

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

NRRF[®]

NATIONAL RECREATION FOUNDATION





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“It makes me especially proud that NRF’s strategy includes prioritized grantmaking on Native lands and in communities along the Gulf Coast.”



My lifelong love of the outdoors—be it hiking, skiing or sailing—guides my understanding of just how critical NRF’s mission is. What a joy it’s been for me to serve as Chair of NRF’s Board of Trustees for the past two years. It’s been fabulous to work with an energized and dynamic staff and a great leader. NRF’s CEO, Sophie Twichell, has assembled a terrific team, making the job as Chair especially fun and rewarding.

2024 was a banner year for NRF. One highlight was the Board’s completion of a focus-sharpening strategic plan. The trustees brought their diverse skill sets to reimagine an NRF future that supports youth outdoor recreation programs across the nation, cultivates capacity-expanding partnerships and enhances the skills of the professionals doing this important youth development work. NRF will continue its long tradition of supporting grassroots youth-serving organizations in under-resourced communities that expose children to healing, life-changing experiences in nature. It makes me especially proud that NRF’s strategy includes prioritized grantmaking on Native lands and in communities along the Gulf Coast. NRF seeks to address the discrepancy in funding in these parts of the country, places where youth programs and funding are needed most.

NRF partnerships have expanded during my tenure as Board Chair. These collaborations with other funders allow us to amplify our impact. Since 2021, NRF and the Turner Foundation have co-funded \$1.8 million in support of youth outdoor engagement. This effective partnership has allowed NRF to expand its grantmaking to reach an additional 22 organizations serving youth on Native land and in rural communities, places that need these opportunities the most. Another funding partner, Tom’s of Maine, provided a generous gift of \$3 million (\$1M/year) to support NRF’s Outdoor Grants program through 2024. These grants, focused on building a connection to nature in young

