

Lever Fund Investment Analysis

Organization: Washington Parks & People (WP&P)
Program: Green Corps
Lever Fund Investment: \$25,000
Benefit-cost ratio: 19:1

Analysis prepared by Mark Swartz, April 2016; revised June 2016

Washington Parks & People’s Green Corps Program connects unemployed men and women to green career tracks such as urban and community forestry and forest-based ecosystem and watershed restoration—though some Green Corps graduates to seek and secure jobs in other meaningful, professionally-satisfying fields. The Green Corps includes a referral system to help participants connect to jobs through a wide range of agencies, professional and trade associations, trades, professions, and industries. The initiative launched with federal stimulus funding in 2010, via the Department of Agriculture, but in recent years it has been required to scale back operations.

All of the Green Corps participants have a high school diploma or GED. Most were previously incarcerated, a fact that makes it much harder for them to find employment. According to *The Washington Post*, more than 8,000 men and women return to DC each year from various prison populations. Though they face tremendous obstacles, employers cited by the *Post* call them unusually motivated to succeed.¹ As noted, not all Green Corps alumni go into green jobs: The soft skills they provide are applicable to a wide range of careers.

In May 2016, when we awarded the grant to WP&P, we recommended that the organization use the grant money as it sees fit to further the Green Corps mission. Among the possibilities discussed were increasing the stipend for participants and adding staff time for case management. The WP&P team embraced both of these options, and has chosen to enhance the program for its participants and alumni rather than serving additional participants. WP&P also embraced our emphasis on transparency, and has indicated that it will allocate the grant money in the following manner:

Case management	\$13,500. Projection: 10 additional hours of support is sufficient to shift at least 75% of the 16 trainees in the 2016-2017 cohorts and at least 25% of the 59 alumni who also will participate in the Lever Fund-funded program into jobs earning at least \$10,000 more per year than if they had not participated
Stipend support	\$9600. Projection: Doubling the stipend will mean that trainees can better meet costs or make investments that will help them pursue and achieve employment, better health, more stable living situations, and/or other positive gains
Curriculum support	\$1900. Projection: A strengthened roster of professional and/or academic instructors will provide participants with a strong network of career mentors who can provide guidance and assistance to trainees and alumni for as long as they stay engaged; DC Water, for example, is one such training collaborator

¹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/01/16/returning-citizens-are-still-one-of-d-c-s-most-marginalized-and-motivated-groups/>

Our initial assessment of the Green Corps Program found that a Lever Fund investment would capitalize on three key assets:

- **Good timing.** Investing in the Green Corps now will enable the organization to take advantage of DC Water’s recently-launched \$90M Clean Rivers Project.
- **Solid financials.** Washington Parks & People owns its historic home—the Josephine Butler Parks Center—and is able to cover all of its operating expenses through event rentals (earned income).
- **Strong leadership,** including Executive Director & President Steve Coleman, who has led the organization since it began as a volunteer neighborhood park crime patrol in 1990; RonDell D. Pooler, Green Corps Manager—and himself a Green Corps graduate; and Jeff Catts, Field Director, a landscape architect with 30 years of experience. WP&P’s board chair is Jennifer von Bismarck, an expert on international finance, who values the Lever Fund’s investment strategy.

Our subsequent meetings with WP&P’s leadership reinforce these impressions, and we now also add:

- **Shared values.** WP&P’s commitment to transparency, accountability, and data matches our own, and we look forward to an extended partnership. In our conversations with Steve and his team, the word “leverage” came up repeatedly: By making Green Corps a stronger program, this investment will accomplish more than just training this year’s participants; it will help to ensure the program’s long-term sustainability.

Metrics²

Lever Fund investment amount	\$25,000
Career earnings: 16 2016-2017 Green Corps trainees	\$1,200,000 (\$10,000 extra per year for 10 years ³ for the 75% placed in better jobs than they would have secured otherwise)
Career earnings: 60 Green Corps alumni	\$750,000 (\$5,000 extra per year for 10 years for the 25% placed in better jobs than they would have secured otherwise)
Total earnings boost	\$1,950,000
Lever Factor	25%; <i>i.e.</i> , our investment represents a 25% stake in the program’s total impact
Total Lever Fund benefits	\$487,500
Benefit-cost ratio (projected)	19:1

² Estimates based largely on data provided by Washington Parks & People.

³ Ten years is the time horizon used by the Robin Hood Foundation.