

THE VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP NETWORK

SUPPORTING NATURE VOLUNTEERS
AND GROUPS ACROSS ILLINOIS
SINCE 1983



2021-2022

The Nature Conservancy 



nature.org/volunteeril

Co-partners of the Volunteer Stewardship Network

HELPING VOLUNTEER GROUPS ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

Visit any county in Illinois, and you will find a stretch of land—such as a prairie remnant, wetland or community garden—that is being lovingly tended by local, often small organizations and their devoted volunteers. The Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN) supports these vital volunteer groups by providing financial and educational assistance. VSN helps organizations recruit and engage volunteers, pay for supplies and equipment, network with peers and experts and stay on top of conservation best practices.

About 40 years ago, The Nature Conservancy in Illinois partnered with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to form VSN. Today, we support more than 140 public and private organizations that care for Illinois natural areas and manage community gardens.



Volunteers with Friends of the Forest Preserves (Friends) collect seeds at Whistler Woods in Riverdale. © Friends



A community garden kick-off event with Empire 13, an environmental justice group in East St. Louis. © Empire 13

NEXT PAGE: A volunteer with Grand Prairie Friends (GPF), which is restoring tallgrass prairie and woodlands in Central Illinois. © GPF



The Volunteer Stewardship Network: By the Numbers

140+

VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS
IN VSN

\$100,000+

TOTAL SUPPORT TO
NETWORK MEMBERS
(2021-2022)

1,000+

SCHOLARSHIPS GRANTED
(2021-2022)

CONVENING VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS FROM ACROSS COMMUNITIES

A key goal of VSN is to help volunteer groups engage populations that are often left out of conservation and stewardship efforts, including people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, veterans and people with disabilities. To help volunteer groups welcome and embrace historically excluded populations, VSN launched the Community Convening Fund in 2021.

Volunteer groups spend the grants on engagement efforts aimed at increasing equity and inclusiveness in their organizations, such as hosting community gatherings or creating welcoming spaces in nature. On the following pages are three examples of how volunteer groups used Community Convening Fund grants in 2021 and 2022.

Academy for Global Citizenship

A Chicago public charter school on Chicago's southwest side, the Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC) is nearing the end of a major expansion to benefit students as well as the nearby community. About half of the six-acre project is dedicated to an urban farm and learning gardens. The Community Convening Fund grant helped cover consulting services from a local nonprofit farm.

"We're located in a food-insecure community where residents have to drive 15 minutes to find healthy food," said Sarah Elizabeth Ippel, founder and executive director. "With the expansion, we'll be able to provide our students and community members access to fresh produce directly in their neighborhood."

Community members recently launched a separate nonprofit, called Cultivate Collective, that will work together with AGC to oversee the urban farm and other community programs and services.



AGC students inspect crops. © Eva and Daniel Gillet



“With the expansion, we’ll be able to provide our students and community members access to fresh produce directly in their neighborhood.”

All Things Through Christ Outreach Ministries

All Things Through Christ Outreach Ministries (ATTCOM) runs a food pantry, youth programs and a community garden to help low-income neighbors. ATTCOM used its Community Convening Fund grant to encourage more people in Chicago's West Englewood neighborhood, including Spanish-speaking neighbors, to help with the garden and take advantage of ATTCOM's services. "Our focus over the last three years has been to improve our outreach and offer services and support that mimic the cultural needs of the people we serve," said Reverend Gwen Sampson, vice president and COO.

For example, the nonprofit posted and distributed bilingual signs, flyers and social media content that explained the purpose of the garden and invited community members to participate. ATTCOM also held a community engagement event where more than 100 people of various nationalities helped plant the garden and enjoyed a box lunch. Bilingual volunteers

served as translators so ATTCOM leaders could introduce themselves and extend invitations to come out and participate.

Douglas-Hart Nature Center

In addition to managing a 65-acre native habitat and two gardens in Coles County, the Douglas-Hart Nature Center hosts nature-related programs. The nonprofit used its Community Convening Fund grant to support adult programs designed to foster discussions about diversity, equity and inclusion. The Nature Nerds Book Club was one of these programs. One book the club read was *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* by Carolyn Finney. Taneya Higginbotham, CEO, The RealiTea Project, guided the discussion, which helped attract a diverse group of attendees.

"Our goal was to highlight underserved populations, and we tried to create a very safe space where honest and open conversations could emerge," said Jennifer Day Tariq, executive director.