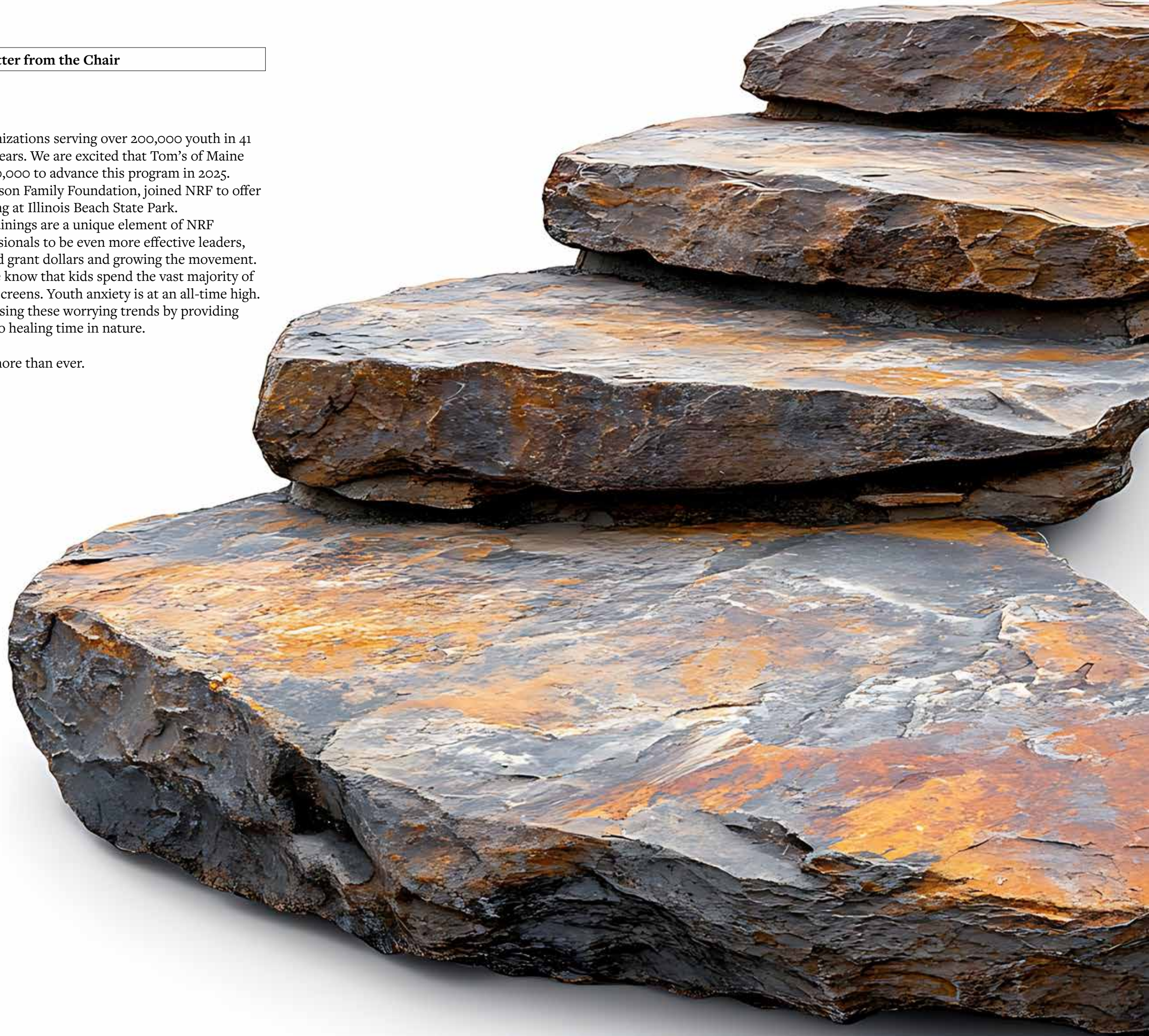
Letter from the Chair

people, supported 80 organizations serving over 200,000 youth in 41 states over the past three years. We are excited that Tom's of Maine invested an additional \$250,000 to advance this program in 2025. Another partner, the Morrison Family Foundation, joined NRF to offer a grantee leadership training at Illinois Beach State Park. Grantee workshops and trainings are a unique element of NRF funding: supporting professionals to be even more effective leaders, providing resources beyond grant dollars and growing the movement. In this post-COVID era, we know that kids spend the vast majority of their time indoors and on screens. Youth anxiety is at an all-time high. NRF is dedicated to addressing these worrying trends by providing young people with access to healing time in nature.

This work is needed now more than ever.

Chip Davison

Chair, Board of Trustees



MISSION

The National Recreation Foundation increases access for young people to play, explore, learn, and grow in the outdoors.

HOW OUR MISSION TRANSLATES INTO ACTION

Over the past decade, National Recreation Foundation has distributed over \$20 million to more than 270 grantees across the country. Today, NRF grants more than twice as much as it did 15 years ago. Programs supported by grants from NRF reach up to 50,000 youth annually.



Ten years!
2024 was a year of celebration and reflection for me. I celebrated a significant milestone - 10 years of service to NRF. When I joined NRF in 2014, I was the sole staff member and the first full-time executive director. It's hard to imagine now, but all grant applications were submitted by mail, and most meetings were held via conference call. So much has changed! Reaching a major milestone affords an opportunity for reflection. In scanning the last 10 years, I'm proud to report that we:

