

Improving Public Spaces and Services in New York City

The Fund's Improving Public Spaces and Services in New York City Program (IPSS) is dedicated to improving the quality of life in its own hometown. IPSS targets issues that New Yorkers care deeply about: the condition of their neighborhoods, the state of their parks, and the quality of their public services. The program seeks out projects where a relatively modest investment could yield a substantial community return, and where Fund support could serve as a stimulus for other foundation backing.

Improving Public Spaces

Grants made over the past year to improve public spaces encouraged community involvement in maintaining parks, promoted public-private partnerships to supplement limited public

dollars, and provided summer outdoor programs for children and teenagers in low-income neighborhoods.

Hudson River Park, five miles long, is the largest public park to be built in New York City since Central Park in the 1850s. Begun in 1999, the park will ultimately stretch from Battery Park City to 59th Street along Manhattan's West Side and will include 13 shipping piers converted for community use. Fund support to the fledgling Friends of Hudson River Park is helping the private, not-for-profit group develop a broad-based constituency to ensure that the park's facilities and programming meet the multiple needs of its ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods.

One of the little-known marvels of the New York City landscape is the 23-mile Bronx River. Beginning as a small brook in Valhalla, New York, the waterway winds through southern Westchester County into the South Bronx. Over the years, the river has not been treated well, too often serving as a dumping ground for abandoned cars and other refuse. In the past two years, the condition of the river has greatly improved, owing largely to the efforts of Partnerships for Parks, part of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Now, Fund support has enabled Partnerships for Parks to launch the Bronx River Education Initiative,

a formal outreach program to involve Bronx riverside communities in maintaining the river as a public resource.

Of New York City's 180 public high schools, only 60 provide students with outdoor sports facilities — and most of those are in a state of acute disrepair. Take the Field (TTF), a year-old non-profit organization formed by a group of concerned New Yorkers, has taken up the challenge of rebuilding the athletic facilities of 52 high schools. TTF has received a challenge grant of \$75 million from the city toward the cost of the \$100 million program and must now raise the remaining \$25 million from the private sector. The Commonwealth Fund provided a leadership grant to jumpstart the organization's capital campaign.

Randall's and Wards Island Park, located in the East River under the Triborough Bridge, stands out in a city that sorely lacks outdoor athletic space. The Randall's Island Sports Foundation (RISF) is rehabilitating the extensive playing fields and sports facilities at the 480-acre park. While private schools have made good use of the islands' fields, the city's public schools lack the resources to bring their teams to the park. For the past year, RISF has tested a pilot program that provides free after-school sports and nature programs

to more than 200 children from four Central Harlem middle schools. With Fund support, a "Kids Island" program office has been established to expand the program and coordinate outreach activities with additional schools in East Harlem and the South Bronx.

Another important public-private partnership involves the rehabilitation of historic Battery Park for those visiting and working in lower Manhattan. The park's 23 acres at the southern tip of the island are home to Castle Clinton National Monument, one of the city's earliest forts, and the Admiral Dewey Promenade, the point of departure for millions of visitors taking the ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Following the terrorist attack of September 11, Battery Park became the staging area for Army and Marine national guardsmen and the landing base for tugboats carrying rescue workers to and from lower Manhattan. Three months later, on December 11, the restored Upper Promenade was opened, and the Gardens of Remembrance around it dedicated to those who perished in the attack. The Conservancy, with Fund support, is now redesigning the park's perimeter to create easier

access to adjacent Hudson River Park, Battery Park City, and Pier A, and to develop a pedestrian and bicycle path between Hudson River Park on the West Side and the East River Esplanade.

New York City has a great deal of open space: 40,000 acres of parkland and 8,000 acres of marshes, wetlands, and meadows. But the city also possesses a magnificent 150-square-mile harbor that, with its thousand-mile watershed, is one of the most heavily used transportation systems in the world. Fund support to the New York Academy of Sciences is helping a consortium of experts from public, private, and academic institutions, in partnership with the federal Environmental Protection Agency, grapple with a basic dilemma: how to get the most economic value out of the harbor while managing environmental hazards and potentially negative health consequences.

