Nature initiative in November 2014, with the support of a three-year grant from The JPB Foundation. In the earliest phase, C&NN updated a review of the scientific [literature](#), and over 70 cities and their partners contributed responses to a survey to describe policies and practices they have implemented to connect children to nature. **Next, NLC and C&NN will host two *Connecting Children to Nature* Leadership Academies in October 2015.** Each leadership academy will provide city officials with the skills and knowledge to take up new or expanded leadership roles in connecting children to nature. Each academy provides participants access to national experts, promising practice examples, and opportunities for peer learning and local action planning.

**In 2016-2017, cities that have participated in a leadership academy may apply for pass-through grants and technical assistance to plan and implement local initiatives to expand equitable access to nature.**

#### WHEN & WHERE:

Tuesday, Oct. 6 – Thursday Oct. 8, 2015  
Salt Lake City, UT

OR

Wednesday, Oct. 28 – Friday, Oct. 30, 2015  
St. Paul, MN

Each academy will include the same content, with possible changes in the national experts in attendance. When applying, please select a preference between the two locations and sets of dates. The first academy will take place from **October 6-8 in Salt Lake City, UT**, and the second will take place **October 28-30 in St. Paul, MN**. Both commence with an opening dinner and program, and conclude before lunch on the final day. Both academies will include the following opportunities:

- Sessions led by experts and pioneers in the field
- Workshops for drafting action plans
- Dinner and networking with key thought leaders
- *Optional* field visits before and after each academy

#### WHO: **Local elected officials, senior city staff, and other community stakeholders are invited to apply in teams of two or three persons.**

NLC will select teams from up to 15 cities to attend the leadership academies. Each city may nominate a team of two or three representatives that must include *at least one of the following individuals: the mayor; a city council member; or a senior representative of the mayor's or city manager's office.* Other team members may include but are not limited to: senior representatives of city agencies such as parks and recreation, education, urban planning, utility, or environment departments; and community-based partners or service providers with a record of effectively connecting children to nature and/or reducing inequities in access to nature.

NLC will select, on a competitive basis, a diverse set of cities of various sizes from different regions of the country to participate in the leadership academies. **Preference will be given to cities that are members in good standing of NLC.** NLC's selection criteria will include: evidence of high-level municipal leadership and commitment to improving nature access outcomes for youth in underrepresented communities, collaboration among relevant city, county and state agencies, and a clear indication of how the leadership academy can catalyze local efforts.

**BENEFITS:** Selected city teams will learn about best practices and lessons learned from the C&NN's literature review, the nationwide city scan, and thought leaders in the field. Teams will explore successful efforts to improve access to nature in cities across the country, with a focus on children from communities with historic or recent lack of access. City teams will receive guidance from experts who approach this issue from multiple disciplines, including planning, education, policy, and youth development. Participants will also strengthen their relationships with colleagues in cities across the nation. Following the leadership academies, participating cities will be invited to apply for planning and, subsequently, implementation grants to take action in their communities.

NLC will also invite leadership academy participants to form a new NLC Children & Nature Learning Network, which will provide ongoing opportunities for city leaders to learn and receive support from nationally-recognized experts in the field and city peers.

**TRAVEL:** NLC will reimburse participants for airline travel (up to a maximum of \$600) as well as two nights' accommodation at the hotel and other travel-related costs in accordance with NLC's travel reimbursement policies. Meeting participants will receive reimbursements promptly upon submission of travel receipts following the convening.

**APPLYING:** **Thursday, July 16 at 2:30pm ET – Optional Q&A session**  
This is an optional question and answer session to obtain more information about the leadership academy or application requirements. You can **register for the webinar** [here](#). You may also direct your questions anytime to Priya Cook at NLC at (202)626-3044 or [cook@nlc.org](mailto:cook@nlc.org).

**Wednesday, July 29 – Applications Due**

Please complete and email the following application materials to Priya Cook at [cook@nlc.org](mailto:cook@nlc.org) by **July 29, 2015**. Please type or print your responses. We encourage early applications.