Community members at a session of the Nature Nerds Book Club. © Douglas-Hart Nature Center



"Our focus ... has been to improve our outreach and offer services and support that mimic the cultural needs of the people we serve."

FUNDING STEWARDSHIP TOOLS AND SUPPLIES

Stewarding Illinois preserves and other green spaces requires a wide variety of resources—from tree seedlings and native plant plugs to saws, loppers and safety supplies (e.g., goggles, gloves). Volunteer groups also need to invest in websites, brochures and other materials to engage volunteers and the community. In addition, groups may need various items to offer hands-on educational programs, such as binoculars for bird watching.

Out in Nature

Out in Nature (OIN) organizes outdoor meetups for LGBTQIA+ individuals. “We create spaces that allow queer individuals to be themselves safely while building community through outdoor recreation, stewardship and hands-on activities,” said Dani Abboud, president.

OIN used its stewardship grant to buy binoculars and other supplies that volunteers need to explore and care for nature.

Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves

Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves (Friends) assist volunteer groups in caring for sites in the Illinois Nature Preserves System. Friends used its VSN grant to buy supplies for volunteers restoring Kishwaukee Fen Nature Preserve. “The grant’s impact has grown,” said Friends director Amy Doll. “It kickstarted the preservation work, which caught the attention of village officials and others.”

Green Earth, Inc

The nonprofit Green Earth owns and maintains 220 acres of native habitat and nine miles of hiking trails in Carbondale, Ill. Green Earth used its VSN grant to buy gloves, insect repellent and other supplies for volunteer stewardship workdays.



Volunteers with Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves at Kishwaukee Fen Nature Preserve removing invasive buckthorn. © Friends



Sixth-grade students from Unity Point School helped remove invasive garlic mustard in Green Earth’s natural areas. © Green Earth.

NEXT PAGE: Out in Nature (OIN) leadership team member Che during a 2022 workday at Whistler Woods in Riverdale, Ill. © OIN



VOLUNTEERS IN ACTION!

Forest Preserves staff and trained volunteers are restoring health to our woodlands, grasslands and wetlands. Have a question? Inspired to join us? Come say hello or visit our website.
fpdcc.com/volunteers • 773-631-1790

FOREST PRESERVES
of Cook County

“We create spaces that allow queer individuals to be themselves safely while building community through outdoor recreation, stewardship and hands-on activities.”

PROVIDING SCHOLARSHIPS AND TRAININGS

To care for Illinois prairies, community gardens and other green spaces, many volunteers and volunteer leaders benefit from trainings on a variety of topics, from invasive species management to native plant landscaping. By collaborating with The Morton Arboretum and other organizations, VSN is helping volunteers expand their skills.

Scholarships to Nature Conservation Trainings

VSN partners with The Morton Arboretum to provide volunteers and volunteer leaders with access to the Arboretum's Natural Areas Conservation Training (N-ACT) program and other adult learning programs. Classes offered include "Spring Native Plant Propagation," "Chicago Wilderness Prescription Burn Crew Training" and "Towards Resilient and Equitable Food Systems."

More than 350 volunteers and volunteer leaders received full scholarships from VSN for N-ACT courses between 2021 and 2022. Funding from the Oberweiler Foundation helped VSN provide these scholarships. "The scholarship fund helps make the learning opportunities at the Arboretum available to a broader audience who might not otherwise be aware of or able to access those programs," said the Arboretum's Megan Dunning, PhD, manager of adult learning programs.

Wilderness First-Aid Trainings

In 2022, participants from more than 20 organizations participated in Wilderness First-Aid Trainings for outdoor volunteers, held in central and east-central Illinois. VSN funded the trainings, which is taught by Venturing Crew 1.

"What a great training! I've taken wilderness first aid before and [this one] was more comprehensive than any training I've had in the past," said Peter Goodspeed, Champaign County Forest Preserves.



Volunteers with Grand Prairie Friends (GPF) practice first-aid learnings during a training simulation of a potentially real-life scenario. © GPF



Morton Arboretum instructor Cindy Crosby with a class on a spring prairie wildflower walk. © The Morton Arboretum

EXCHANGING IDEAS AND BEST PRACTICES

Another way that VSN supports volunteer groups and their volunteers is through our **Network for Nature programming**. We offer a variety of workshops and meetings to provide opportunities to exchange ideas, inspire collaboration and learn new skills.

Network for Nature Events

Due to COVID-19, many VSN events became virtual workshops, which helped increase access and attendance. Below were three courses offered in 2022. Going forward, VSN plans to continue to offer online events in addition to providing in-person gatherings.

