



Breaking the Green Ceiling: Investing in Young Workers of Color, Paid Environmental Internships, Career Pathways



Got Green

Young Leaders in the Green Movement

gotgreenseattle.org

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Executive Summary

The Young Leaders in the Green Movement steering committee is proud to present the report *Breaking the Green Ceiling: Investing in Young Workers of Color, Paid Environmental Internships, Career Pathways*. This is the culmination of 2 years of work, beginning in 2013 with a community based research project that included input from 150 young adults, that proceeded to our own research of the available internship programs in Seattle, then interviews of community partners and other impacted young workers like us.

We are excited to lift up the voices of young workers of color to reach our city government and other organizations and agencies interested in the investment of the next generation. As we know, our society will feel the effects of global warming for the next 40-50 years, and will impact communities of color disproportionately, from heat waves to flooding to rising costs of basic needs.

We are hopeful that the potential of the youth today will not be wasted, but rather recognized and supported in leading the way for climate preparedness and a new green economy. Leaders of the green movement must come from the communities hit first and worst, creating solutions as they have first-hand experience in what climate mitigation tactics will be most effective in their communities. In the words of **Damu Smith- Former Leader of the National Black Environmental Justice Network**,

“Those of us involved in the environmental justice movement have a different take on what it means to be an environmentalist. We view our struggle for environmental justice as being organically linked to all struggles for justice. Against poverty. Against homelessness. Against police brutality, racial violence and racial profiling. Against the prison industry. If we don’t have political justice, if we don’t have racial justice, if we don’t have economic justice, we cannot achieve environmental justice.”

Signed,

The Young Leaders in the Green Movement

BACKGROUND

Got Green is a people of color-led community organization based out of Southeast Seattle, which works to ensure that low income and communities of color have access to the promises of the green economy - access to green jobs, access to healthy foods, energy efficient homes, and public transit. Founded in 2008, Got Green continues to work at the intersection of environmental, economic, and racial justice and lift up young leaders of color in the green movement.

In 2013 Got Green launched the Young Workers in the Green Economy Project, now known as the Young Leaders in the Green Movement, to do a 10-month-long community research project with 150 Seattle young adults (18-35). Thirty-two percent of young people surveyed were unemployed and of those working, 75% earn less than the living wage for a single adult. With youth unemployment rates the worst since the Great Depression, tuition rates soaring, and constant cuts to public transit, young adults face many barriers to reaching their goals. Lack of access to paid work experience was one of the most often cited hurdles by young people taking the survey. In spite of their economic woes, when asked how important it was to work in a job that is good for the environment, two out of three young people said it was either important or very important.

“Even while struggling to make it, young people have environmental values and want to make a difference. Our city has an obligation to make sure this potential does not go to waste.”

- Mo Avery, Got Green Young Leaders Organizer

From there Got Green released the findings of the community research project in a report titled [Environmental Justice, Jobs and Education: Young Adults in Seattle Speak Up.](#)ⁱ

Following the release of the community research project, Got Green’s Young Leaders in the Green Movement zeroed in on what they could do to address the lack of access to paid work experience. We interviewed leaders from the \$15 Now campaign, met with Mayor Murray’s staff, learned about current internship opportunities through the City of Seattle’s Office of Personnel, and researched other programs for youth to get hands-on work experience.

One of those programs is the City’s Seattle Youth Employment Project (SYEP). This program does targeted outreach to youth and young adults from marginalized communities and then places them in internships. While City programs, like SYEP, already offer comprehensive ways to address youth employment needs, community members and young adults have recommendations to build upon these programs and make the scope of the City’s efforts reach even more young adults and help the fight against climate change.

In 2015, we launched the **Green Pathways Campaign**, in order to define what makes a successful paid work experience and advocate for its creation. We are calling on the City of Seattle to:

- Develop comprehensive systems to help young adults move into career pathways.
- Expand the definition and number of “green” paid work experience opportunities, which we define as positions that are good for the environment and our communities at the same time;
- Do targeted outreach to young adults of color to increase racial diversity in the environmental jobs field.

CAREER PATHWAYS

“With the money I make I can just afford to cover my basic needs. I can’t save to see my family who live back east, which means I haven’t seen them in 3 years, I have to take any job I can find, which has usually meant low-wage service jobs, and with skyrocketing rents I have had to stay in a living situation that if I had choice, I would not be in. A living wage green internship would allow me to have steady employment in a field I eventually want to pursue. It would allow me to get credit as an older student, and to get experience in my field, so that when I enter the job market I could be competitive with my peers. Again with high rents, it may not allow me to move out, but I would be able to save more money and have more choices.”

- **Yolanda Matthews, Young Leader and Seattle Central College student who has aged out of youth programs.**

Traditionally youth and young adults from Seattle’s communities have been able to gain valuable job skills through programs like the Seattle Youth Employment Program (SYEP). SYEP has three programs that provide youth with academic support and work training. They do this through a school year program, summer internship program, and out of school youth program. So that the participant can succeed in the program they are paired with a case manager to support their progress. SYEP serves as an example of our cities investment in the youth and young adults of the City of Seattle.

