

INTERCONNECTED

AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND SYSTEMS



2023 State of the Network Report





MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO

For over two decades, the Groundwork USA Network has transformed under-resourced neighborhoods into healthy, green, just, and resilient places. From the beginning, our why has been consistent. We show up every day because we believe everyone has the right to clean water and air, safe and healthy neighborhoods, welcoming and inviting outdoor spaces, and to be included in decisions about their future.



But, as a people-centered organization, how we approach our work evolves continually. Nearly a decade ago, Groundwork recognized that if we wanted our work to be sustainable, we needed to think beyond changing places and changing lives; our success depends on our ability to change systems. By anchoring our work at the intersection of people, places, and systems, we address the root causes of harm and build a future where resident leadership is the norm, not the exception.

This commitment to centering the interconnectedness of people, places, and systems has been the foundation of our success this year. As funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has begun to hit the ground, our deep connection to people and place has positioned our Trusts as essential community partners and intermediaries, unlocking millions of dollars for environmental justice projects while our focus on changing systems—through new coalitions and expanding community leadership—has helped make sure these investments are grounded in equity and reflective of community priorities. **I am so proud of what our network of staff, partners, and champions have accomplished this year and what these new opportunities mean for our future.**

This commitment to interconnectedness is not only about our place-based work. As a national organization, Groundwork USA fosters connection, collaboration, and shared learning across our grassroots network and bridges between national partners and grassroots priorities. Through this national network of partners collaborating at the local, regional, and national levels, we expand and scale the impact of local environmental justice action across the county.



This has been an incredible year. Not only has Groundwork USA's team continued to grow—expanding our ability to deepen support for our grassroots partners—but we have also expanded our programs and established new partnerships that strengthen our interconnectedness and enable us to work more effectively. There is so much to celebrate:

- **We distributed \$2.5 million in funding to our network** to support more than twenty climate adaptation and land reuse projects.
- **We brought more than 150 young people from across our Green Team and GroundCorps youth leadership and workforce development programs to national parks** to hone their conservation skills and strengthen their connection to public lands.
- **We supported over 1,300 practitioners and community leaders** through workshops, webinars, and in-person learning sessions.
- **We were awarded \$10M by the USDA Forest Service** as a national passthrough partner to launch a new urban forestry effort anchored in community stewardship.
- **We doubled down on our commitment to systems change**, investing in paid community leadership programs, partnering with American Forests and Green Latinos to launch the Tree Equity Alliance, and deepening our commitment to nonprofit leadership through our technical assistance programs.

This list barely scratches the surface. These pages celebrate what our incredible community of partners and champions have accomplished through their passion, commitment, and dedication to showing up every day to move us one step closer to our shared vision.

But, our work is far from over. The path to a healthy, just, and resilient future will be paved one person, one project, and one policy at a time. While celebrating the present, we are also keeping our eyes on the future and leveraging this moment to chart a path for long-term sustainability – investing deeply in the relationships, infrastructure, and partnerships needed to steward this momentum into the future.

This journey is not for individuals but only possible in community with other committed partners and champions. I deeply appreciate all who join us in this pursuit of a healthier, greener, and more just future for all!

With gratitude,

Heather McMann

CEO, Groundwork USA





“Our most meaningful work happens at the intersection of people, place, and systems. At Groundwork, the environment becomes a platform for essential conversations about community, belonging, justice, and the future we can create through collaborative action.”