- Welcomed **14 new trustees** who bring valuable skills, perspective, and life experience to the board.
- Initiated a **leadership program** in 2015 to cultivate those competencies that build the long-term sustainability of our grantee partners. While we started with one workshop per year, today NRF offers 10-12 programs annually, including peer leadership circles, webinars, trainings and roundtables based on subjects surfaced directly from grantees. NRF has hosted over 50 workshops to date!
- Launched the **Impact Grants** program in 2017. Since then, NRF has provided over \$1.7M in grants to organizations addressing critical needs with bold solutions.
- Established an **Advisory Council** in 2019. Thank you to NRF advisors José Gonzalez, Terry Horton, Sarah Milligan-Toffler, and Edwin Moses for sharing your knowledge and strategic advice with NRF.
- Realized we could multiply our impact by engaging in **grantmaking partnerships**. Our first collaboration started in 2020, and we launched our **Outdoor Grants** program in 2021. Since then, this initiative has infused an additional \$4M in the nature-based youth development sector.
- As NRF's work has grown and evolved, we've transitioned from a team of one to a **team of five**, all focused on how to best serve our grantee partners.

Letter from the President

While I am enormously proud of all that NRF has accomplished over the past 10 years, including distributing almost \$20M to over 270 organizations across the U.S., what I'm most excited about is our new strategic direction. Adopted by our Board of Trustees in late 2024, this new plan cements NRF's focus on supporting access to meaningful experiences in the outdoors for all youth. Further, NRF will concentrate its dollars on the youth that need it most. While we'll continue to fund across the country, we're prioritizing funding smaller, local and regional organizations with promising practices to scale and sustain their impact. And, we plan to lean further into our leadership development and capacity-building programs to nurture strong leaders and champions for outdoor recreation. This includes an exciting new field-building grants program to foster a community of local leaders that can share learnings and support each other across regions.

As a young person, I never imagined that my deep connection to the outdoors would ultimately guide my career. I head outside to strengthen my body, nurture my creativity, quiet my mind and feed my curiosity. A profound thank you to NRF for allowing me to pour my energy into bringing the joy of time outdoors and a connection to nature to thousands of young people every year.

With deep appreciation,

Sophie Twichell
President and CEO



The ROBERT W. CRAWFORD Prize

The purpose of the Prize is to recognize a living person who is dedicated to enhancing recreation opportunities for youth, making it possible for more young Americans to live healthy, participatory lives, thus reinforcing the work of the Foundation.

Each year the Prize is awarded to that person, whether professional or volunteer, who has made an extraordinary contribution in advancing outdoor recreation programs for youth from disadvantaged circumstances.

The prize consists of a \$50,000 cash award to support the outdoor recreation-related project of the recipient's choice and is presented at the Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees.



Robert W. Crawford (1906-1995)

Robert W. Crawford served others through his role as Commissioner of Recreation in Philadelphia and as Executive Director of the National Recreation Foundation.

The ROBERT W. CRAWFORD Prize



For 60 years Crawford established a national model for local government's provision of recreational services for all citizens. His creativity and innovative ideas won him international recognition. He also played an important role in the development and growth of the National Recreation Foundation. Crawford personified those qualities of leadership and commitment that the Foundation seeks to foster, which is why this achievement prize is named in his honor.

Past Recipients of The ROBERT W. CRAWFORD Prize

2023 Manny Almonte
2022 Arshay Cooper
2021 Tyrhee Moore
2020 Derwin Hannah
2019 Richard Louv
2018 Peter Westbrook
2017 Susan Teegen
2016 Spike Lobdell
2015 Khary Lazarre-White
2014 Jackie Joyner-Kersey
2013 Harrison Steans
2012 John Conaway
2011 Eleanor M. Josaitis
2010 Melissa T. Harper
2009 Robert J. Kohel
2008 Sidney Epstein
2007 Kent Hutcheson
2006 Margaret C. Daly
2005 Ronnie Lott
2004 Peter A. Witt
2003 Jane G. Pepper
2002 David McLone

Atiya Wells 2024 Recipient

“When I found out that I won the Crawford Prize, I was surprised. It’s heartwarming to know that the impact that we have on our local community is being seen and heard across the country.”

As a pediatric nurse, Atiya Wells became aware of the detrimental effects that an unhealthy lifestyle could have on her patients. Many were suffering from diet-related illnesses that could have been avoided through better nutrition and more physical activity. This sparked an interest in Wells to learn how to help educate her patients about making healthier choices and introducing more fruit and vegetables into their diet.

