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Introduction

Through the Green Partners environmental education grant program, Hennepin County provides funding and support to organizations to implement projects that empower residents to make environmentally friendly choices and take action to protect the environment.

Over the past five years, the county has worked with 133 grantees and awarded more than $1.3 million in grant funding. These projects have successfully engaged more than 90,000 people, including 28,000 youth, throughout Hennepin County in learning about and taking action to reduce waste, recycle, reduce household hazardous waste, conserve energy, protect pollinators, and improve our air and water quality.

The county recently concluded an evaluation of the grant program to reassess goals, analyze project outcomes, check alignment with community needs and county goals, and look for efficiencies in program management.

The public and internal evaluation focused on three main areas:

1. Application process and audience reach: Are we reaching important audiences? Is the program accessible?
2. Project outcomes: Are behaviors changing? How do we define success? How will we measure outcomes?
3. Program and project support: Is the support we provide addressing the needs of our partners? What changes do we need to make to support grantees, applicants, and potential applicants?

The internal evaluation also included assessments of:

- Application requirements
- Application review process
- Contracting process
- Application and project timelines
- Behavior change and youth environmental education goals
- Long-term and multiyear support for projects
- Project expectations and outcomes
- Reporting requirements
- Formal and informal staff support
- Program budget

This report summarizes the evaluation process and efforts to engage external and internal partners, the feedback received through that engagement process, and draft recommendations for future environmental education grants.
Through 11 funding rounds, the Green Partners grant program has:

- Awarded 133 grants
- Funded 72 unique organizations
- Funded 32 grantees more than once

Of the 279 applications received, 36 organizations have never been awarded a grant through the Green Partners program.

Most of the organizations that have been funded are community nonprofit organizations, while others are schools, early childhood education programs, youth groups, neighborhood groups, and park districts.

The Green Partners program has supported organizations engaging their audiences in a wide variety of environmental issues.
Engagement approach

The evaluation process engaged current and past grantees, past applicants, community groups, grant managers of other programs, and Hennepin County staff. Information was also collected and summarized from program records and grantee project reports.

### Summary of public engagement activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Survey to public, including grantees, partners, and community organizations</td>
<td>81 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey to Hennepin County grant managers</td>
<td>9 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey to grant managers of programs outside of Hennepin County</td>
<td>6 respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Partners grant applications, contracts, program tracking documents and grantee final reports</td>
<td>Documents from 11 grant rounds from spring 2012 to fall 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Partners grantee final reports</td>
<td>Reports from six grant rounds from fall 2013 to fall 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public input meeting</td>
<td>36 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone interviews</td>
<td>Representatives from four organizations who work with communities that the Green Partners program does not currently have relationships with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series of four staff meetings to review feedback gathered and develop draft recommendations</td>
<td>9 staff involved</td>
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Goals of the Green Partners program

Through the Green Partners program, the county partners with organizations who have a connection to their audiences to engage them in learning about and taking action to protect the environment.

Feedback summary
To see if partners understood the goals of the program, survey respondents were asked an open-ended question about the goals of the Green Partners program. Overall, their responses aligned well with the county’s goals for the program.

The most common responses were:

- Support community-based projects with funding, resources and training to reach a wide array of audiences.
- Focus on motivating behavior change and action among individuals, organizations and communities.
- Increase knowledge and raise awareness about environmental issues.

Other responses included:

- Overcome financial barriers for organizations.
- Create lasting partnerships.
- Promote a wide variety of environmental issues and actions.
- Increase reach of county programs and help meet county goals.

Recommended changes

Program goals

- Clarify Green Partners grant program goals to ensure everyone – including county staff, reviewers and applicants – understand the county’s expectations for success.
- Integrate the goals into program communications and outreach, including the web page, criteria and application materials, information meetings, and orientation.
Audience reach and application process

The Green Partners environmental education program reaches diverse audiences, including youth, recent immigrants, historically marginalized communities such as people of color and low-income communities, and rural, urban, and suburban audiences.

In the past five years, Green Partners projects have reached over 1 million people. This includes more than 92,000 people engaged in project activities and more than 28,000 youth engaged.

The Green Partners program has been successful at engaging these target audiences. Of the 133 projects funded since 2012, 91 projects involved youth and 97 projects reached underserved audiences.

Feedback summary

Reaching new audiences and organizations

Participants in the survey and discussions provided many ideas for how the county could connect with new groups that work with important audiences. These suggestions include:

- Meeting the community where they’re at, such as at regular meetings and annual celebrations, and going to them more often.
- Engaging with non-traditional issues and groups, such as environmental justice, culture and health.
- Reaching influencers and engaging community leaders.
- Continuing to work through Green Partners network.
- Continuing to provide translated materials.