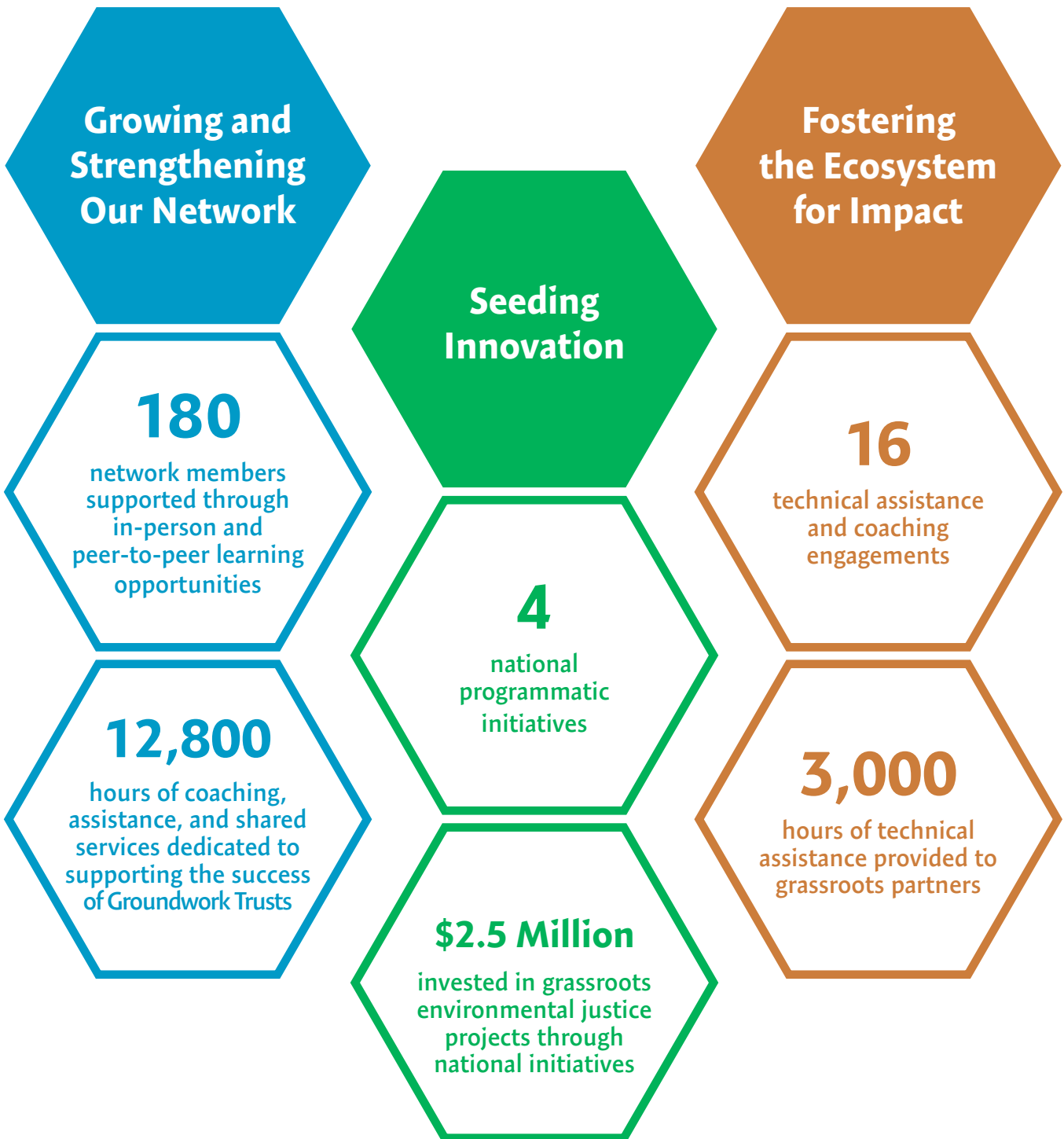
Sarah Calderon, *Groundwork USA Board President*



GROUNDWORK USA

Groundwork USA is a national nonprofit that supports and strengthens grassroots efforts to undo the legacy of environmental injustice and create healthy, green, just, and resilient neighborhoods. Our work is grounded in a deep connection to people and place, a passion for collaboration, and a commitment to collective impact.

National Impact



The Groundwork Network

Our Network

Groundwork USA is a national network of 21 place-based environmental justice organizations, Groundwork Trusts, working hand-in-hand with their community to restore the urban environment and create healthier, more just, places to live, work, and play. While we share a mission and vision, the work in each local Groundwork community is shaped by local needs and community voices.

Our Vision

We envision a world where everyone can live in a community that is healthy, green, just, and resilient.

Our Mission

We bring about the sustained regeneration, improvement, and management of the physical environment by developing community-based partnerships that empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.

Changing Places



Engaging community members in transforming their environment and creating healthier, greener, and more resilient outdoor spaces.

Changing Lives



Connecting people to their environment and creating pathways to opportunity through education, employment, and leadership development.

Changing Systems



Creating new partnerships that elevate local voices into decision-making and model shared leadership.

We're
Changing
Places

All people deserve to live in a healthy, green, just, and resilient community. Through our work to change places, we engage community members in setting a vision for their neighborhood's future and creating the healthier, cleaner, and greener spaces they want to see.