At the same time, Wells was developing her own connection to the outdoors and nature. She began organizing meet ups at local parks in her Baltimore neighborhood for her young family to connect with other preschool-aged kids and their families. “People started asking me questions about the plants and trees, so I figured if I’m going to be leading them, I probably should know the answers,” said Wells.

Thus began Wells’ deep exploration into the natural world. “I took every environmental and nature-related class that I had time and could afford to attend. And I read a lot of books—I wanted to learn everything,” said Wells. With passionate determination, Wells quickly evolved into a budding naturalist.

“When my daughter went to kindergarten, I developed a program to take her school’s kindergarten classes outside. We were doing lessons on plant identification and a little foraging, but it really was just about them being outside to play and learn while they were playing,” said Wells. This program was the early beginning of Backyard Basecamp, which Wells founded in 2019 to provide culturally relevant urban environmental education and to connect more families in northeast Baltimore, especially those of color, to local outdoor spaces.



Backyard Basecamp was founded by Atiya Wells, a pediatric nurse with a passion for introducing, educating, and connecting families in Baltimore, especially families of color, to local outdoor spaces. She has dedicated her time to (re)introducing people of color to nature by starting with neighborhood nature walks, and eventually embarking on journeys into the many wild spaces across Baltimore.

“I was envisioning the life I wanted to live and how I wanted to engage with my neighbors and community. The name Backyard Basecamp came to me because I wanted people to reconnect to the land in their own backyards,” said Wells. For those who didn’t have a backyard, Google Maps helped Wells find one. Looking for a place to sit and observe nearby nature every day (per a naturalist program assignment), Wells pulled up Google Maps and noticed a green space a few blocks from her home.

There Wells found an unmarked and overgrown seven-acre city park and three-acre vacant lot that she turned into the community’s basecamp—BLISS Meadows. Today BLISS Meadows is a 10-acre land-reclamation project featuring: two ponds; a newly renovated farmhouse; goats, chickens, and bees; a farm with produce and medicinal herb gardens; an orchard with fruit and nut trees; a pollinator meadow; and a forest full of nature trails, meditation spots and natural play spaces.

The work that Wells and Backyard Basecamp accomplish at BLISS Meadows is at the intersection of environmental and food justice. It’s especially needed, in food deserts like Wells’ neighborhood, where grocery options are limited. Backyard Basecamp creates over 20,000 pounds of produce annually that is distributed to the community. “I remember one of the first things that I learned in my classes was that all parts of the dandelion are edible,” said Wells. “There are so many edible and medicinal plants in nature—nobody should be hungry, and nobody should be sick.”

BLISS Meadows provides a space for

people of color to feel safe in nature and learn about the outdoors and the environment. While attending classes and workshops, Wells often noticed that she was the only person of color in the room. She researched the relationship of people of color to the outdoors and learned that ancestral wounding and historical trauma contribute to the lack of diversity in nature-based activities. “I wanted to create a safe space for Black and brown people to reconnect to the land so that when they go into predominantly white spaces in the outdoors, they already have a sense of knowing that they too belong outside,” said Wells.

One way Backyard Basecamp accomplishes this is through intergenerational programming that provides opportunities for whole families to participate in outside activities together. “Initially we were focused on getting kids outside, but then we wanted to create programs where families could be together and share in those activities and more deeply engage in nature together,” said Wells. Backyard Basecamp’s urban farming, nature walks, and health and wellness programs are offered to all ages. Backyard Basecamp’s suite of environmental education programs includes a six-week nature-based summer camp for children, ages 3-13, and an environmental workforce development program that introduces youth of color, ages 16-24, to green careers.

Wells is a true force of nature herself—unstoppable and deeply rooted in the belief that everyone deserves the chance to thrive outside. She has turned her vision into reality, creating initiatives that center nature in her neighborhood fostering a deeper connection to the environment for children and their families, and helping to build healthier, more resilient communities. In recognition of her leadership and the lasting changes she is making in her Baltimore community, the National Recreation Foundation awarded Atiya Wells the 2024 Robert W. Crawford Achievement Prize.

“When I found out that I won the Crawford Prize, I was surprised. It’s heartwarming to know that the impact that we have on our local community is being seen and heard across the country,” said Wells. “We just turned five. But we really hit the ground running and have been charging forward to keep this important work at the forefront—ensuring that everyone in our community has access to nature and to food.

To learn more about Backyard Basecamp, visit backyardbasecamp.org.



Intergenerational Programs Support Youth Development

NRF grants support programs that invite kids outside and foster a connection with nature. Sometimes this is simply about letting kids be kids - granting young people the time and space to explore the outdoors on their own terms. There's more, however, to positive youth programming. Intergenerational relationships are also key.

Some programs foster intergenerational relationships within existing family units by including parents and caregivers in their activities. Opportunities for adults and children to learn and play together can build connections that have positive outcomes for family dynamics, mental health, and intergenerational communication. One NRF grantee that exemplifies this type of programming is Black Kids Adventures, an Alabama-based organization dedicated to helping families of color connect to the outdoors and each other. Kids and their caregivers can go hiking, paddle boarding, caving, and camping with Black Kids Adventures, whether they're seasoned campers or brand-new outdoor recreationists. Founder and Executive Director Zenovia Stephens is passionate about bringing whole families into the outdoors together because of the possibilities it creates for changing the face of outdoor recreation. She believes that if multi-generational groups of people have the opportunity to explore natural spaces together, we can disrupt stereotypes about who belongs in our outdoor spaces. By doing this, we can avoid perpetuating these perceptions about outdoor recreation to younger generations.

Another approach is emphasizing intergenerational relationships within a larger community. For example, the Story Riders program at the Center of Southwest Culture in Albuquerque, New Mexico depends on community elders to help pass down knowledge and stories to youth participants. This youth cycling program helps kids explore their communities, gain bike maintenance skills, better understand the power of storytelling, and connect to their cultures.



These goals are achieved through bridging intergenerational gaps and engaging kids with community elders to hear and tell stories that are important to them. This allows Story Riders participants to gain a deeper sense of place and appreciation for cultural history in their local community.

Another example of an NRF grantee building intergenerational connections is the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP). ZYEP is run by Zuni community members for Zuni youth. The kids at ZYEP get to have fun painting, playing sports, making pottery, gardening, and hiking, but there's something deeper at work as well. All of ZYEP's programs are centered on an assets-based approach to youth development that fosters a new generation of Zuni leaders who feel valued, respected, and grounded in their identities. ZYEP draws mentors for youth programming from across the community. Mentors each bring their own individual knowledge, experiences, and approaches to working with youth. This kind of mentorship model helps kids build a network that extends beyond peers, allowing youth to reconnect with cultural practices and embed themselves in their communities.

Intergenerational programming is an important part of the constellation of efforts focused on reimagining what being outside looks like and cultivating a sense of belonging in the outdoors among the next generation. All of these grantees are using innovative strategies to help youth build connections to nature while remaining grounded in tradition. Ultimately, bringing people together through time outside can open up new opportunities, pathways, and perspectives for young people and adults alike.

Impact Grants Support Key Programming for Newcomer Youth in Chicago

Nearly 45,000 people arrived in the Chicago area as immigrants to the U.S. in the past two years. This includes almost 20,000 newcomer youth who entered the Chicago Public School system since 2022. Communities in and around Chicago are working fast to address the needs of newcomer families. As part of this effort, NRF awarded three Impact Grants in 2024 to organizations extending services to newcomer youth and families in the Chicago area. These grantees are Beyond the Ball, Working Bikes, and Refugee Education & Adventure Challenge (REACH).