VSN NETWORK FOR NATURE PRESENTS

How We Listen: Workshop and Talk

Environmental organizations across our region are dedicating resources to recognizing, acknowledging and working toward eradicating systemic harms that negatively impact communities that they work in, yet many remain challenged with establishing and sustaining authentic connections that reach those people who are at highest risk of experiencing negative environmental outcomes.

Join us for a conversation on approaches to listening to communities. We will discuss insights to understanding a framework for community participation processes and share strategies to prepare for effective, authentic engagement.

Thursday, April 7, 2022
11 am - 12 pm CST

Registration required. [Click here to register!](#)

Please reach out to vin@tnsc.org if you have any questions!

The Nature Conservancy
Volunteer Stewardship Network

The VSN hosts virtual and in-person **Network for Nature** meetings and workshops to allow its members to share ideas, inspire collaboration, and learn new skills.

How We Listen: Workshop and Talk

Participants discussed how volunteer groups can authentically engage historically excluded populations and people at risk of negative environmental outcomes.

VSN NETWORK FOR NATURE PRESENTS...

THE CALLERY PEAR CHALLENGE:

A virtual gathering with special guest Pat Hayes

Wednesday, July 27, 2022
10 - 11:30 a.m. CST

[Click here to register!](#)

Is the callery pear taking over your grassland, forest or neighborhood?

Or, are you wondering what all the callery fuss is about?

Join us to engage in dialogue around the challenge of the invasive callery pear and how we can take joint action to stop the spread!

Thursday, August 25, 2022
9:00 - 10:30 am CST

Registration required. [Click here to register!](#)

Zoom link to be emailed on **Wednesday, August 24**.

Please reach out to vin@tnsc.org if you have any questions!

The Nature Conservancy
Volunteer Stewardship Network

Pat Hayes is site steward at Orland Grassland, a 960-acre Cook County Forest Preserves site, an Illinois Land and Water Reserve and Important Bird area.

Pat was recently a guest on WGN Podcast, "Steve Dale's Other World" to talk about the harmful impacts of the callery pear and other invasive species.

Registration required. Zoom link will be emailed on **Tues. July 26**.

The Callery Pear Challenge

Callery Pear trees are taking over many grasslands, forests and neighborhoods. The event focused on how to stop the spread of this invasive tree.

VSN NETWORK FOR NATURE PRESENTS

A Native Seed Collection Workshop

with special guest Kelly Schultz

Collecting native seeds is fun! It is a restoration activity that focuses on LIFE, when so much of restoration is focused on killing invasives. Yet despite the number of people working & volunteering in restoration, there are very few resources for native seed collectors.

Most seeds are in subtle shades of brown, seed capsules often look nothing like the flower, and leaves may be completely gone at harvest time. So how do you know when and how to collect your native seeds?

Bring your questions on your favorite natives. Most of the webinar will focus on seed collection and use images from the Seed Guide, but we will also touch on seed processing, storage, and germination. This webinar will be recorded.

Thursday, August 25, 2022
9:00 - 10:30 am CST

Registration required. [Click here to register!](#)

Zoom link to be emailed on **Wednesday, August 24**.

Please reach out to vin@tnsc.org if you have any questions!

The Nature Conservancy
Volunteer Stewardship Network

Kelly Schultz is the Stewardship Ecologist for the Lake County Forest Preserve District (LCFPD). She has spent 18 years professionally collecting seeds, running greenhouses, and working with volunteers. She co-authored the Lake County Seed Collection Guide, available as pdfs (free) and books (proceeds benefit the LCFPD volunteer program).

A Native Seed Collection Workshop

This webinar provided tips and advice on how to identify and collect different types of native seeds, as well as seed processing, storage and germination.

THANK YOU, VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEER LEADERS

- ... For rolling up your sleeves to cut down buckthorn or remove other invasive species.
- ... For planting, weeding or harvesting a community garden.
- ... For donating hours to collect, process and spread native seeds.
- ... For earning a certification in prescribed fire or herbicide application—which are two needed stewardship skills.
- ... For teaching and inspiring children, teenagers and adults about Illinois wildlife or plants.
- ... For purposefully engaging community members who are often left out of conservation work.
- ... For taking on a leadership role in your volunteer group—and all the work that is involved.
- ... For showing up for nature in whatever way you can.



Volunteers with Friends of the Illinois Nature Preserves. © Friends



Volunteers with Empire 13. © Empire 13



**Learn more about VSN—
or find a volunteer group
near you.**



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