Investing Directly in Environmental Projects

Through our Climate, Land, and Water Programs, Groundwork Trusts and their local partners collaborate to lead transformative projects that address the human impacts of environmental harm and the climate crisis. From planting [microforests across affordable housing sites across Elizabeth, NJ](#), to [retrofitting homes to increase storm resilience in Jacksonville, FL](#), to [creating a new stormwater park in New Orleans](#), Groundwork Trusts are leading large-scale green infrastructure projects that address heat, flooding, and air quality concerns. These projects bring immediate relief to environmental concerns while creating more welcoming community spaces and serving as inspiration for future climate adaptation projects. To support the continued expansion of these critical infrastructure projects, we convened 100+ members of our network in Lawrence, MA, last October to share best practices, learn how to capture and communicate impact, and engage young people in this important work. In 2023, our network collectively maintained and improved over 12,000 acres of open space and retrofitted 575 properties with green infrastructure.

Elevating Lessons To Improve Practice

At Groundwork, we believe the most impactful environmental work is grounded in collaboration and grassroots leaders' collective knowledge and experience. Through the Urban Waters Learning Network and our Equitable Development Technical Assistance Program, we elevate and amplify lessons and learnings from our work - and those from grassroots leaders across the country - to provide guidance, support, and inspiration to hundreds of climate, water, and environmental justice practitioners each year. With several federal climate justice initiatives launched this past year, our programming focused on providing tools and training at the intersection of climate, data, and community engagement to help community-based organizations pursue these funding opportunities! The Urban Waters Learning Network hosted a six-part [Water Equity and Climate Resilience webinar series](#) for nearly 1,000 participants, sharing effective strategies for responding to climate risks such as flooding, coastal storms, and drought, focusing on protecting community members most vulnerable to climate threats. Through our [Equitable Development Technical Assistance program](#), we provided coaching and technical assistance to 16 municipalities, community groups, and nonprofits, like the [Canfield Consortium](#), to help develop and implement equity-centered land reuse strategies.

"Canfield Consortium's partnership with Groundwork USA built capacity for our organization and supported our growth as environmental advocates for the development of a healthy and thriving East Canfield Village neighborhood."

**Kimely Theus, President,
Canfield Consortium**



Mapping and Data as a Platform for Equity

Data, maps, and visuals are powerful tools for planning, community engagement, and impact tracking. Groundwork Trusts use climate and equity dashboards to visualize where they can have the greatest impact, open conversations with new partners and municipal leaders, and engage residents in prioritizing and planning. To help others develop these valuable resources, this year we a [Neighborhood Brownfields Inventory Toolkit](#) and hosted a [Maps as a Platform for Equity](#) webinar to showcase strategies for using these tools for planning, engagement, and impact tracking.

Neighborhood Brownfield Inventory Toolkit: Unlocking Free Mapping Software




TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. Reasons to Conduct a Resident-Led Brownfield Inventory in Your Neighborhood
- III. Build a Brownfield Inventory Form Using Free Google Software
- IV. Training Surveyors and Planning Outings
- V. Mapping and Sharing Inventory Results
- VI. Other Tools

I. INTRODUCTION

When planning a resident-led brownfield inventory, using accessible and user-friendly tools is crucial since participants will have varying degrees of experience and comfort with technology. Google provides a suite of powerful and free tools that can be leveraged to create a form for collecting data during a resident-led brownfield inventory. By using Google Forms, participants can easily gather information about brownfield sites in their community, contributing to a comprehensive inventory that can inform environmental initiatives and community development efforts. Google My Maps can then be used to map and share the inventory results.

This guide will walk you through the process of creating a resident-led brownfield inventory form using Google tools. We will focus on utilizing Google Forms, which provides a simple and intuitive interface for designing and administering surveys. By collecting data through a form, residents can systematically capture key attributes of brownfield sites, ensuring a standardized approach to data collection. Additionally, the integration of Google Maps and cloud storage solutions such as Google Drive can enhance the visualization and accessibility of the collected data.

Whether you are an individual resident, a community organization, or a local government entity, this guide will equip you with the knowledge to create a user-friendly and effective brownfield inventory using free Google tools. The methods shared in this tutorial are intended to create a neighborhood-scale brownfield inventory. Conducting a city-wide inventory would require more robust tools and would necessitate more intensive coordination and planning.

Neighborhood Brownfield Inventory Toolkit
Lawrence Hoffman, Senior Manager of GIS and Data Services Groundwork USA

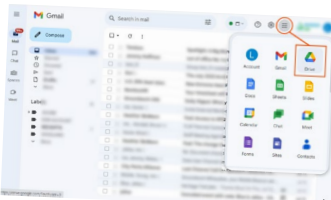
This resource was developed as part of Groundwork USA's Equitable Brownfield Development Technical Assistance Program with grant funding from The EPA's Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization.