Central Park is, in effect, the Fund's front yard. Over the years, the Fund has provided support at critical junctures to the Central Park Conservancy, an effective partnership between the Department of Parks and Recreation and a committed group of private citizens. In the past 20 years, the Conservancy has worked to restore and preserve Central Park's 843 acres and develop innovative maintenance strategies. In 1996, the Fund

provided an interest-free, four-year line of credit of \$300,000 to support restoration work associated with the Conservancy's last capital campaign. The loan was repaid in full in August 2000.

The Fund also provided support to the Phipps Community Development Corporation's summer youth program, which operates day camps, sleep-away camps, and a teen camp for more than a thousand boys and girls in three low-income neighborhoods: West Farms and Crotona Park in the South Bronx, and Bellevue South in Manhattan. Phipps, New York City's oldest and largest non-profit developer of affordable housing, provides educational, vocational, and social services to build neighborhoods in which family and community interests are paramount.

Fund support enabled the Parks Council's Urban Conservation Corps (UCC) to complete the East New York Success Garden, a community park in one of Brooklyn's poorest neighborhoods. The project established a migratory bird sanctuary that is being used in the science curriculum of nearby public elementary schools. For 30 years, the UCC has been providing teenagers

from low-income neighborhoods with employment and training in city parks during the summer months.

Improving Public Services

Fund support in the past year reflects the remarkable diversity of organizations working throughout the city to improve public services for their communities.

The Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York (NPCC), established in 1984 with Fund support, is a singular resource for the largest regional nonprofit sector in the country. Under the leadership of Jonathan Small, NPCC serves as an advocate for the nonprofit field, tackling relevant legislative and regulatory issues, and helps small organizations establish shared services and group purchasing arrangements to promote efficiency. The Fund's 2000–01 grant helped ensure NPCC's continued functioning as the "Chamber of Commerce" for New York City's nonprofit sector.

The Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF) supplies infrastructure loans at below-market rates to small and medium-size nonprofit organizations in the New York metropolitan area. An NFF loan is often part of a package that also includes commercial loans. In 1995, the Fund

helped establish the loan fund with a five-year recoverable grant of \$350,000 with an annual interest rate of 2 percent. NFF has since made \$18 million in infrastructure and facilities loans to 92 New York institutions. Recognizing the effectiveness of NFF's approach, the Fund approved a five-year extension of the recoverable grant last year.

Fund support to Advocates for Children of New York in 2000 enabled the start-up of the first online, interactive resource on the city's public schools, the Parents Information Center. Board of Education statistics, information from site visits, and comments from teachers and parents are being used to develop profiles on the city's best-performing public elementary, middle, and high schools. Fund support in 2001 is helping Advocates complete the database, publicize the web site, and develop neighborhood partnerships to help parents without computers gain access to the internet.

For most New Yorkers, jury duty is an obligatory part of their civic life. Until recently, however, it has been an onerous experience. In 1995, the Fund underwrote the Citizens Jury Project, a special initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice, which instituted several reforms that have helped make trial duty significantly more hospitable for jurors. The New York State Court System assumed

the project's funding in 1997 and, two years later, transferred its management to the Fund for Modern Courts. With Fund support, the Vera Institute is now developing a book that will examine the fundamental importance of the jury system to American democracy. Related work is examining how nonprofit organizations and foundations can protect the quality of innovative initiatives as they are moved to other institutions, drawing on recent successful transfers of pilot programs by the Vera Institute.

Through its Health Care in New York City Program, Improving Public Spaces and Services in New York City Program, Health Services Improvement Fund grants, national programs, communications program, President's Discretionary Fund, matching gifts by directors and staff, and core operating costs, the Fund spent approximately \$12 million, or 46 percent of its total budget, in New York City in 2000-01. In addition to its economic investment, the Fund encourages the involvement of its board members and staff in efforts to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers.