

YII Overview

The award-winning Youth Inclusion Initiative empowers youth from overburdened communities in New Jersey by providing hands-on experiences, environmental insights, and introduce them to some of the technical skills necessary to pursue a career in environmental protection. Through collaborative efforts across NJDEP and partnerships with local organizations, the program fosters a diverse, knowledgeable, and capable new generation of environmental stewards, with a focus on providing opportunities to youth from communities that have disproportionately less open space or historically lack access to natural lands.

Managed by the Community Investment & Economic Revitalization (CIER) program, the initiative relies on expert staff from NJDEP program areas and bureaus, including Water Resources Management, Contaminated Site Remediation & Redevelopment, Air, Energy & Materials Sustainability, the Office of Natural Resource Restoration, Green Acres, the Historic Preservation Office, NJ State Park Service, Fish & Wildlife, and Watershed & Land Management. Through curated "DEP days," youth participate in hands-on activities and receive guidance from professionals, gaining valuable skills and knowledge across a wide range of environmental fields.

General Information

- The Initiative takes place over 6 weeks in the months of July and August.
- The Initiative is open to all youth aged 16 to 20.
- To hire and manage youth, NJDEP partners with Community Host Organizations from eligible municipalities throughout New Jersey.
- Youth are compensated via stipend for their participation in the Initiative.
- In addition to working on collaborative community projects for the duration of the Initiative, youth create open-ended final projects which are presented during a final day ceremony.



Youth examine a historical vehicle with State Parks, Forests, and Historic Sites staff at Fort Mott State Park. 2023.





The Environmental Council of States awarded NJDEP the State Program Innovation Award for Water & Equity for [highlighting the Youth Inclusion Initiative](#) in 2022.

History of YII

YII was launched in the summer of 2021 as part of the New Jersey State Park Service's workforce development program. In 2022, YII expanded to include nearly every program within the department in New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and a yearly partnership with EPA Region 2 was established. DEP aims to continually improve YII, routinely incorporating feedback and lessons from prior years into each new iteration. The history of how YII has evolved is showcased below, starting with the most recent year:

YII 2025

The Youth Inclusion Initiative 2025 was launched on July 7th and concluded on August 15th.

This summer marked the fifth year of the Youth Inclusion Initiative (YII), which engaged 99 young adults from overburdened New Jersey communities to explore careers in the environmental field. Ranging in age from 16 to 20, participants gained hands-on experience across virtually every DEP program, working alongside staff in GIS, environmental justice, and climate resilience. Over 250 DEP employees supported the program, helping guide youth through activities such as fish identification, seining, electrofishing, wetlands restoration, rain barrel building, community gardening, and tours of a recycling facility and DEP vessels. Participants also contributed to community projects and professional development days, culminating in a final week of HR sessions, mock interviews, a job fair, and guest speakers that included representatives from the Department of Labor and Brigadier General Yvonne L. Mays of the New Jersey National Guard.

The youth, hired by 10 Community Host Organizations across the state, split their time between 15 days working directly with DEP, five community project days, and four professional development days. The program concluded on Friday, Aug. 15, with the YII Final Day Celebration, recognizing the achievements of the 2025 cohort.



2025 [Press Release](#)

YII 2024

The Youth Inclusion Initiative 2024 was launched on July 8th and concluded on August 16th. NJDEP partnered with 8 Community Host Organizations from Trenton, Camden, Salem, Garfield, Elizabeth, and Newark. With a total of 78 youth participants, 2024 marked a major expansion for the initiative from prior years.

Youth participated in activities such as kayaking tours at Sedge Island, community gardening at TCNJ, investigating wildlife crimes with Conservation Police, testing air quality with personal monitors, identifying macroinvertebrates to assess stream health, designing parks with Green Acres, and much more. These activities took place Tuesday through Thursday for the duration of the program during 'DEP days,' where youth were on-site in the field with DEP staff.

New in 2024 were community project days, held on Mondays. Community projects are undertaken by Community Host Organizations with the goal of youth collaborating to create tangible positive changes in their communities. 2024 community projects included community gardens, a rain garden, community anti-littering initiatives, and more. Community projects were completed by the final day of the program on August 16th, 2024.

Professional development days were held each Friday. As in 2023, guest speakers provided by NJDOL often attended to inform the youth about career paths and apprenticeship opportunities for green jobs in both the private and non-profit sectors.



2024 [Press Release](#)

YII 2023

This was the third year that the NJDEP hosted the Youth Inclusion Initiative. In 2023, YII expanded from 3 to 5 Community Host Organizations (CHOs) with a program duration shortened to 6 weeks. The youth age range was also shifted to ages 16-20, allowing a greater opportunity to serve as an early guide for youth to pursue careers and opportunities in environmental science and conservation. This year saw not only an increase in partner organizations but also an increase in youth participation, totaling 47 youth.

Ever committed to growing and improving the Youth Inclusion Initiative, DEP incorporated weekly professional development days in 2023. During these days, youth workshopped their professional skills, including resume and cover letter writing, and gained valuable feedback in preparation to pursue positions in their desired fields. Guest speakers provided by [New Jersey Department of Labor](#) (NJL) often attended these workshops to inform the youth about a wide variety of career paths and apprenticeship opportunities in the trade unions and the private sector.



2023 [Press Release](#)

YII 2022

This was the second year of the Initiative and the first year in which it was managed by the Community Investment & Economic Revitalization (CIER) program. 2022 also marked the transformation of YII from a workforce development program to an exposure-based program. Participation increased to three Community Host Organizations (CHOs) bringing in a total of 32 youth aged 18-24. The participating youth came from communities in Elizabeth, Camden, and Newark.

Exposure opportunities were expanded to include areas such as human resources, geographic information systems (GIS), air quality, water resources, sustainability, waste management, and more. The 8-week Initiative provided the youth with an opportunity to participate in work study and exposed them to a variety of DEP programs for 6 weeks following the first week of orientation. The final week was dedicated to individual and group projects and presentations to encapsulate the youth's experiences and takeaways from the summer. 2022 was also the first year that DEP partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide the youth with exposure to environmental careers at the federal level.

NJDEP Youth Inclusion Initiative 2022



2022 [Press Release](#)

YII 2021

In 2021, the program was an 8-week workforce development initiative where participants engaged solely with the New Jersey State Park Services under the DEP. It involved 18 youth from Newark and Trenton, who spent the duration of YII working on hands-on trail and park management activities.

Contact Us

- If you are interested in the Youth Inclusion Initiative and would like to learn more, please [Contact Us](#).
- For information regarding the Request for Proposal or Grant Announcement, eligible municipalities, and budgeting, click [Here](#).

[Back to Community Investment & Economic Revitalization](#)

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