

The Case for Urban and Community Forestry

Versatile and applicable to nearly every landscape, forestry work has become a focal point of many companies' environmental strategies. In recent years, the private sector has viewed forestry projects through the carbon offset lens, investing in large tracts of often-remote forestland to achieve internal climate commitments. There is, however, a growing awareness that forestry investments on a company's own lands or in the communities in which they operate can help them realize a diverse set of benefits, both internal and external:

Social Benefits

- Stronger community ties through opportunities for collaboration and the creation of communal spaces
- Beautified communities with increased tree canopy
- Decreased noise pollution
- Physical and mental wellness benefits associated with diverse canopies and outdoor recreation

Environmental Benefits

- Carbon sequestration
- Temperature moderation, particularly in areas prone to urban heat island impacts
- Reduced air pollution
- Flood mitigation
- Improved water quality, through trees' nitrogen uptake and stormwater control capabilities
- Shelter and food for wildlife

Business Benefits

- Increased satisfaction among employees as companies invest in their communities
- Improved social license to operate
- Biodiversity, climate response and community engagement metrics that can be used in reporting
- A nature-based mechanism for managing stormwater runoff and particulate matter
- Lower energy costs through nature-based temperature moderation

To realize these benefits fully, companies must adopt a proactive and holistic approach to their forestry work, engaging communities from the start to ensure that their needs are met. Failing to integrate stakeholder input into forestry work results in projects that, at best, provide limited community benefit and at worst may worsen existing tensions between community members and companies. To ensure that forestry work is both technically and socially sound, many companies engage local partners (e.g., community associations, environmental NGOs, municipal offices) to help balance a project's social, environmental and business objectives.

Urban and community forestry (UCF) involves choosing the right tree(s), right place and right partner to ensure that forestry work meets local community and environmental needs while strengthening ties between all parties involved. While industry is not yet integrated into the most prevalent municipal, state

and federal UCF plans, companies can play a critical role in improving quality of life in high-potential communities by partnering with community groups to start new initiatives or by contributing resources (e.g., funds, employee volunteers, land) to expand existing efforts.

About this Toolkit

To explore the potential for industry to engage in UCF work, and to develop a best-in-class approach that connects corporate ambitions, community needs, and local, state and national canopy and forestry goals, in 2020, Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC) and a team of corporations, knowledge partners and community stakeholders implemented an [Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Cost Share Grant Program](#), aligned with the national [Ten Year Urban Forestry Action Plan \(2016-2026\)](#) and focused on creating and enhancing resilient urban and community forests.

The program, which formed the basis for the *Across Fence Lines* initiative, focuses on forging connections between corporate America's industrial and mining facilities and adjacent communities through public-private forestry programs that diversify, leverage and increase UCF funding and resources, while also maximizing local resiliency, workforce development and biodiversity uplift outcomes. As the lack of canopy within an urban region often serves as a proxy for a suite of other social and environmental inequities, *Across Fence Lines* has focused on developing public-private partnerships and crossing fence-lines in **urban and rural communities with low canopy cover, high industrial density and high scores on the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Index**. As part of this work, WHC and its partners conducted research in five regions of the U.S. to explore how historical, environmental and socio-economic contexts inform UCF approaches within distinct geographies.

To facilitate private sector engagement in urban and community forestry, Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC) developed this toolkit, which provides guidance on integrating community needs and partner insights into UCF projects. It is one of three WHC-produced UCF toolkits — the other two focus on the **Technical Implementation** of forestry projects and how **Education** efforts can strengthen UCF work.

Getting Started – General Guidance

While community needs and partner priorities will vary from place-to-place, there are general guidelines that teams across the U.S.¹ can follow when conducting forest-oriented outreach. This section of the toolkit explores some of these general best practices, with the following section, **An Overview of Across Fence Lines Partners**, exploring the work of partner organizations involved in *Across Fence Lines* in some of the target regions. Teams outside of these regions can search the [Alliance for Community Trees member directory](#) to identify potential partners in their area.