TUTORIAL


1 SET UP A GOOGLE ACCOUNT

If you don't already have one, you'll need to set up a Google account to follow along with this tutorial. Contemporary Google accounts come with many tools associated with common computing tasks like word processing, spreadsheets, and web-based cloud storage. In this tutorial we will use Google Drive cloud storage to store our survey, Google Forms to build our survey, Google Sheets to store our survey responses, and Google My Maps to put form responses on the map.

To set up a Google account and access Google Drive cloud storage:

- 1 Go to the [Google Account Creation Page](#). Open a web browser and navigate to the Google Account creation page at [accounts.google.com/signup](#).
- 2 Provide Personal Information: Fill in the required fields, including your first and last name, desired email address (username), and password. You may also need to provide a phone number for account verification purposes.
- 3 Complete the Setup Process: Follow the on-screen prompts to complete the setup process, including accepting the terms of service and privacy policy.
- 4 Verify Your Account: Depending on your chosen verification method (phone or email), you will receive a verification code. Enter the code to verify your account.
- 5 Access Google Drive:
 


Once your Google account is set up, you can access Google Drive by visiting [drive.google.com](#) or through the Google Drive mobile app. It can also be accessed, along with all of the other applications in Google's software suite via the menu in Gmail in the top right corner of the web interface.
- 6 For additional support setting up a Google account visit Google's Help Center: [Create a Google Account](#)




Maps as a Platform for Equity-Based Planning

THURSDAY, MARCH 16TH
1-2 PM ET


SPEAKERS:



MELISSA GUEVARA
Senior Program Advisor,
Groundwork RVA



LAWRENCE HOFFMAN
Senior Manager of GIS and Data
Services, Groundwork USA



The Lower Price Hill neighborhood in Cincinnati is located at the heart of the former industrial district. Covered with pavement and industrial infrastructure instead of trees and green spaces, the neighborhood frequently experiences extreme heat, poor air quality, and flooding. Groundwork ORV's Climate Safe Neighborhoods program brings residents, community organizations, and local and regional leadership together to chart a different future for their community. In partnership with Green Umbrella, Groundwork ORV facilitates paid community advisory groups to create a unifying vision for climate adaptation in the neighborhood and elevate equity and justice priorities into local and regional planning. With this community-centered plan, Groundwork ORV and its partners are making this vision a reality. In 2023, they completed their most ambitious green infrastructure project—a 4,100 sq. ft. green roof on top of Oyler High School. Construction of this first-of-its-kind project for Cincinnati's public schools was completed by Groundwork ORV's Green Teamers and GroundCorps. The green roof stores up to 2,554 gallons of water during each rain event (over 120,000 gallons annually!), provides urgently needed cooling benefits and helps reduce air pollution. This is only the first in a series of green infrastructure projects on the horizon for Lower Price Hill. Through extensive community organizing efforts, many of the community's priorities were elevated into the Green Cincinnati plan adopted this year.



We're
Changing
Lives

The work to repair harm in the built environment is the work of generations. Through our youth leadership and workforce development programming, we invest in the future of individuals and their communities to effect change in themselves, the built and natural environments in which they live, and our society as a whole.

Cultivating The Next Generation of Leaders

Through our Green Team youth employment program, high-school-aged young people are paid to develop their leadership skills through conservation, exploration, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. This year, we employed 480 young people in these environmental jobs. While projects and goals vary based on the unique priorities in each city, Green Team programs are always anchored in building the leadership skills of our young people through work that tangibly impacts their neighborhoods. In 2023, Groundwork Erie, our newest Trust, launched their first Green Team program focusing on urban agriculture and community gardens. In Denver, [“Blue” Teamers learned how to collect and monitor water quality samples from Lower Bear Creek](#) and how to install different types of green infrastructure to improve water quality, and in San Diego, [the results of the Green Team’s water quality sampling were published in a report by the San Diego Coastkeeper](#) highlighting the urgent need for green infrastructure investments.

