

## **NYSDEC Awards POC and Its Partners a 2012 Environmental Justice Grant**

Wednesday January 25, 2012 by Aggie

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The Partnership for Onondaga Creek (POC) and Onondaga Earth Corps (OEC) are pleased to announce the award of \$49,967 by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) to their joint project called "Growing Syracuse's Next Generation of Environmental Justice Leaders". Out of 123 state applicants, the POC/OEC project is the sole winner for the Central New York region. The award will be administered by the groups' fiscal sponsor, the Onondaga Environmental Institute.

"OEI is pleased to serve as the fiscal sponsor on this project," stated Onondaga Environmental Institute President Edward Michalenko. "The project's goals to empower youth to be active participants in creating positive change for their communities and the environment aligns nicely with OEI's mission to advance environmental research, education, planning and restoration in Central New York. Amy Samuels, OEI's Education and Outreach Coordinator, is excited to provide youth technical training and mentoring."

The "Growing Syracuse's Next Generation of Environmental Justice Leaders" Project will create an educational and career pathway for at-risk youth on the South side and the Near-West side of the City of Syracuse. The pathway will be created through environmental education, youth leadership projects, employment, and internship opportunities. "This is a real opportunity for three really strong environmental groups to create a pathway for young people to get engaged in environmental justice, while also building a link with the green economy," explained Greg Michel, Director of the Onondaga Earth Corps.

The project builds on the strengths of each organization. For the last seven years, using a national earth corps model, the Onondaga Earth Corps has been hiring urban youth between the ages of 15 – 20 years old. Through an intensive team building and leadership training at the beginning of each summer program, the OEC turns these urban youth into an effective work unit. Funding for this program comes from a variety of sources, including grants and fee-for-service work, such as Onondaga County's Save the Rain initiative. The youth work on various outdoor projects, from green infrastructure project installations to lawn, tree and garden care, primarily in the summer but with options to continue working on weekends and after school during the spring and fall.

"After we convinced Onondaga County in 2008 to stop building sewage plants in low-income neighborhoods and use underground storage and green infrastructure to address the combined sewer overflows instead, we knew there was much more we could do," explained Lionel Logan, President of the Partnership for Onondaga Creek. "We shifted our focus to supporting the Save the Rain program, connecting residents with training and green jobs, and educating urban youth."

Since 2008, the POC has been coordinating with the NYSDEC to send urban youth ages 11-14 to the DEC's



environmental education camps, requiring children to participate in community service to earn their trip. This award expands this program to a two year long environmental education program, called "Young Eco 'Cuse Explorers".

Urban youth will engage the community in research and action projects to help mitigate an environmental harm the first year and a public health risk the second year. In year one, the Project will address combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and the city's inadequate tree canopy and the resulting air and water pollution, and the use of green infrastructure such as rain gardens and rain barrels to help the community. In year two, the Project will address a lack of food access and security, which contributes to poor nutrition and health, obesity, high blood pressure, asthma and diabetes.

The Project will create a pathway for youth to learn about and be employed by the Onondaga Earth Corps. The Project also offers the opportunity for OEC youth to serve as mentors and role models to younger peers in their community. Lastly, OEC youth will be offered additional job readiness skills and the opportunity to further develop their resumes and job experiences by working for POC as interns.

Since OEC's inception in 2004, OEC youth have contributed over 15,000 hours of service to Syracuse, planted 560 trees, educated over 600 youth, identified over 1500 potential tree planting sites, and completed the program at a rate of 95%. OEC youth leave the program better prepared to complete high school, continue their educations in college and civically engage as advocates of sustainable communities.

The Young Eco-Cuse Explorer program still has spaces available for 2012. It is for ages 11-14 and requires a commitment of one Saturday a month. For more information on the program, visit [www.onondagacreek.org/Eco-'Cuse Explorers/How to Apply](http://www.onondagacreek.org/Eco-'CuseExplorers/HowtoApply) or call Aggie Lane at 315-478-4571.

The Onondaga Earth Corps is currently accepting applications for spring and summer employment. Visit [www.onodagaeearthcorps.org](http://www.onodagaeearthcorps.org) [6]

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