In 2014, Got Green met with the City of Seattle Office of Personnel and received the below data set. The data showed that internships targeted to young people of color in SYEP were a great start, but that career-oriented, living wage internships at the college and graduate level in city government were predominantly held by young white males (56%). According to their demographic data, of all the living wage city internships in Seattle, Asian/Pacific Islanders held

29 percent, African American 9 percent, Latinos 5 percent, and Native American/Alaskan held less than 1 percent.

College and Graduate School Interns

Interns Ethnicity	Female	Male	Grand Total
American Indian/Alaska Native	1		1
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	30	56
Black	7	9	16
Hispanic	3	7	10
Not Applicable (Non-U.S.)	1	1	2
White	33	68	101
(blank)	2	1	3
Grand Total	73	116	189

High School Interns (SYEP program)

SYEP Ethnicity	Female	Male	Grand Total
American Indian/Alaska Native	11	8	19
Asian/Pacific Islander	75	43	118
Black	272	211	483
Hispanic	28	31	59
Not Applicable (Non-U.S.)		2	2
White	7	19	26
Grand Total	393	314	707

When one considers the populations that have historically had access to higher education and networks for upward mobility and wealth, it isn't surprising that white males hold most of the career-track internships in professional settings. Green Pathways recommends extending those same professional opportunities to a more diverse population, and intentional tracking to ensure that the internships being offered are breaking the cycle of inequity.

“My first SYEP placement was doing child care, and then working at a museum. It wasn't until I got a third placement, interning at City Council for Councilmember O'Brien, that I developed real professional and employment skills, and also became politicized. I was also able to expand my networks through The (Washington) Bus fellowship program. Such opportunities mean a lot to a young person.”

- Hodan Hassan, Got Green Climate Justice Organizer

JOBS FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

“While Seattle has long been recognized as an environmental leader, the city faces many of the same challenges as the broader U.S. environmental movement: those who shape and benefit from environmental policies and outcomes are primarily white, upper-income communities. Those who do not benefit from progressive policies are overburdened with health, social and economic impacts.”ⁱⁱ

- Press release of Mayor Ed Murray’s launch of the Environment and Equity Initiative, April 22, 2015

Living in a city that prioritizes environmental justice, as seen by Mayor Ed Murray’s launching of the Environmental Equity Initiative (EEI) and the involvement of community-based organizations in the city’s Climate Action Plan, we have the right conditions to make long-lasting systemic change in which historically marginalized communities - people of color, immigrants and refugees, people with low incomes, can lead the green movement. The City can help make this change happen through paid internships available to young people most affected by environmental racism, with a pathway to positions of leadership in green jobs.

Since our founding in 2008, we have been asking: “what does a green job look like?” The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines green jobs as “*Jobs that benefit or conserve the environment in production and process.*”ⁱⁱⁱ If we take into account the long history of environmental racism,^{iv} the Green Pathways campaign expands the BLS definition to include the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit Principles of Environmental Justice, to include *socioeconomic as well as environmental benefits*.

We therefore define green jobs as: “*Jobs that benefit or conserve the environment, provide a living wage, and preserve or expand environmental health for workers and the surrounding community.*”^v

We invite the City of Seattle, which has already begun to address both youth unemployment and environmental justice, to intentionally place youth of color in green internships and green jobs. The City can be a leader in helping to lower employment barriers experienced by young people within marginalized communities and open access to the environmental field.

EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION

“Creating pathways for young leaders of color to attain jobs within the green economic movement is essential. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2043, people of color will grow from 36 percent to 50 percent of the U.S population. Youth in the U.S. will be over 50 percent people of color by 2019 according to the Brookings Institute. Without active engagement with communities of color, the environmental movement as it stands will become irrelevant. The time is now to strategize on how we can support youth from communities of color and low income communities to become the leaders that will take us into a new era.”

- Lylianna Allala, Environmental Professionals of Color-Seattle Chapter

To address the disproportionate economic and health impacts of environmental inequality on communities, Green Pathways proposes that low-income young people of color from these communities must be positioned to take leadership roles. This requires not only access to employment opportunities, but comprehensive career support.

According to the University of Michigan’s Green 2.0 report, authored by Dorceta E. Taylor, professor at the School of Natural Resources and Environment, the “Green Ceiling,” is very real. The term “green ceiling” refers to a 16% cap of people of color employed in green fields, including foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies.

The Green 2.0 report shows that although “...[p]eople of color support environmental protection at a higher rate than whites[,]... environmental organizations are not adequately reaching out to organizations representing people of color organizations.”^{vi} When marginalized people are refused a seat at the table, a cycle of institutionalized environmental racism is perpetuated.