Expanding Horizons Through Service Learning

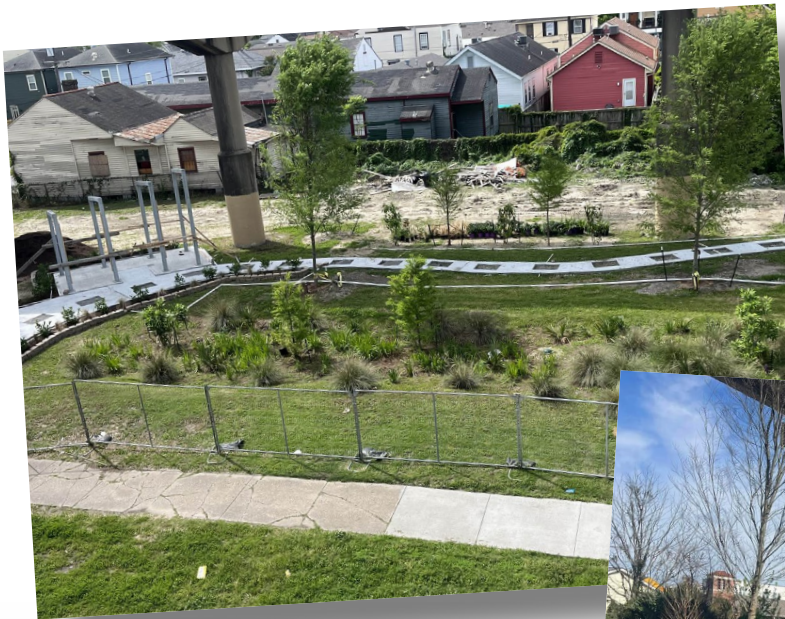
Every year, we bring 100+ Green Team and GroundCorps participants to our nation’s most iconic National Parks for a week of service, learning, and community building. In 2023, we hosted experiential learning trips at national parks like Yellowstone and Grand Teton. Collectively, our young people contributed 10,000 hours of service to maintaining our national parks while learning more about themselves, increasing their connection to public land, and building community with young people from across the country. These experiences are transformative—ask Roger Osorio and Melissa Guevara—two program alums who recently reconnected with us to share how these experiences shaped their careers. [Roger is now a Park Ranger in the National Park Service, and Melissa currently runs youth programs at Groundwork RVA in Virginia.](#)

“Working with youth and with Groundwork is an extension of my values—my love for the environment, my community, and all of humanity.”

Melissa Guevara, Youth Programs Director, Groundwork RVA



Due to a history of institutionalized racism codified in infrastructure decisions, much of the 7th Ward in New Orleans is heavily impacted by air pollution, extreme heat, and frequent flash flooding. Working at the intersection of people, places, and systems, Groundwork New Orleans is a key partner in a coalition of local nonprofits seeking to remedy the harm caused by these decisions and create new systems that better serve residents. Through Groundwork's Climate Safe Neighborhoods community advisory group, residents elevate community resilience priorities and help co-create new tools, like the soon-to-be public Green Infrastructure Dashboard, that visualize inequities and help generate investments into green infrastructure where it's needed most. Through their Ground CREW (Creating a Resilient Environmental Workforce) program, a paid workforce development program for young adults, Groundwork NOLA is leveraging the construction and stewardship of these green infrastructure projects to provide living wage employment to young people from the community while building the skills of a local workforce to spearhead future green infrastructure projects. Combined, these programs holistically address the deep roots of inequity, reshape the built environment, and model the power of people-centered infrastructure design.



We're Changing Systems

Sustaining change over the long haul requires new approaches to leadership and decision-making. Through our work to change places and change lives, we cultivate partnerships that elevate community voices into decision-making, model shared leadership, and create new systems to ensure a more equitable distribution of climate adaptation and environmental justice resources now and into the future.

Engaging New Audiences

Changing systems requires engaging new voices in the conversation. This year, through the Land Use Innovation Initiative, Groundwork Trusts piloted innovative community engagement strategies that sparked community leadership and long-term investment in land transformation projects. [Groundwork Ohio River Valley expanded its Climate Action Group](#), a paid community group where residents are trained to lead community outreach efforts. And, [Groundwork Hudson Valley flexed its creative muscles](#) to broaden engagement in the planning process for Ludlow Park through design workshops that bridged climate, culture, history, and resilience.

Amplifying Community Voice

Amplifying community voice has always been a central part of our mission, but we are continually seeking ways to further amplify local voices in decision-making. This year, many Groundwork Trusts launched paid Community Advisory Cohorts designed to bolster the ability of residents to spearhead local organizing and advocacy efforts. Through these paid training programs, residents have the opportunity to discuss the impact of the climate crisis on their neighborhoods, explore potential green infrastructure solutions, lead community education and outreach efforts, prioritize climate actions, and learn how to engage with municipal and regional leadership to advocate for investments in their vision. The structure looks different in every community, but the values and goals are the same: amplifying resident voices and changing how decisions get made.