Participants suggested the following ideas for how the county could better support organizations that work with important audiences but face challenges with limited capacity:

- Facilitate partnership development by finding and connecting groups that could partner well or identifying larger or well-established organizations that could act as mentors or fiscal agents for smaller organizations.
- Provide examples of successful and replicable projects and applications.
- Provide first-time grantees additional support and resources to build their skills and capacity.
- Provide opportunities for groups to connect remotely, such as through webinars or conference calls.
- Increase staff capacity by connecting them to interns, college classes, or volunteers such as Master Recycler/Composters or Master Water Stewards to support their projects.
- Provide a forum to share resources, knowledge, and project tools.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved with the support provided.

Groups that were interviewed through “cold calls” appreciated the county reaching out and were interested in more information about the programs and resources available, suggesting this process could be repeated to reach important target audiences and organizations.
Application

The Green Partners program plays an important role in supporting environmental education in our region, as most of the survey respondents (61 percent) said they do not receive funding for environmental education from any other source.

Most of the grantees who took the survey said applying for a Green Partners grant was about the same amount of work as other grant programs. They said the application requirements and criteria were mostly or very clearly communicated, and 74 percent of the survey respondents rated the support they received from Hennepin County staff during the application process as helpful or extremely helpful.

Some suggestions that participants had for the application process include:

- Provide funding or support for pre-work, planning and applying.
- Reduce the complexity and time required to apply, especially for first-time grantees.
- Clearly communicate what is and is not funded, the selection criteria, and how much time is needed for meetings and reporting.
- Provide examples of good applications.
- Allow repeat grantees.
- Provide longer-term funding (more than 1 year).
- Make more visible what resources are available to organizations.

Recommended changes

Application

- Create separate applications to better assess goals for each audience: projects that focus on developing an environmental ethic and interest in environmental stewardship with youth and projects that motivate behavior change among older youth and adults.
- Evaluate youth applications separately and with different criteria than what is used for behavior change projects to ensure program goals are met in each area.
- Require behavior change projects to focus on one or two actions per project to ensure that audience barriers to environmental behaviors are more effectively addressed during the project period.
- Solicit applications once per year. This will give the grant manager and project mentors more time to support grantees throughout their projects.
  - The proposed timeline being considered is a spring application deadline with projects beginning in the fall at the start of a typical school year.
  - In 2018, the timeline will be slightly delayed due to the evaluation process.
  - Changes will be fully implemented in 2019. Request for proposals will be released in April and applications will be due in May. Projects will begin in September.
- Create and provide samples of application materials so groups have a model to follow.
Grant information meetings

Revamp information meetings, which are held after the request for proposals is released and before applications are due, to include:

- Training on motivating behavior change and reporting on outcomes
- Project planning assistance and support for completing your application
- A webinar option or remote live access so that more people can participate

Application review and selection

- Update project selection criteria to reflect grant program priorities such as audience, project activities, and outcomes reporting.
- Involve members of Hennepin County’s youth environmental education team to review youth project applications and lend their expertise and support to grantees working with youth. This support may include training workshops, one-on-one project support, or programming guidance.
Project reporting and outcomes

For project evaluation and reporting, Green Partners grantees are currently required to:

- Conduct a barriers discussion with some of the audience they plan to engage at the beginning of their project and submit a summary report.
- Submit a mid-term report that includes an update on barriers and project activities, successes and challenges experienced, progress toward and plans to collect the behavior change surveys, a newsletter article and photo, an assessment of the budget, and request for budget reporting assistance if needed.
- Conduct a survey with project participants. For projects engaging adults and older youth, the survey focuses on what actions they took and behaviors they changed. For projects focused on youth, the survey measures if youth believe they can make a different in protecting the environment and if they want to keep learning about the environment.
- Submit a final report that includes a summary of project activities and accomplishments, audience description, topics covered, barriers addressed, survey results, lessons learned, assessment of county resources and support, budget report, and expense receipts.

Green Partners grantees reported from surveys collected that more than:

- 7,300 adult participants reported making behavior changes
- 5,800 youth believe they can make a difference in protecting the environment
- 4,200 youth want to keep learning about the environment

It should be noted that while these results show positive impacts, surveys are collected from a small number of overall project participants, surveys can be challenging to collect, and the accuracy of self-reported results can vary.