Assessing Community Support

Before beginning a UCF effort, it is critical to speak with local residents, assessing their priorities and perception of the proposed project. Many UCF initiatives have fallen short of their goals because of community resistance — sometimes because of the maintenance concerns associated with trees, but more

¹ While the guidance in this toolkit is informed by research and project implementation completed in the U.S., comparable outreach tactics can be employed in many countries. WHC recommends that UCF teams outside the U.S. supplement this toolkit's guidance with additional research about their countries' environmental histories, forestry priorities and funding opportunities.

frequently because of how these efforts are presented. In many underserved communities, a history of inequitable municipal policies, combined with zoning practices that disproportionately place industrial facilities in low-income communities and communities of color, have left residents wary of city and corporate-led tree-planting efforts. This distrust is exacerbated when project organizers make little effort to involve community members in planning. Conducting intentional community outreach, and listening and responding to resident concerns, can help restore local confidence in forestry initiatives.

Finding Community Champions

If a community is generally hesitant to support or partake in UCF efforts, consider identifying and engaging individual community members that are more enthusiastic about the project. They can then conduct their own outreach, leveraging their status as community members to encourage local trust in the project. When seeking potential project champions, consider the following tactics:

- Identify community members with the healthiest yards and ask them if they're interested in beautifying the rest of their neighborhood through forestry work.ⁱ
- Contact employees living close to the project site and ask them to speak with their neighbors about the project.
- Children are generally more open to adopting new pro-environmental habits than adults areⁱⁱ — using the **Education** toolkit, start a forestry education initiative for local youth, and encourage participants to share what they learn with adult family members.

Properly Siting Plantings

It is important for the project team to properly site its plantings using a data-backed approach that identifies locations with the greatest need for the ecosystem services trees provide (such as temperature moderation and stormwater and air pollution control), and to ensure that the chosen planting sites will be accessible to employees or community volunteers conducting ongoing monitoring or maintenance. The **Technical Implementation** toolkit explores tactics and tools that can assist with identifying a planting site.

It may also be necessary to adhere to municipal or subdivision codes that specify what tree species can be planted and where, and some forestry projects, such as those with phytoremediation goals, typically require state or federal-level permits. Within the UCF sphere, there is an active community of nonprofits and forestry experts who can use their regulatory knowledge to help companies navigate these processes.

Any data collected, or permits obtained, during this process can in turn be leveraged to build a case for planting in a specific location, in order to garner additional community support.

Building Community Capacity

A common challenge in urban forestry work is the perception that plantings are typically organized and implemented by individuals or organizations based outside of the community, often of a higher socioeconomic status than the impacted residents. To address this concern, many UCF efforts, such as those carried out by the industries and partner organizations outlined in this toolkit's case studies, have opted to build the capacity and resources of local community members to plant or maintain trees themselves:

- Rather than implementing UCF projects themselves, many companies have chosen to provide local or regional UCF organizations with funds, land or volunteers, building the capacity of expert partners in their communities.
- Others have found success supporting the youth engagement programs of local community development organizations and places of worship, increasing these organizations' capacity to plant, water and care for trees.

- Some companies have ensured community engagement with their forestry efforts by tying their work to a green jobs initiative.

Among the many benefits of building community capacity to undertake forestry work are:

- Economic development within the communities
- Improved perception of UCF efforts and the companies/organizations involved, by demonstrating that the project team is committed to the area and its residents
- Assistance in tree monitoring and maintenance
- Greater alignment between corporate goals (e.g., sustainability metrics) and community-identified priorities (e.g., economic stability, quality of life)
- Job creation, including opportunities to lower recidivism rates and increase employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated people

Grant Opportunities

Obtaining funding for UCF efforts is a challenge for company and community teams alike, particularly for those new to forestry work. Company employees may be able to secure a budget from site or corporate-level funds, and nonprofits may be able to obtain grants and solicit donations. Communities may have the capacity to develop state and federal grants to plant trees in their cities and towns.

The greatest chances for funding, however, come from partnerships between diverse parties — corporate contributions can be designated as matching funds when nonprofits or communities apply for grants, allowing corporate-supported planting activities to have a greater impact through funding secured by nonprofit partners. For instance, to finance the *Across Fence Lines* initiative, WHC applied for community forestry funding from the U.S. Forest Service using a federal cost-share program that allowed the organization to leverage private sector funding as a matching source. This provided a platform for WHC’s corporate partners to participate in local, conservation-focused community forestry and expand their role in fostering community resiliency to a range of environmental challenges.

