



Testimony of Tonya Gayle, Executive Director of Green City Force

House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

On “Examining the Potential for a Civilian Climate Corps”

July 20th, 2021

Introduction:

Good afternoon Chairman Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to testify regarding the important topic of “Examining the Potential for a Civilian Climate Corps.”

My name is Tonya Gayle. I serve as Executive Director of Green City Force (GCF), as well as a board member for both The Corps Network (TCN) and Environmental Advocates of New York (EANY). I’m moved to speak before you today because since 2009, GCF has worked at the intersection of environmental, economic and racial justice. I believe that these critical priorities are fully aligned with the components needed for the successful design of a national Civilian Climate Corps. This is an exciting time and a rich opportunity for establishing real systems change and equity in American society.

Green City Force

The mission of GCF is to train young leaders to power a green and inclusive society through service. Our pillars are service, training, sustainability and justice. We believe that these are nonpartisan principles and practices that all Americans should align with regardless of political party, race, creed, or socioeconomic status. A recent article written by General Stanley A. McChrystal states that [National Service Is One of the Few Things That Could Unite America](#). GCF is one of over 130 Corps within The Corps Network. GCF’s recruitment and AmeriCorps national service initiatives are focused in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) which is a city within a city, representing roughly 1 in 15 New Yorkers.

We are an urban conservation corps that engages young residents ages 18-24 years old who have high school diplomas or equivalency in six or ten months of structured, full-time, national service and workforce training. 68% of our last graduated cohort identify as Black, multiracial or indigenous, and 55% as Hispanic. NYCHA communities face intersectional, structural issues related to environmental, economic and racial injustice. Through the Service Corps, young adults in NYCHA lead large-scale, multi-faceted sustainability initiatives improving environment and health for fellow residents. Working in teams, in partnership with resident leaders,

agencies and other organizations, Corps Members gain skills, certifications and experience to secure family-supporting careers in the green economy.

The low- to moderate-income clients that we serve are all residents of NYCHA. In order to qualify for NYCHA housing a family's household income must be below 80% of the Area Median Income, although most NYCHA residents earn below that mark. As of January 1, 2020, the average household income at NYCHA is \$25,602 which is below the 2020 Federal Poverty Level for a family of four.

GCF has a 12- year track record of results serving NYCHA young adults and communities, which are 90% Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) (NYCHA's 2021 Resident Data Book). We work from an asset-based framework, recruiting BIPOC NYCHA young adults challenged by systemic barriers to economic mobility and pervasive effects of poverty, racial discrimination, environmental injustice, and divestment in public housing; all intensified by the pandemic.

GCF is unique in employing a conservation corps model focused on public housing residents and communities. We recruit from the pool of 52,000 18-24 year old NYCHA residents. Pre-pandemic, the unemployment rate of 18 - 24 year old young adults in NYCHA was over 70%. The national unemployment rate for out-of-school 16-24 year olds is 9% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), 20% for Latinx and 30% for Black people (JobsFirstNYC, 2016).

GCF has a program completion rate of 81% and 82% of our graduates are working within six months of program completion. Average wages one year past service term is \$16.50/hr. Graduates of our corps get jobs in energy efficiency, horticulture and landscaping, sustainable construction, solar, composting, urban farming, nutrition and food, building operations and maintenance, zero waste and trade union jobs. Featured in my written testimony are Earlton Massenburg currently working in an electrical union, and Domingo Morales, an entrepreneur whose Compost Power enterprise works to hire GCF graduates.

GRADUATE TESTIMONIAL: DOMINGO MORALES



"Green City Force put in so much resources to get me to the point where I am today. From the idea of working with housing residents from the ages of 18-24.... (GCF) gave me the opportunity to be in a position to change people and teach people and to bring a skill."
- Founder, Compost Power, GCF graduate and winner of the 2020 David Prize

GCF ALUMNI: EARLTON MASSENBURG



Current Position:

Apprentice at IBEW Local 3

Achievements at Green City Force:

- Gained certification as a Green Building Professional (GPRO) from the U.S. Green Building Council.
- Obtained 10 & 30 hour Occupational Safety & Health (OSHA 10 & 30) certification
- Completed NYCHA Resident Training Academy

GCF has grown and distributed over 100,000 lbs of organic fresh produce inside urban spaces. Our Eco-Hubs are completely driven and built by Corps Members and our staff, many of whom are alumni of our program. These outcomes are examples of what a Civilian Climate Corps could achieve at a national scale.

In NYC and across the nation, there is latent talent and ability in young people who have been locked out of the economy as a whole let alone the green economy. At GCF, we believe in the knowledge and wisdom of people from frontline communities as the ones with the best understanding of what it takes to solve problems in their home communities, including climate solutions.



We created our corps in New York City as a working model for what we believe a bold national effort can look like:

- Enlist and train young people from low income housing communities as a priority population
- Equip them with the tools to change the trajectory of their lives and access good jobs
- A platform to develop a passion for sustainability and service, through being part of and driving large-scale environmental and health initiatives in environmental justice communities: conducting credible messenger campaigns to educate residents about energy and water conservation, zero waste practices, healthy food preparation in their homes; installing low-cost energy measures; building composting facilities; maintaining and expanding the urban forest
- Design service as a path to greater well being and means to enlist young people to become contributors, entrepreneurs and builders of the future green cities in our country
- Employ intentional program design to center equity
- Recognize and invest in existing corps, notably those working in cities
- Provide adequate, consistent resources per member to support quality in programming including supportive and follow-up to support retention as well as career paths post-corps, and funding for projects (costs for materials, partnerships with local community groups, resident participatory planning for community-based initiatives) and for capacity

- Incorporate priority people, places and implementation partners for rapid implementation and longer-term impact
- Require that operating organizations employ a career paths framework
- Envision at least a ten-year effort so local corps like Green City Force can undertake ambitious legacy projects for systemic change in cities, such as building eco-hubs in every NYCHA community.