Beyond the Ball uses public spaces for group recreation that ultimately aims to build community and reduce public violence in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. The Impact Grant from NRF supports two initiatives from Beyond the Ball – Project Play and Our Little Village. Both programs activate community parks and ensure that youth have positive ways to spend their time, while also connecting families to create networks of support within Little Village. Since receiving the grant, Beyond the Ball has engaged over 3,000 unique individuals through 60 events and over 300 hours of programming. These numbers will continue to grow as Beyond the Ball continues to transform NRF funding into community programming.

Working Bikes increases access to bicycle ownership, repair services, and mechanical training for Chicago residents. NRF's grant supports the Welcome, Let's Roll / Bienvenidos, Vamos a Rodar initiative, which assists newcomer populations with transportation and social connection. Having a bike allows new arrivals to travel efficiently and cheaply around the city. Working Bikes also offers regular community rides and workshops, which help newcomers meet new people and build skills around bike maintenance and repair. Over the course of the grant, Working Bikes distributed bikes, locks, helmets, and lights to 300 youth and their families. Additionally, NRF funding supported 50 new participants at in-house volunteer sessions and supported Working Bikes in engaging 65 residents of Chicago shelters at pop-up bike repair clinics.

REACH works to boost access to nature among newcomer families in Chicago through transformative outdoor learning experiences. The grant from NRF supports summer and weekend Adventure Camps. At camp, youth are engaged in hiking, fishing, biking, kayaking, and birdwatching among other activities. REACH approaches connection to the outdoors as a channel to American culture and language. Alongside traditional camp programming, REACH staff also are responsive to the specific needs of new arrivals. This means REACH programming aims to bridge cultural gaps, increase awareness of safe recreational spaces,

and build connections between families. So far, REACH has engaged over 100 young people through NRF-supported Adventure Camps. Of those 100 youth, almost 85% have remained engaged with REACH since their initial contact and 80% reported developing connections with peers through REACH programming.

These kinds of connections are essential. Young people face a range of challenges when they move to the United States. Beyond the typical emotional hardships of childhood and adolescence, newcomer youth must also navigate multiple cultures, separation from family and friends, and new social dynamics at school. Beyond the Ball, Working Bikes, and REACH are extending their work to ensure that new arrivals in Chicago can be safe, feel welcome, and access both essential services and opportunities for fun in their new home. NRF is proud to support all three of these organizations doing this important work in the Chicago area.



Grants Overview 2024



Trustee Grants ▶ \$680,000

- Bay Area Wilderness Training (a fiscally sponsored project of Earth Island Institute)
- Camping and Education Foundation
- Catalina Island Conservancy
- Center for Native American Youth at The Aspen Institute
- Chicago Training Center
- Chicago Voyagers
- Compass Rose Harvest
- Courage Ranch
- Cultivate Collective
- Dakota Wicohan
- Denver City Lax
- Diving With a Purpose
- EARTHSeed Farm (a fiscally sponsored project of Community Movement Builders)
- Excite All Stars
- Get Outdoors Leadville! (a fiscally sponsored project of Lake County Community Fund)
- Heritage Conservancy
- Homegrown Lacrosse
- Ironwood Tree Experience
- Kids in Focus
- Miles4Mentors
- Momentum Bike Clubs
- OKC Latina (a fiscally sponsored project of The Third Space Foundation)
- Red Tail Scholarship Foundation

- The Semilla Project
- SHAPE Community Center
- Solar Youth, Inc.
- Urban Word NYC
- Walter Anderson Museum of Art
- We've Got Friends, Inc.
- West Point Association of Graduates
- Wilderness Inquiry
- Wilderness Youth Project

Special Grants ▶ \$704,145

- Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions
- Detroit Hives
- Detroit Horse Power
- Gardeneers
- Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles
- Grand Canyon Youth
- Muddy Sneakers
- SailMaine