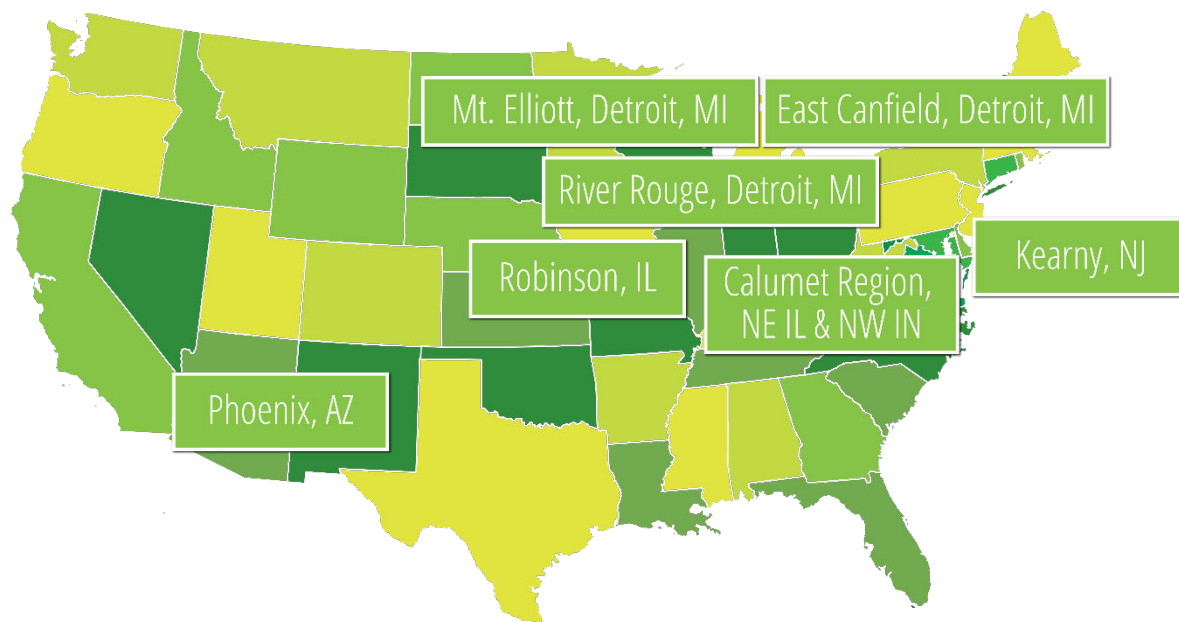
The most prevalent type of grant funding for community forestry starts at the state level, often in relation to the forestry plans and goals established by a state’s department of natural resources or environmental protection. Within the regions studied through *Across Fence Lines*, relevant state agencies include:

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
- Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy
- Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management
- New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

Matching guidelines for government grants can vary — some, for instance, may require cash matches, whereas others are open to in-kind contributions (e.g., donated equipment, volunteer hours). Before agreeing upon a match contribution, companies should set expectations with nonprofit partners to ensure that the selected match type is accepted by the funding source.

An Overview of *Across Fence Lines* Partners

Through *Across Fence Lines*, WHC has collaborated with some of the most prominent knowledge partners in UCF, who each work toward the social and environmental needs of one of the initiative's target regions. Each of these partners approaches community forestry work through a unique lens, utilizing a regionally appropriate outreach framework.



This section of the toolkit explores the frameworks utilized by key *Across Fence Lines* partners, and how the tactics used help organizations benefit both the environment and local communities.

The Greening of Detroit

The Greening of Detroit is a nonprofit organization focused on enhancing the quality of life for Detroit residents by creating green space and planting trees, and by providing community members with hands-on education and job training. Some training programs target those who face employment barriers, including people who were formerly incarcerated.

The Greening of Detroit's framework revolves around a suite of education and tree-planting initiatives, including:

- A Federal Apprenticeship Program, in which adult participants who face barriers to employment undergo eight weeks of paid training to become certified landscape technicians or tree artisans.
- The Green Corps, a paid urban forestry vocational program which trains teenaged participants to become environmental stewards while also providing them with career development, conflict resolution and financial literacy skills.
- The Land+Water WORKS program, a multi-organization green infrastructure education initiative, to which The Greening of Detroit provides comprehensive curricula.
- A community tree planting initiative, through which residents of Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park can request that a tree planting take place in their community. Before a planting takes place, the community point of contact must demonstrate that residents are open to having more trees in the neighborhood and are willing to help with planting, watering and ongoing maintenance. The Greening of Detroit ensures that community volunteers have the tools needed to implement the plantings and provides instructions on tree maintenance.
- Citizen Forester training, which combines forestry training with the development of volunteer management and community engagement skills. Graduates of the program then lead planting events throughout the city.