Feedback summary

Defining success

In reviewing grantee final reports, survey data and discussion responses, there are many factors that contribute to a successful environmental education project, including:

- People show up to project events and activities.
- People experience a-ha moments during project activities.
- Staff and participants are knowledgeable about the issue and understand why and how to take action.
- Participants are interested in talking about a topic, sharing anecdotes and stories, and interpreting results.
- People take action and model the desired behavior to others in the community.
- Community members are interested in continuing to work on and support the issue.
- People see the issue as relevant and connected to community concerns.
• Community members are developed and empowered to become leaders.
• A measureable goal is reached.
• A positive relationship between community organizations and the county is established.

The grantees who took the survey and had completed their projects reported that their projects were successful.

**Best practices for successful projects**

The grantee final reports, survey data and discussion responses also identified best practices for successful projects.

**Planning, implementation, and project team**

• Have a core group of leaders or project team. Anticipate and have a plan to manage organizational and staff changes and logistical and partnership challenges.
• Establish a clear plan with clear goals from the beginning, but be prepared to be flexible to adapt to your community’s needs.
• Stay organized and recognize that regular communication is important.
• Create good messages and enlist the right messengers to communicate with your audience.
• Network and gain support from peer organizations. Develop partnerships focused on where there are already resources and complementary expertise. Recognize that it takes time to build relationships and trust with partners and participants.
• Stay in touch with the Green Partners grant manager to get feedback and troubleshoot.

**Engaging participants**

• Ensure you have a captive audience and engage them in meaningful ways. Make your project relatable, tangible, and fun. Use personal storytelling, field trips, and hands-on activities.
• Reach out directly to participants one-on-one and follow up to troubleshoot and encourage changes.
• Honor the expertise of those in the community. Empower community members to be decision makers during the project, with their insights informing education and outreach strategies.
• Have realistic expectations and acknowledge that behavior change occurs slowly. Build confidence by starting small, focusing on one or two actions, and celebrating successes.

**Challenges**

Some key challenges grantees have noted for projects include:

• Recruiting and retaining participants
• Finding support and building relationships
• Lack of leadership/management buy-in
• Limited staff capacity, losing staff, and staff changes
• Motivating behavior changes with participants
• Developing relevant, engaging programming
• Audience and/or colleagues unwilling to change
• Inconsistent communications, both internally and externally
• Collecting and tracking behavior change data
• Time to achieve success with participants

**Grantee accomplishments**

Grantees who took the survey said they were able to accomplish a variety of goals because of their grant, including:

• Effectively engage their audience and reach new audiences
• Increase the importance to environmental issues to their audience
• Continue to engage their audience in activities to protect the environment
• Make the environment a higher priority for their organizations
• Continue environmental education work by getting additional Green Partners funding
• Develop new and/or strengthen existing partnerships
• Establish or strengthen their relationship with Hennepin County

**Green Partners evaluation and reporting**

In the survey, most grantees (46 percent) said they spent more than 10 hours reporting for the grant, while others said they spent 5 to 10 hours (36 percent).

Many grantees (39 percent) said the evaluation and reporting requirements for Green Partners are more work than other grant programs they have received funding from, while 35 percent said Green Partners is about the same amount of work.

Grantees said they found the required barriers discussion with members of their audience helpful to investigating and understanding barriers participants experience and perceive.

Grantees are interested in other options to evaluate project outcomes, including allowing more qualitative information and stories as well as a more flexible survey process. They are interested in more tools and assistance with measuring awareness and behavior change.

Most of the Environment and Energy department’s other grant programs collect both quantitative and qualitative information in evaluating the success of grant projects. All require a final report, but fewer require a mid-term report (and sometimes that depends on the size of the grant for that program).

None of the external grant managers who completed the survey require mid-term reports. Many said they use a variety of methods to collect reporting information, including a lessons learned summary, an interview at the end of the project, and progress reports with each invoice.

**Recommended changes**

**Outcomes reporting**

• Develop an evaluation tool for behavior change projects that allows for quantitative data collection and qualitative indicators of success to ensure that credible, consistent outcomes data is collected and shared.
• Simplify grant reporting requirements by eliminating the mid-term report and updating questions in the final report to lighten the load on both grantees and the grant manager and ensure what is collected is useful and timely.

• Institute a formal project debrief between county staff and project managers at the end of grant projects to evaluate outcomes, discuss successes and challenges, and identify resources and strategies to support future projects.

• Provide samples of effective reports so groups have a model to follow.

Planning for evaluation in the application

• Require applicants to include a minimum amount of time and funding in their budget to report project activities.

• Emphasize the importance of successful past project outcomes by providing a template for past grantees to report their results in their application. Weigh this criteria more strongly in future applications.
Project support

Feedback summary

Project support

Overall, grantees feel very well supported by county staff.

Grantees said they receive the most timely and effective support remotely via phone or email and for project implementation. Hennepin County staff expertise and planning support, as well as staff support at events was rated as highly useful. Grantees reported the orientation, networking meetings, training, and connections to other resources and organizations are also helpful.

Partners expressed that the flexibility of the Green Partners grants is important to allow them to adapt to changes in the community and address newly identified barriers.

Most grantees said they get more support in the Green Partners program with training, project planning, and implementation than other grant programs they’ve been involved with in the past.

Organizations said that having project planning tools, models and successful examples is useful.

Grantees felt they needed more support with project evaluation and reporting.

Funding models

When asked about different potential funding models, groups are generally interested in anything we offer. Funding models groups were most interested in were:

- Free resources, such as education supplies and field trip transportation
- Current Green Partners model of up to $20,000 for a one-year project
- Larger grants of more than $20,000 per project year
- Multi-year project grants
- Planning grants

Most of the other county grant programs fund grants for one to two years, and allow organizations to receive grants multiple times (with no limit). Most of the external grant managers provide one-year grants, while some provide grants for more than two years. Most allow organizations to receive grants multiple times.

Several participants expressed interest in a longer grant period because of the time it takes to build relationships and engagement.

Training, environmental education tools, and communication resources

Beyond funding, grantees said they are most interested in the following environmental education support and resources:

- Resource sharing with other organization and grantees
- Opportunities for partnership development
• Training on environmental education skills and topics
• Messaging and communication resources
• In-person networking opportunities
• Curriculum

Our communication channels are helpful in connecting with partners. Some of the most common ways people heard about our programs is the Green Partners e-newsletter, a friend or colleague, the Hennepin County website, another Green Partners grantee, and a Hennepin County employee. Grantees report that the environmental education tools and resources provided by the county, including environmental brochures and handouts, activity guides, and learning kits were very helpful.

Participants also expressed a desire to understand and share how the actions of grantees are connected to bigger city and county environmental goals.

Participants said they thought improvements could be made to how the county’s environmental education web resources are organized, and they expressed interest in additional online tools. Partners want an online platform to connect and share resources as well as a venue to learn about other projects and demonstrated strategies for success.

Organizations are generally interested in more training, especially on how to do the work of environmental education. In addition to environmental topics, participants said they are interested in training on youth environmental education, behavior change strategies, community engagement strategies, integrating technology into environmental education, applying for county environmental grants, and outcomes reporting.

**Recommended changes**

**Grant project length**

• Allow past grantees (organizations who have successfully completed a one-year Green Partners project) to be eligible for grants of up to two years, with the second year contingent upon successful progress in year one.
• Allow organizations who have never completed a Green Partners project to be eligible for a one year grant.

**Youth environmental education support**

• Provide more staff support from Hennepin County’s youth environmental education team to groups engaging youth.

**Networking and training**

• Offer additional networking and training opportunities through the Green Partners networking meetings, including youth environmental education, skills training on topics like motivating behavior change and teaching methods, partnership development, and more.
• Explore options for a digital sharing site for applicants, grantees, and community partners to share information and learn about other projects.
Additional changes

Some of the changes identified through the program evaluation require more research and will take more time to develop. County staff will form project teams to explore and pursue the suggestions identified and outlined below.

### Changes to research, develop, and evaluate making in the future

#### Audience reach and application process
- Offer alternatives to the written application process, including online applications, video submissions, interviews, etc.
- Consider the benefits and consequences of limiting the number of grants for each grant organization.
- Conduct intentional outreach to target geographic areas and audience segments.

#### Outcomes reporting
- Explore options to offer online reporting for grantees.

#### Project support
- Improve internal coordination and sharing in regards to effective, socially inclusive outreach to the county’s diverse rural, suburban, and urban audiences.
- Provide an opportunity fund to support different kinds of projects, possibly including mini grants, partnership development grants, event sponsorship, and training funds.
- Define the roles of county staff and expectations of grantees for county participation at project and community events.
- Explore options to connect grantees to additional staff support, such as interns, college classes, service learning projects, and volunteers, to increase their capacity.
- Review and improve the organization and accessibility of environmental education resources on the Hennepin County website.

#### Other ideas to explore and consider feasibility of implementing
- Identify options for supporting projects or organizations long-term beyond Green Partners grants.
- Create a field office or other remote site for pickup of environmental education resources and connecting with county environmental education and outreach staff.
- Create templates of successful projects that groups could quickly apply for and implement.
- Virtual tours of field trip sites like the Brooklyn Park Drop-off Facility and commercial organics composting sites.
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