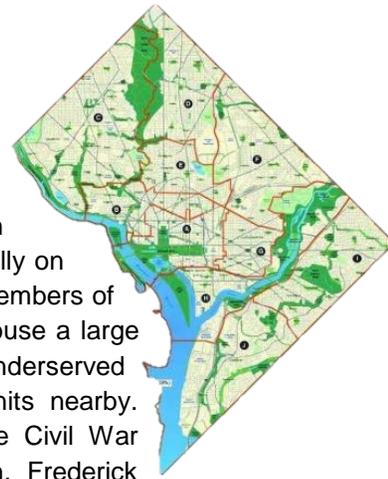


WASHINGTON, D.C.



What more appropriate place is there to activate the Urban Agenda than in the nation's capital? People of color are the majority of residents in Washington D.C. (52.3% according to the Census Bureau), and the large metropolitan area has a population of over 6 million. Washington D.C. is the center for political action and change-making in the U.S. and features a comprehensive set of cultural and historical resources, many of which are free to the public, including the Smithsonian, D.C. area national parks, and the Library of Congress. These and other sites illustrate an ongoing commitment in the city to ensure these sites and stories are accessible to all visitors and residents.

What makes Washington, D.C. unique is that nearly 90% of all parkland in the District - more than 20% of the city land area, is under National Park Service's jurisdiction. NPS parklands are scattered throughout the city with hundreds of local neighborhood parks and green space, as well as several of the Nation's most iconic sites including the National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, Rock Creek Park, and the White House. Many of D.C.'s cultural resources can be found in the city's public lands, making it one of the premier organizations in the capital responsible for preserving and telling the nation's history.

This presents an enormous opportunity for the NPS. In a city that is intimately connected to the past and future like D.C., public land management organizations can play a major role in the health and quality of life by ensuring equitable access to key resources. In a conversation with Missy Morrison, the D.C. Urban Fellow, she highlighted the capacity of D.C. as a model, and spoke to her main goal to connect the existing Park Service infrastructure with underserved communities in Southeast Districts of D.C.

As the pilot began Morrison helped convene what became the Urban Steering Committee—a group of D.C. park superintendents and Associate Regional Directors that gathered to help identify and support projects and partnerships related to the Urban Agenda. “The Steering Committee was an example of One NPS in action,” Morrison remarked. Through regular interplay among leadership at the parks and in the region, parks were more aware of the efforts of one another, and were able to better support Morrison's, and each other's work beyond park boundaries.

Morrison took a handful of proposals to the steering committee featuring projects in District wards where NPS had a physical presence (parkland or historic site for example) and where there was opportunity to build and/or strengthen relationships with the community. Through this lens of enhancing NPS presence in places where relationships are non-existent or perhaps

somewhat strained, Morrison focused on Southeast D.C., specifically on connecting community members of Wards 7 and 8, which house a large proportion of underserved communities, to NPS units nearby. These units included the Civil War Defenses of Washington, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument, among others and Morrison's main focus: Shepherd Parkway.

Shepherd Parkway, is a neighborhood park that features a small pocket park that is physically connected to a portion of the NPS Civil War Defenses of Washington—a system of forts that surround the city and are linked by green corridors once envisioned as a parkway, the Fort Circle Drive. Interpretive signs were added to identify the area as a National Park and better connect the park with its place in the history of the Civil War and within the historic formation of the District's green space (The L'enfant Plan and the early 20th century Macmillan Plan). Interpretive signage was a quick and effective win that helped demonstrate NPS's commitment to the communities surrounding the park. Many of the successes at Shepherd Parkway were similarly small but impactful applications of NPS resources.

Additionally NPS convened partners to help conduct an ethnographic study of the Shepherd Parkway community.

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Designed to develop greater insight into the community and assist NPS with future planning and management of the park, this ongoing Rapid Ethnographic Assessment adds to the multi-disciplinary approach to urban community engagement. This approach spurred additional NPS park units in the District to do the same.

The Urban Agenda's Model City pilot presented a unique opportunity to share and amplify examples of how the NPS in the National Capital Region has been operating to meet unique urban challenges. This is one aspect of the program Morrison hopes can continue; “Our staff in DC has been engaged in many innovative efforts, long before the Urban Agenda initiative was launched in 2015, as have many of our urban parks across the country, and it was constructive to be able to share these ideas with parks and programs across the service.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The structure of NPS operational boundaries can impede collaboration.

“In DC there’s a park in everybody’s backyard, but the NPS management system is complicated and not easily understood by our residents” Morrison explained. Though

many of D.C.’s residents are physically close to a national park or NPS co-managed site, a lack of identity and consistency in some areas further complicates partnering with NPS parks and programs. Activating One NPS is crucial in D.C. and similar areas where NPS presence is woven through several small park units.

NPS community presence pays off—volunteer in local events and initiatives.

The Park Service frequently and successfully relies on its arrowhead and flat hat to draw in new partners. Morrison expressed that regardless of the success of this strategy in the past, NPS must seek out new community partners through grassroots community engagement. Attending local community meetings, participating in local initiatives as volunteers, setting up listening sessions apart from a NPS project or plan are valuable components of building stronger relationships with communities. “The Park Service must continue to listen without an agenda, to better understand and help align community goals with the overall mission of NPS.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NPS

Morrison’s primary recommendation called for the need for consistent advocates within NPS for underrepresented urban communities, to ensure the investment of time and resources remains equitable across the urban landscape. “If I wasn’t advocating for Southeast [D.C.], it felt like very few others were,” Morrison noted. She expanded on this by charging NPS to “mitigate the idea that the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” D.C. is full of powerful and influential voices, but the demographics that need parks most, whether it pertains to health, economic growth, or stewardship, often have their voices eclipsed. With the capacity and creativity among NPS staff, Morrison asserts that it is possible, and paramount for NPS to focus on the equitable allocation of funds, time, and resources across the region.