Since its founding in 1989, the organization has planted over 130,000 trees in metro Detroit and 350 participants have graduated from the Federal Apprenticeship Program since its start in 2015. Over 2,000 teens have graduated from the Green Corps, with 85% of them going on to pursue a college degree.

Regional Approach

The Greening of Detroit has developed a hyperlocal, progressive approach to UCF, employing locally informed experts from within the city. Building on the team's familiarity with Detroit's unique challenges and history, employees work to increase access to trees and to educate residents about their benefits:

- The organization works to dispel misconceptions surrounding trees and their costs, and highlights the benefits of their presence.
 - Due to ash tree damage sustained from an emerald ash borer invasion in the early 2000s, and the impact of underfunded municipal services, many residents are wary of tree planting efforts. The Greening of Detroit provides communities impacted by these challenges with current, accessible information about canopy inequity in Detroit.
- Communities can contact the organization to request tree plantings, which are fulfilled as resources become available.
 - Before starting work, the organization ensures that the request will not interfere with city infrastructure or the city government's development priorities.

The organization takes a similarly holistic approach to its green job programs:

- Admission requirements are intentionally low to address traditional barriers to education.
- Participants are provided with relevant certification training, a theoretical foundation and practical experience.
- To ensure that its curricula and capacity-building efforts are aligned with the local job market, the Greening of Detroit solicits input from local landscaping companies, utility providers and municipal authorities.

Student Conservation Organization

The Student Conservation Association (SCA) empowers teens and young adults across the U.S. to protect and restore marine sanctuaries, cultural landmarks, and urban and rural green spaces through a range of conservation crews, corps and internship programs. Participants receive hands-on environmental education experiences and gain a greater affinity for nature, while also building leadership and job readiness skills. While some of the SCA's initiatives relocate youth to national parks and other distant locations, there are many opportunities for participants to instead make an impact closer to home, including:

- Community and regional crews for teens and young adults in select areas. Crews of 6-12 participants partake in activities such as trail building and habitat restoration while learning about green job opportunities in their regions. Many crew members receive a stipend or credit for community service hours.
- Internships for young adults, some of which are restricted to local applicants.
- Paid opportunities for adults over 21 to serve as field leaders, including chances to lead a community youth crew.
- ConSERVE, an initiative that organizes single-day conservation activities for youth.

The SCA has been active for over 60 years and engages over 4,000 teens and young adults annually. Pre- and post-program surveys indicate that SCA participants leave their experiences with a greater sense of environmental and social responsibility, as well as stronger interpersonal and leadership skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regional Approach

Within the Calumet Region of Indiana and Illinois, the SCA has emerged as a key player in local UCF efforts. While municipal governments and landowners are supportive of forestry work in the region, they often lack the bandwidth or knowledge to implement initiatives of their own.

The SCA's efforts have been strengthened by a wealth of local opportunities for partnerships with:

- Other nonprofits, such as forestry collective CommuniTree
- Corporations, including NiSource, BP Americas and Cleveland Cliffs
- U.S. Forest Service technical support staff
- Other federal agencies that support environmental restoration in the Great Lakes region

The SCA's work in this region has addressed local issues including urban sprawl, heat island effect, poor infrastructure and a lack of job training for youth:

- As of early 2021, the SCA Calumet Tree Conservation Corps had planted over 3,000 trees in northwest Indiana, with plans to plant an additional 500 trees by the year's end.
- Within the Calumet region, the SCA has organized dedicated local crews of young adults to work in their local municipalities, planting and caring for trees within public parks, school grounds and public rights-of-way.

This approach has allowed the organization to obtain private support from companies located throughout northwest Indiana, complementing support the Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission provides for tree-planting initiatives.