- ☐ City Team Application Form
- ☐ City Team Application Questions (no more than four pages)

**Friday, August 7 – Notification to Selected Cities**

NLC will notify cities as to whether their application has been accepted.

**LEADERSHIP ACADEMY:  
CONNECTING CHILDREN TO NATURE  
CITY TEAM APPLICATION FORM**

**City:** Austin, Texas

**Population:** 843,000, but its 5-county metropolitan area has an estimated population of 1.9 million **% Low income residents:** 19.1% persons below poverty level 2009-2013

Please indicate a preference, if any, between the Salt Lake City and St. Paul academies for our consideration:

☐ Salt Lake City (10/6-10/8)

☒ St. Paul (10/28-10/30)

**Team Member One (City Lead Representative):**

Name: Brandi Clark Burton

Title: Environmental Policy Advisor

Office/Agency: Office of the Mayor's, City of Austin

Street Address: City Hall, 301 W 2nd St,

City, State, and Zip Code: Austin, TX 78701

Phone: (512) 978-2100

Email: Brandi.Burton@austintexas.gov

**Team Member Two:**

Name: Marty Stump

Title: Assistant Director over Operations

Organization/Agency: Austin Parks and Recreation Department

Street Address: 919 W. 28 1/2 St.

City, State, and Zip Code: Austin, Texas, 78705

Phone: (512) 974-9460

Email: marty.stump@austintexas.gov

**Team Member Three (Optional):**

Name: Hayden Brooks

Title: Immediate Past Chair and Co-Founder of CiNCA

Organization/Agency: Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center

Street Address: 712 Congress Ave # 200, Austin, TX 78701

City, State, and Zip Code: Austin, Texas 787

Phone: 512 554 5544

Email: hbrooks@americanrealty.com

## LEADERSHIP ACADEMY: CONNECTING CHILDREN TO NATURE CITY TEAM APPLICATION QUESTIONS

*Responses to the questions below will help NLC & C&NN assess your community's capacity and commitment to engage in and lead initiatives connecting children to nature. Only one application is required per city. Please do not exceed four pages for the narrative portion.*

1. How would you describe your city's efforts to connect children to nature? Are you at a beginning stage (for example, isolated interest across departments without having yet engaged in planning or implementation) or an advanced one (for example, your city leadership has defined and implemented a strategic plan specifically targeting underserved youth)? Please summarize the status of this work in your city.

Austin has a long history of connecting children to nature and is well advanced in planning ways to connect children to nature.

The Austin Nature & Science Center, a facility owned by the City of Austin, under the Parks and Recreation Department, had its early beginnings in 1959, with a clear focus on outdoor environmental education being in place by the mid 60's. Nature's Way Preschool is one of the country's earliest nature preschool, established in 1992. The preschool offers a nature enrichment program that engages our children's knowledge and instills an appreciation of nature and its resources. The City of Austin continues to support these sites and other locations that bring children in touch with nature, insuring free entry and many free events.

Austin Parks and Recreation Department began organizing semi-annual "Nature Planning Collaboration" meetings in 2009 with environmental leaders across the city, gathering information on those agencies and organizations' goals as related to land stewardship and nature education for adults and youth. They were asked how they might collaborate or contribute to Family Nature Clubs, Nature events, Nature programming at recreation centers, creek and river education, and Healthy trails. The city combined efforts with Westcave Preserve in 2011 to merge this group with the beginning Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin.

In addition to the Austin Parks and Recreation Department, other City departments have organized and provided environmental programming for children, including Watershed Protection with Earth Camp and Austin Water Utilities' Wildlands interpretive hikes. The City's Transportation and Public Works departments have also been heavily involved in creating access to nature through bike paths, trails, and supporting community garden infrastructure. Health and Human Services department recognizes the importance of getting outdoors, and has several programs in place to encourage outdoor activities for families.

Imagine Austin, the City's comprehensive plan, is the document created by a combined citizen and government task force that gives the vision providing cohesion throughout the organization. <http://austintexas.gov/departments/imagine-austin>

2. What key agencies, community organizations, or other partners are potential collaborators for your future children and nature efforts? Please provide brief descriptions of these organizations, including the role that each organization currently plays in your city.

Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA) comprised of 28 different organizations, is an effective partner currently and for future efforts to focus on connecting children to nature. For the past work and current partners, see <http://westcave.org/cinca>. Future collaborators might include more state agencies, since Austin is the home to many. Austin Parks Foundation (APF) is a non-profit organization devoted to building public and private partnerships that develop and maintain parks, trails, and open space in Austin and Travis County. Their mission is to connect people to resources and partnerships to develop and improve parks in and around Austin. They serve as a principal partner for community groups and other organizations to promote and create projects through community-wide collaboration and public education, and helps bridge existing city initiatives that encourage a well-balanced and healthy urban environment for people, see <http://austinparks.org>

3. What city partnerships, strategies, or other resources will increase connections to nature for low-income children or other groups that currently have limited access, and what are the primary impediments to engaging your underserved youth?

Our underserved youth experience difficulties in getting out to nature and engaging in nature programming due to transportation issues and perceived dangers outdoors. Centralized Programming in the Austin Parks and Recreation Department allows resource heavy programming offered at a single nature or cultural center is made available to recreation centers across the City, which has increased connections to nature. Those recreation centers have requested a more consistent presence by the nature center staff. A recent grant awarded to CiNCA/Westcave will allow for bus transportation to be shared between the providing organizations to take kids out into nature. Past planning for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and its facilities did not focus on connections to nature, so many of our recreation centers require retrofits, especially in those underserved neighborhoods.

4. How will participation in the Connecting Children to Nature Leadership Academy strengthen or expand local efforts in your city? Please list three things you hope to implement in your city as a result of attending this leadership academy, and name any particular strategies or topics you hope this leadership academy will address.

Through our attendance at the Academy, we hope to learn existing best practices and what other cities are achieving with successful approaches for a variety of topics that have gained importance in future planning.

Accessibility, both involving development of nature pods throughout neighborhoods and transportation to our larger nature tracts, is a concern for the City of Austin. We are working hard on adaptation/inclusion strategies for high adventure activities and our regular camps and programs.

Creating Children in Nature play environments has begun with several built environments, each with increasing amounts of natural materials and physical challenges. We would like to see the creation of guidelines and policies that capture the philosophical approach of this intention, such as the required amount of natural materials in all playground replacements, in order to capture the goals quantitatively. There is also interest in how other cities deal with the liability and risk of building nature playscapes.

We have great interest in becoming part of longitudinal studies that examine the impact of nature play, and how it functions in ethnic and minority cultures successfully.

5. How will your city's participation enrich the leadership academy experience for fellow participants? What experiences or resources in the area of connecting children to nature can you share with your network of peers?

The City of Austin was one of the early municipalities involved in the formation of a nature collaborative, beginning in 2009. Both nonprofits and a variety of agencies and organizations helped choose a focus resulting in a concentration of resources to attack an issue, such as the high level of obesity found in targeted middle schools, and to come together in providing grants for outdoor classrooms at schools.

We can share the work being done in the nature playscapes and our collaboration with the Health community through gardening, outdoor exercise equipment trails, conferences and speakers.

Work in developing outdoor leaders from underserved communities is ongoing, being led by multiple entities through Texas Parks and Wildlife outreach grants.

Because of the two Habitat Conservation Plans put in place to protect critical habitats for 3 endangered species within the city's limits, we have experience in protecting nature and using it as an opportunity for educating the public about the lands with controlled access.

We take opportunities in cross programming to introduce nature through art, fantasy, and high adventure (Celebrate Urban Birds, Woodland Faerie Trail, Wild Caving), as a gateway to being out in nature.