Impact Grants ▶ \$250,000

- Beyond the Ball
- Refugee Education & Adventure Challenge
- Working Bikes

Outdoor Grants ▶ \$771,000

- Bridger Ski Foundation
- Brothers on the Rise
- Brown Girls Climb
- Catamount Institute

- Center of Southwest Culture, The
- Cheyenne River Youth Project
- Chill Foundation
- Connecticut Institute for Communities
- Conservation Legacy
- CultureSeed
- Elevate Youth
- Explore Austin
- Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks

- Gallatin Gateway Youth Group
- Generations Indigenous Ways (an affiliate of Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples)
- Greening Youth Foundation
- GTG Outdoors
- Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories
- La Semilla Food Center
- Laru Beya Collective
- Mountain Dreamers
- Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project, The
- Outdoor Outreach
- Purgatoire Watershed Partnership
- River Newe
- SHRED Foundation
- Tokata Youth Center
- Watersmith Guild, The
- Wellfit Girls

- West Atlanta Watershed Alliance
- West Point Association of Graduates
- Wild Earth Wilderness School
- Yellow Bird Life Ways
- Youth Enrichment Services
- YouthSeen
- ZIA Youth Center
- Zuni Youth Enrichment Project

Other Grants ▶ \$256,150

- Backyard Basecamp
- Blue Sky Funders Forum
- Chicago Voyagers
- Duke University Marine Lab
- Early Connections Learning Centers
- Elawa Farm Preservation Foundation
- Forefront
- Heard Museum
- Ironwood Tree Experience
- Kids in Focus
- Muddy Sneakers
- OneGreenThing
- Silver Spur Therapeutic Riding Center
- Springfield Rotary Foundation
- Walter Anderson Museum of Art
- Washtenaw Promise



Collaboration ► Workshops

Each year, NRF invites grantees to complete a survey sharing which types of trainings would be most valued by their staff. In 2024, the top requested areas for support were soliciting major gifts, cultivating individual donors, board development, leadership development and program evaluation. In response, NRF offered a slate of workshops that included:

Three workshops hosted by Youth INC (a NYC-based capacity-building organization that fulfills its mission to improve the lives of young people by strengthening and magnifying the impact of community-based youth development nonprofits) that focused on **Building a Board of Advocates**, **Data Learning for Impact**, and **Creating a Culture of Philanthropy**.

Refilling the Change Agent's Cup, facilitated by John Burnett, provided leaders space to explore self-care strategies that help people working in the social sector continue doing work that serves others without sacrificing their own well-being.

To help grantees build peer networks and benefit from collective wisdom, NRF again offered several **Peer Leadership Circles** for nonprofit executive directors. Also offered was a new **Liberated Soul Wellness Circle**, which gave women leaders of color an opportunity to build community, initiate

powerful and authentic conversations, and develop strategies and practices to thrive.

Additionally, NRF provided **program evaluation support**, through NC State researchers who specialize in outdoor recreation program evaluation, to organizations who received Outdoor Grant funding from NRF through its partnership with Tom's of Maine.

In collaboration with the Morrison Family Foundation, NRF piloted an **in-person leadership cohort** for nine leaders of organizations connecting youth from under-resourced communities with the outdoors. Held at Illinois Beach State Park in the fall, leaders from across the country co-created the agenda and priorities, fostered a strong peer network, leveraged the knowledge of their peers and collaborated to solve organizational challenges.

All workshops, trainings and coachings are offered to grantees, past and present, at no cost. NRF invests in these professional and organizational development opportunities to provide grantees with access to the tools, skills, strategies and connections to maximize impact and long-term success.

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there are several Joshua trees with their characteristic spiky leaves and branching forms. The ground is sandy and dotted with small desert plants. In the distance, there are more desert hills and mountains under a vast, blue sky filled with soft, white clouds. A large, solid brown rectangular box is positioned on the right side of the image, partially obscuring the sky and the desert landscape. This box contains the contact information for the National Recreation Foundation.

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