Alkebu-Lan Village Community Center

Alkebu-Lan Village (AKBV) is a longstanding community center in Detroit. With a 30-year history serving youth and their families, what began as a martial arts program teaching discipline and personal responsibility is now a sprawling facility that serves over 1,000 Detroit residents each year. The organization addresses a wide range of community needs through multiple outreach and education programs, including:

- Its flagship martial arts program, which integrates conventional self-defense lessons with a holistic set of physical and mental wellness, education and citizenship values.
- Building Positive Leaders, an afterschool and summer program that offers youth academic support, leadership development and conflict resolution training.
- A Youth Assistance Program, organized by the Wayne County Juvenile System and hosted on AKBV property, that provides wellness, environmental education and recreation opportunities for underserved and at-risk youth.
- Comprehensive entrepreneurship and financial and computer literacy programs.
- Instruction in multimedia and performing arts.

Youth from AKBV also manage a community garden, which in 2021 became the backdrop for an extensive forestry project (further explored in the Education Toolkit).

Regional Approach

AKBV's works at the intersection of community needs and cultural celebration, utilizing a youth engagement model that showcases local Black expertise and a solution-oriented approach to issues unique to Detroit. This asset-based, representation-forward model of community development uses creative partnerships and interdisciplinary models of problem solving to bring economic, environmental and social uplift to community members. From inviting local industrial partners to a job fair for local residents to assembling and distributing vegetable garden kits, AKBV is addressing hyperlocal issues inclusively and proactively.

Friends of the Rouge

Founded in 1986, Friends of the Rouge River (FOTR) mobilizes metro Detroit residents to serve as stewards of the Rouge River and its watershed, hosting clean-up, restoration, data collection and education events throughout the year. The organization performs this work through a series of initiatives, including:

- Collaboration with Greening of Detroit and other local partners in the Land + Water WORKS Coalition. FOTR has created rain gardens with educational signage in support of the program.
- Rouge Rescue, a yearly clean-up and restoration event that involves trash and invasive species removal, native plantings and stream bank stabilization activities. The event typically attracts over 1,300 participants.^{iv}
- General rain garden training, and an intensive training program designed for residents who want to find work as a parks or ground maintenance workers.
- The Rouge Education project, which organizes hands-on lessons about watershed health for local youth.
- Regular monitoring of indicator species (insects, frogs and fish), performed by community volunteers with FOTR training.
- A 27-mile paddling trail, which residents can navigate independently or during organized, educational events.
- The Fort Rouge Gateway Partnership, a collaborative effort that has resulted in the Fort Street Bridge Park, a public green corridor with a historical monument and spaces for outdoor recreation.

Regional Approach

Friends of the Rouge has developed an innovative model of outreach, engaging Detroit residents of all ages in stewardship of the Rouge River while quantifying and articulating the impacts of their volunteer base. With programs designed for engaging residents with a wide range of skillsets and interest levels in the ongoing care of the river, Friends of the Rouge makes citizen engagement in watershed health accessible and appealing. From tree plantings to rain gardens of all scales, the organization's work brings the community to the river and makes connections between actions taken at home and their broader impacts on the watershed.

Leveraging Your UCF Project's Success

UCF efforts don't stop once the right trees have been planted in the right place — to maximize the business and social benefits of a forestry initiative, project teams should consider the many ways that their successes can be publicized. Obtaining recognition for a UCF effort through the appropriate outlets can lead to greater buy-in (and potentially more resources) for the project from community members, local governments and corporate leadership. This increase in support can help UCF teams improve and expand upon their efforts by planting more trees, creating educational content or adopting more intensive management practices (e.g., pest control, mowing, controlled burns, understory enhancement, the replacement of dead or unhealthy trees).

This section of the toolkit explores some of the many ways to gain recognition for a project and leverage its success for additional support:

Storytelling

Community members, including employees who live locally, often respond best to information delivered in an informal, narrative form, whether through community meetings, an article distributed through the company intranet or neighborhood newsletter, or short videos shared via social media. To engage community members with your UCF work, consider the following tactics:

- Invite partner organizations to attend town halls and other in-person community meetings, so that they can share their perspective on UCF and how corporate participation has supported their forestry goals. When producing written communication, include quotations from partners reflecting on your collaboration.
- Invite site or corporate-level communications, public relations or community outreach employees to partake in planting events to raise their awareness and appreciation of the project.
- Share tangible evidence of the project's impact — for planting projects, this could involve taking *before* and *after* photos of the same part of the planting site and posting online. For an education project, local students or teachers could be invited to an event to speak about their on-site experience or could be quoted in an article about the project.
- If publicizing successes on social media, consider crafting a project hashtag and suggested post wording that employees, partners and community participants can use to share their experiences with their own networks.
- Consider joining WHC as a member company. WHC members' certified programs are regularly selected for inclusion in widely distributed white papers and success stories.