Groundwork San Diego graduated their first cohort of 20 community members from their leadership academy, where residents honed their storytelling and advocacy skills. In New Bedford, the Lideres de Resiliencia Comunitaria (Community Resilience Leaders), organized by Groundwork Southcoast, led the design of a new green infrastructure corridor that will address climate concerns and increase the utilization of existing and future green space. Groundwork Milwaukee's Climate Action Group, an intentionally intergenerational cohort of leaders, convened to explore intersectional challenges related to climate change and vacant properties and began to chart out opportunities to reclaim and transform vacant land into active community spaces.

“We recognize that folks have been prescribed solutions their whole lives. And so we attend the neighborhood council meetings, we have events, we do canvassing neighborhoods, we go door to door... we're interested in engaging folks and asking them what is it that would help benefit their neighborhoods around not only tree planting, but air quality... all of these issues.”

Sarah Calderon,
Groundwork Richmond,
Workforce Development
Director and Groundwork
USA, Board President

[Read the full interview on the Urban Waters Learning Network.](#)



Modeling Shared Leadership

Changing how decisions get made is essential to our long-term success. Over the past five years, Groundwork Trusts have intentionally focused on elevating youth and community voices into local decision-making, and this past year, these efforts have paid off in big ways. A Green Teamer was appointed to the Providence Sustainability Commission in Rhode Island. In Somerville, Green Teamers were invited to meet with members of the Mobility Council to highlight the need for improved biking infrastructure. In Elizabeth, NJ, the Mayor's Youth Council continues to convene to provide input into the Mayor's climate adaptation goals and guide tree planting efforts. Recently, a former leader of the Council was hired to run the NJ Department of Environmental Protection's Youth Inclusive program. In Cincinnati, 11 young adults from Groundwork Ohio River Valley's Community Action Group participated in the Youth Environmental Council, a training program designed to engage young people in environmental policy. Members of the Council were invited to present their work to help inform the Green Cincinnati Plan. The final Green Cincinnati plan earmarked \$700,000 for green infrastructure investments in historically under-resourced neighborhoods.



Tools to Support Change

Through our Equitable Development Technical Assistance program, we capture lessons and tools created to support our local work in a public digital resource hub to support others—whether organizations or individuals—in pursuing systemic change in their neighborhoods. This year, we added two new resources to the hub. Our [Stakeholder Mapping](#) exercise creates a framework for identifying whom to engage and why they should care, and our [Equity in Action](#) guide helps translate equity values into action.

People, Places, and Systems in Yonkers, NY

The Southwest region of Yonkers, NY, a densely populated, hilly neighborhood at the intersection of multiple industrial sites and transit routes, is disproportionately impacted by rising temperatures and more frequent and intense storms caused by the climate crisis. With more extreme storms, like Hurricane Ida, and hotter, longer heat waves happening more frequently, the lack of trees and surplus of pavement is increasingly more dangerous. Over the past couple of years, the Groundwork Hudson Valley team has established the Climate Safe Yonkers Task Force to help spearhead efforts to collect hyper-local climate data, elevate resident concerns, and champion climate adaptation at every level. This Task Force, which now consists of 30 residents, students, and community leaders, played a key role in developing the Yonkers Climate Action Plan in 2023. Drawing on their experiences supporting Groundwork's installation of green infrastructure projects across the city, Task Force members contributed important context about climate vulnerability and community priorities to the planning process. The plan, released in June 2023, incorporates dozens of their recommendations for equitable investments in economic, social, and environmental resilience. Groundwork HV's partnerships and commitment to centering community voices in all aspects of their climate resilience work has allowed them to create change at the systems level in Yonkers, ensuring the most vulnerable neighborhoods are prioritized and receive the resources they need to adapt.



2023 IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS





Thank You!



Our ability to create lasting change is only possible through the generosity of our partners and donors. Join our community of champions and help make our shared vision of healthy, green, just, and resilient communities for all a reality.

Donate today at groundworkusa.org/donate-to-us/



Groundwork USA

Groundwork USA is a national environmental justice nonprofit that supports a network of place-based environmental organizations—Groundwork Trusts—working hand-in-hand with their communities to address the legacy of environmental injustice and equitably revitalize urban neighborhoods. We believe in collaboration and building community-based partnerships that empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.



Stay in Touch:

22 Main Street, Second Floor | Yonkers, NY 10701

914-375-2151 | groundworkusa.org | info@groundworkusa.org

-  Facebook: @GroundworkUSA
-  Instagram: @groundwork_usa
-  LinkedIn: @GroundworkUSA