

CASE STUDY:

AMIGOS DE LOS RIOS — ALTADENA, CALIFORNIA



Program and Training Information

Amigos de los Rios is a non-profit organization in Altadena, California, founded in 2003 in an effort to create greater access to and investment in open spaces and to train youth in watershed remediation and stormwater management skills. The organization works with 62 cities to develop open spaces for recreation and education in areas that lack access to parks. They have worked with community members and public agencies to design, build, and restore parks and open spaces for recreation and education, with a focus on urban rivers and their tributaries.

Amigos de los Rios is focused on enhancing the capacity of local communities to protect their social and natural environment for the benefit of current and future generations. The organization is currently spearheading an effort known as the Emerald Necklace, a strategy for the development of a 68-mile interconnected trail network along the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel Rivers that will provide much-needed recreational space for community members while also improving water quality.

Amigos de los Rios offers the Green Collar Environmental Certification Program training

for no cost to individuals from underserved communities in Southern California, funded by competitive federal grants such as the USDA “Urban and Cooperative Forestry” grant. Participants in the program are exposed to skills and job experience related to environmental health and restoration. Participants receive training in green infrastructure, watershed management, urban planning, park design and maintenance, and public outreach. They also gain hands-on experience through their work on the projects within the Emerald Necklace effort, including stormwater management, park retrofits, and the construction of biking and jogging trails.

Fifty individuals per year are trained on Saturdays for 12 weeks and receive a certificate of completion. The program is marketed through newspaper ads, flyers posted throughout communities, and through local employers and community organizations such as Youth Corps, the Sierra Club, City Project, local continuation school programs, and other supporters. The demand is high, and hundreds of individuals are recruited from local Youth Corps programs.

Employment Outcomes and Program Evaluations

Participants in the Green Collar training program are prepared for occupations in urban forestry, low impact development, landscaping, and stormwater management. Stormwater mismanagement and water-intensive landscaping practices are major issues in the target communities, where non-porous material continues to be used for roads and sidewalks and 50% of the area’s potable water is used for landscaping. Participants are introduced to concepts in environmental design, planning, and landscape architecture and are prepared to further their education by attending college or vocational school for specialized occupations.

Typical wages for those who complete the training program and are placed in jobs in park maintenance, landscaping, and stormwater management are \$15-\$25 per hour for landscaping and municipal work and \$11 per hour for design work. The employment rate for each session of the program is around 10%. Once individuals have completed their training, the organization remains in contact with them through the local Youth Corps programs, but often loses track of the trainees after a few years.

Amigos de los Rios has relationships with 48 public agencies, the Los Angeles Labor Board, and local school districts who hire individuals from the training program. The organization also depends on these partners to assist trainees with resume-building and interview skills. Additionally, private contractors mentor a number of the trainees during their program participation and often hire them once they have completed the program.

Program Challenges, Strengths, and Weaknesses

Challenges facing the organization center on job placement and funding of programs. Amigos de los Rios reports having strong partnerships with local employers and agencies who continue to support their efforts, but their biggest challenge is not being able to connect trainees to all of the opportunities for jobs in stormwater, retrofitting, and beautification. Funding has yet to be secured to support the certification for retrofitting and other work. Additionally, some of the grant funding that is available to the organization is on a reimbursement basis, and they must be able to secure bank loans in order to start the program training. Another challenge is that the certification awarded to graduates is often only beneficial for local jobs where employers are aware of the Amigos de los Rios organization. Trainees often face challenges with transportation and housing access, along with public health issues, and some trainees are uncomfortable with working in unfamiliar areas due to concerns about violence in certain areas.

Opportunities in the Water Sector

Amigos de los Rios sees the greatest water sector opportunities as the growing work in stormwater management and water quality, and reports that these opportunities have emerged in the area due to new regulations that are forcing cities to come up with innovative solutions for water management. For example, issues with the storm drains in communities in the Los Angeles water basin have raised a critical need for retrofitting stormwater management systems. Similarly, contamination of water and air with particulate matter has raised the need for preventive measures like preservation and expansion of urban forests to help pick up contaminants. Amigos de los Rios also works to make sure that there are adequate waste receptacles in communities to decrease the amount of garbage and pathogens that are contaminating local waterways.

The biggest obstacle preventing the organization from further expanding its work into the water area is a lack of funding for new programs. A federal shift from a focus on energy and water to a focus on solar power in the area has had an adverse impact on the organization's work; a more holistic focus and having some regulations in place that make green infrastructure the only option for compliance would benefit the organization's efforts greatly. Amigos de los Rios looks to communicate with groups in other regions on how they are dealing with compliance and water management.

www.amigosdelosrios.org

Read the full report *Sustainable Water Jobs* at www.pacinst.org/reports/sustainable_water_jobs