Generating Metrics via Digital Tools

Succinct communication that quantifies forestry work or education outcomes often resonates best with professional-level audience members (e.g., corporate leaders, regulatory agencies). In addition to collecting simple measurements of impact (e.g., trees planted, students reached), teams can utilize forestry and education software for more elaborate insights. For instance:

- The [i-Tree](#) suite of desktop and web apps can calculate the environmental benefits (e.g., carbon sequestration, water filtration, energy conservation) of trees planted, generating concrete metrics that can be used in reporting.
- [Kahoot!](#) is an online quiz platform that teams can use to assess learning outcomes. The team can administer the same quiz before and after an education event to gauge knowledge retention, then integrate the change in pre- and post-event assessment scores into reporting.

WHC Conservation Certification®

Forestry projects that have been on-the-ground for at least one year, and any associated conservation education efforts, may qualify for WHC Conservation Certification, the organization's voluntary sustainability standard. WHC Certification helps companies demonstrate a long-term commitment to conservation, education and community outreach by providing third-party credibility.

Certification recognizes a wide array of conservation project types, including forest projects (which fall under the broad category of habitat projects) and training, formal learning, and awareness and community engagement projects (which are considered education projects). Information on applying for certification for these project types can be found in the **Technical** and **Education** toolkits respectively.

WHC knows business & biodiversity

About WHC

WHC promotes and certifies ecological stewardship action on corporate lands through partnerships and education. WHC's corporate members represent some of the leading national and multinational corporations seeking to support sustainable ecosystems and the communities that surround them. These efforts have resulted in more than 1,000 certified programs across 48 states and 25 countries, including 70 programs that feature forestry work in locations throughout the Americas, Europe and Asia. Nearly 80% of these forestry projects report engaging with external partners at some point over their projects' lifetime.

WHC Consulting Services

To help companies forge meaningful relationships with partner organizations and community members, find free resources at wildlifehc.org including webinars, blogs, white papers, etc.

WHC Consulting also offers a variety of fee-based services to help companies leverage successful conservation work to improve their social license to operate. To promote corporate relationships with community groups and local NGOs, WHC Consulting can provide:

- Connections with local partners in the WHC network
- Guidance on addressing stakeholder concerns, biodiversity and conservation considerations
- Representation at public meetings and open houses
- Support in meetings with regulatory and community representatives

To help companies share conservation efforts and their impact, WHC Consulting can provide:

- A customized communications plan targeting internal and external audiences, including strategy, messaging, and print and digital deliverables
- Storytelling that highlights program successes and company conservation initiatives via WHC communications platforms including Success Stories, social media, press releases and WHC Blogs
- Opportunities for company influencers to join WHC senior staff on speaking panels at high-profile conferences to provide insight into a relevant conservation topic
- Comparison and evaluation of conservation efforts and reporting frameworks to identify opportunities for maximum efficiency
- Translation of conservation efforts into ready-to-use metrics for leading reporting frameworks
- Aggregation of WHC Certification data to generate corporate-wide impact metrics

To learn more, visit www.wildlifehc.org/consulting

ⁱ Arbor Day Foundation. 2003. A practical guide to sustainability.

<https://www.arborday.org/programs/ucf/english.cfm>

ⁱⁱ Lee, K., N. Gjersoe, S. O'Neill & J. Barnett. 2020. Youth Perceptions of climate change: A narrative synthesis. WIREs Climate Change 11(3): e641.

ⁱⁱⁱ Syvertsen, A. K., T.S. Sullivan, & C. Wu. 2015. SCA Youth Program Outcome and Critical Program Factors: Summary of Findings. Search Institute.

^{iv} Friends of the Rouge. Rouge Rescue Reports. <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/14h6C9r0PEmb-vSEW--HvIv7mHvPsmz40>