We focus on young adults of color, because they have a higher rate of unemployment when compared to young white adults.^{vii} This employment gap locks youth of color out of future employment opportunities. Although the education gap has failings that must be resolved, the education attainment of young people of color does not fully explain the difference seen in green careers. Many green jobs only require a high school diploma, and here white people and people of color are on relatively equal footing;^{viii} nevertheless, many of these positions require an apprenticeship or certification that people of color do not have access.^{ix} Green Pathways proposes to address the disparities that keep well-qualified people of color out of green internships and careers.

A diverse workforce is necessary to appropriately deal with the complex issue of environmentalism. Despite a well-understood organizational benefit of a diverse workforce, the environmental field remains starkly white.^x Green Pathways understands that an increase of people of color in the environmental field will increase the application of viable solutions that ultimately benefit all of us.

CAREER PATHWAYS NOT PRISON PIPELINES

The disparity in outcomes for young people of color and young white people is a problem of systemic inequalities that is solvable. A paradigm shift is needed to stop seeing young people of color as fundamentally broken. If we only continue providing half measures to fill the opportunity gap for low-income people of color, systems like the school-to-prison-pipeline will continue uninterrupted. In Washington State, youth of color are overrepresented in both juvenile justice system and transfers to adult justice system.^{xi}

In 2012, a levy was approved in King County for the construction of a \$210 million Youth and Family Justice Center, which is a shrouded way of saying “a jail for young people.” An number of community-based organizations, led by Ending The Prison Industrial Complex (EPIC), Youth Undoing Institutional Racism (YUIR), Washington Incarceration Stops Here (WISH), and People’s Institute Northwest (PINW), have opposed the construction of the youth jail.

On February 9, 2015 Got Green Executive Director, Jill Mangaliman testified in front of the King County council against the building and including it as a priority hire project:

“Got Green wants good living wage jobs for our community, so that parents can pay their rent and keep food on the table. But not jobs like this. Jails do not keep our communities strong or healthy. We want to be building structures that support our communities, not imprison our young people. We want to be building structures that our city can be proud of; a youth jail is not something any city should be proud of.”

According to the King County State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) Environmental Health Assessment, the findings indicate that the youth detainees and workers were being exposed to carcinogens.

“Recognized Environmental Conditions (RECs) were identified including releases of petroleum hydrocarbons at the site and migration of dry cleaner solvents (trichloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene) in groundwater on to the property from historical operations at sites located to the north.” They also identified the presence of “asbestos, lead-based paint, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and mercury in certain building materials and/or electrical equipment.”^{xii}

The placement of prisons on environmental hazardous sites are not unusual. The Prison Ecology Project, already started to map the pollution caused by the prison system impacted the incarcerated and people who live in the surrounding neighborhoods.

“In the 1990s the United States built over 1500 prisons virtually all of them were built in rural areas a lot of them were literally built on toxic waste sites.”

– **"Paul Wright" former prisoner, editor of Prison Legal News and director of the Human Rights Defense Center**

Instead of focusing energy on building juvenile detention centers that further limit young people's opportunity, a greater focus is needed on building economically and environmentally vibrant communities. Solving problems within marginalized communities will not take place by relying on a racist justice system. Instead, attention should be brought to the major contributor to crime: unemployment.^{xiii} As a society, we can take the opportunity to disrupt this pipeline that leads through to juvenile justice system by building pathways to healthy communities.

CONCLUSION

Our recommendations are designed to serve the communities that are most impacted by years of systemic inequality and will benefit Seattle and King County as a whole.

- Develop systems to help young adults move into career pathways.
- Expand the definition and number of “green” paid work experience positions which we define as good for the environment and our communities at the same time;
- Do targeted outreach to young adults of color to increase racial diversity in the environmental jobs field.

We need to address the lack of employment opportunities for young low-income people of color while building healthy communities. Addressing the inequality in the environmental field will benefit communities that have been underrepresented for years as well as the environmental organizations that hope to fully address environmental issues. By shifting away from a racist justice system as a primary way of solving community problems and instead embracing what low-income communities of color can offer, we build a sustainable pathway for all Seattle residents.

Credits

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Seattle’s Young Adults Speak Out: Got Green. 2013. 4 Aug. 2015 <http://gotgreenseattle.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/GotGreen-YoungWorkerReport-WEB-11.13.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Mayor Murray launches first of its kind equity environment initiative <http://murray.seattle.gov/mayor-murray-launches-first-of-its-kind-equity-environment-initiative/>

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^{vi} The Report | Diverse Green. 2014. 3 Aug. 2015 <http://diversegreen.org/report/>

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^x Green, KA. Diversity in the Workplace. EDIS. University of Florida. 2014. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/hr/hr02200.pdf>

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^{xii} King County Department of Executive Services Facilities Management Division; Environmental Checklist King County Children and Family Justice Center Project. 2013 pg. 27

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got green?

Environment, Equity, and Opportunity

Got Green is a grassroots organizing group - led by people of color, and based in Southeast Seattle - that works to ensure that the benefits of the green movement and green economy - green jobs, access to healthy food, energy efficient and healthy homes, and public transit reach low income communities of color.

We do this by cultivating leaders - especially 17-34 year olds - to educate, advocate, organize and build coalitions.

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