To dismantle barriers, you have to be holistic and intentional. This is what is so important and exciting about the potential of a Civilian Climate Corps. Leveraging strengths from every community across the country for collective impact. In the west, the climate focus is wildfires, in coastal areas, it's flooding. In cities, the climate needs range from energy efficiency behavior change, to solar, to heat sensor monitoring, composting, urban agriculture and urban forestry.

As a long-time member of The Corps Network, GCF has been part of a national community of conservation corps since our inception. We all value the unique strengths that each corps bring to their communities whether they are in Colorado, Alaska, Texas, California, Baltimore, or Philadelphia.



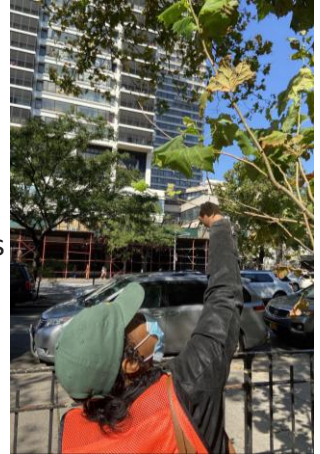
In 2016, GCF Corps Members who all hail from public housing developments in New York City were given the opportunity to participate in a Hands on Preservation Experience (H.O.P.E.) crew two week project at the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site and home of President Theodore Roosevelt. Paul Philpott, Cohort 12 Graduate, said *“The time I spent in Sagamore Hill was a great learning experience from learning more about Theodore Roosevelt other than the*

fact that he was a President. We learned about his family, life values, the concept of work hard and play even harder, the importance of having strong family ties and to make something of themselves at the same time.” [Here](#) is the full report.

This one time project allowed our Corps Members to build on the skills and training they received in our Urban Corps to work on this National Parks restoration project where they met Rangers and learned about other potential career paths they had not previously considered. Due to challenges of logistics, transportation and lodging, it has been hard to implement

additional national parks, forestry and public lands projects out of the five boroughs. But, additional investments and resources to provide for capacity to program these service projects successfully would be a welcome way to provide additional career paths for our graduates.

This past year, GCF has been working with NYCHA on some Urban Forestry projects noted here in [this article](#) featuring GCF graduate Sadiqua Minor. Maintaining and developing NYCHA's urban forest is a strategic priority for NYCHA's climate mitigation plans, and also for the health and wellbeing of NYCHA residents across the portfolio. In partnering with NYCHA, the US Forest Service and the Nature Conservancy, GCF graduates working on GCF's social enterprise conducted a first phase of inventorying NYCHA's trees while learning new skills and technologies under the tutelage of professionals. Expanding this work could be a signature project of the Civilian Climate Corps with lasting benefits for climate and equity.



“To address two of the greatest challenges facing New York City today—the climate crisis and the unemployment crisis brought on by the pandemic—the next administration should create an NYC Climate Corps. The Climate Corps would leverage federal investment through the proposed American Jobs Act to get tens of thousands of unemployed and underemployed young adult New Yorkers back to work in priority environmental projects like greening NYCHA campuses through energy retrofits and solar installation and transforming Rikers Island into a hub for renewable energy. Through these projects, Climate Corps participants who might otherwise face barriers to employment would acquire long-term skills they can use to build careers in the emerging green economy and find opportunities in the public and private sector.” -Tonya Gayle's contribution about creating a NYC Climate Corps from [RE:NEW YORK CITY: 250 Ideas from New Yorkers to Revive NYC's Economy, Spark Good Jobs, Build a More Equitable City](#)

The Corps Network TCN

[The Corps Network: Recommendations to Create a 21st Century Civilian Climate Corps](#)

- In closing...TCN comprises over 130 Conservation Corps, 25,000 national service members, who earn over 9,000 industry certifications as part of their corps experience

positioning them to be competitive for good jobs when they complete their service term. TCN is representative of the nation with a demographic breakdown of 62% white, 16% Black, 14% other, 4% Native American or Alaskan Native, 4% Asian, <1% Pacific Islander and 23% who identify as Latino or Hispanic

- As a member of The Corps Network which represents local service and conservation expertise across various regions of the country, we believe that there is value benefit in leveraging the decades of experience and expertise that should be advising the administration in designing the long term plan for a success Civilian Climate Corps
- The TCN proposal was developed with input from both the public lands and state and local corps coalitions and calls for \$40K/member , with \$15/hr equivalent stipends or wages included
- The proposal lays out a federal structure with a White House Council as an umbrella to grant programs within AmeriCorps, Department of Labor and through agencies for projects. Currently, most corps have to identify multiple sources of revenue to cover costs, which is both onerous and a barrier to reaching more people
- Growth for corps which are already proven models requires that there be multi-year line items of dependable and sustainable revenue streams which are not reliant on matching funds from other sources. This would allow for capacity building within the corps and for long-term strategic planning