

## Community-led Infrastructure in the Great Lakes Transcript for the Water Hub's February 22 Media Briefing

### Panel:

- [Yvonka Hall](#), Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition
- [Joe Fitzgerald](#), Milwaukee Water Commons
- [Tanner Yess](#), Groundwork Ohio River Valley
- [David Ross](#), Junction Coalition
- [Nicole Lampe](#), Water Hub (host)

### Transcript:

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: welcome. And thank you so much for joining us today for this conversation about community led infrastructure in the Great Lakes.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Today, we're gonna be talking about progress on lead pipe replacement, legacy pollution and flood preparedness in the region, as well as the opportunities for creating jobs and sharing wealth. My colleague Sarah is going to help us keep track of the chat. So please feel free to drop your questions at any point.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: We're gonna send out the recording and transcript later this week for everyone who registered. We have a great panel today, and we'll hear from each expert before opening up the discussion for QA. In the second half of the hour. My name is Nicole Lampe. I work as managing director for the Water hub, and I'm gonna be facilitating the conversation with 4 amazing panelists.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Before I introduce them. I want to briefly offer some context. As you all know, many homes in the Great Lakes are 100 plus years old making lead poisoning a major problem there alongside other pollutants from heavy industry.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: And, like the rest of the country, the Great Lakes are also experiencing more severe and frequent weather disasters from recent deep freezes to extreme heat and flooding low wealth. Neighborhoods of color tend to bear the brunt of these and other environmental and health problems. So we invited 4 grassroots leaders to talk about solutions they're working on.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Luckily, right now, there's a historic amount of Federal funding available for clean water and climate preparedness. Just this week on Monday, actually, Vice President Kamala Harris and EPA Administrator Michael Regan announced 6 billion dollars in new clean water funding available for states.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: and something special about this wave of funding is that about half of it is going out as forgivable loans. Historically, it's been money that states and cities had to pay back

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Great Lakes states are receiving money for lead pipes, for PFAS testing and treatment, flood preparedness, and the cleanup of contaminated sediment through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The leaders we're hearing from today are working to bring those dollars to communities that have been overburdened and underfunded.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: First, I would love to introduce Yvonka Hall, Executive Director of Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition. Yvonka was also a member of the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Her organization focuses on health disparities connected to water and climate from unaffordable water and garbage service to extreme heat, cold, and flooding. In her role on the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, Yvonka helped inform the implementation of the Justice 40 Initiative designed to get funds directly to disadvantaged communities.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition has also received a grant to work with local partners on a resilience plan for African American residents of Northeast Ohio. Thanks for joining us. Yvonka. I'm going to get through the rest of the introductions before I turn to you for initial remarks.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Next, we have Joe Fitzgerald, policy and advocacy manager for Milwaukee Water Commons. Milwaukee Water Commons is a cross city network that fosters connection, collaboration and community leadership on behalf of common waters.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Their program works towards safe drinking water, green infrastructure, blue green jobs, and more. Joe advocates for environmental justice to be centered in the acceleration of lead pipe replacement, investments in stormwater and wastewater infrastructure, and ecosystem restoration.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: He was also involved in the formation of the Milwaukee Water Equity Task Force, and is working to ensure that water investments help to reduce disparities in access to living wage employment.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Tanner Yess, is co-founder of Groundwork Ohio River Valley. In this role Tanner has led the creation of one of the nation's largest green youth green workforce programs and brought climate safe neighborhoods to Cincinnati Groundwork. Ohio River Valley is the Cincinnati Area trust of Groundwork, U.S.A., the only national enterprise with the mission of transforming the natural and built environment of urban communities through youth employment.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: And finally, we have David Ross, Vice President of the Board of Directors for Junction Coalition. Junction Coalition seeks to promote healthy relationships with

local, State and Federal Government to build a better quality of life for community members and business owners who benefit the Junction community.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: David builds a foundation for the Junction Coalition's pillars of environmental, peace, and social justice. His practice as a creative is to use the arts and culture to creatively address social issues that affect community. Junction Coalition is working on both lead pipe replacement in Toledo, Ohio, as well as flood preparedness and water democracy. Thank you all so much for being here.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: I would love to turn to you first, Yvonka. I wanna start sort of like big picture, with funding. Can you talk about the work you did on the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council to ensure money from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law actually reaches community based organizations>

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: Sure. So one of the things that we originally started talking about as the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee was the fact that when we talk about where money actually goes, very little of the money that was coming from the federal government was going to communities that were disproportionately impacted. If universities were the partner, then universities got the main portion of the money, and so by the time they got finished allotting, what happened was, the community probably would get, you know less than 1% of those dollars that would go out.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so, at the table, because I have an opportunity to have a voice at the table. I made a big fuss about the fact that our communities have been told that millions of dollars are going to flow or billions of dollars are going to flow, and then in the end nothing changes, because the powers that be end up with the money.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so, because the universities have always had the infrastructure. They have the bank, so they're able to have collateral that they need. A lot of small organizations such as mine, and there are many others. I'm sure that all of us here are not these huge conglomerates.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: You know that they, that we, were kind of left behind. And so what happens is, we have a boots on the ground, and so when you leave the boots on the ground, without the resources that they need, what happens is the communities aren't going to the universities for the answer. They're coming to us. And so, as these communities are coming to us. We wanted to make sure that we're using our voice to make sure we're representing them. Well.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: As Shirley Chisholm said, "You know, if you, if they don't give you a chair, you know you bring your own," and so for us, we've had to bring our own chairs to the

table many times. And that has been the nature of this beast for far so long. And so now this is an opportunity for us to have true equity around the allocation of dollars...a first time, ever opportunity for all of our organizations to apply for dollars and be able to get those dollars to use them to impact the communities that we serve.

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Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so that's why it was so important that not only that I sit on the new NEJAC (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council), that I allow the voice of other people who may not have said anything before I came to actually talk about the things that have been happening for far so long in our communities. And so for me, this is a blessing and a great opportunity, not only for my community, but for all other impacted communities across the United States.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you, Yvonka. And, speaking about the opportunity for your community, I would love for you to talk a bit about the work that Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition is doing in terms of climate preparedness planning for the African American community of Northeast Ohio.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: Well, I think first I need to tell them about me, because otherwise I don't know about the organization. So the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition is the first coalition in the state of Ohio to work on addressing equity in the African American community. Our work is to create equity in the African American community.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: addressing the cumulative impacts of racial, economic, environmental and social justice and equities, and how they work on education, employment, housing, and health. And then our bigger work is to educate, advocate for and empower the community we don't do within a silo. Our biggest strength is being able to work across multiple sectors and unify people and bring them together. So bringing in these public and private partnerships to address the unique needs of our communities

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: We don't work in silos. I think that that's important for most organizations that are boots on the ground is that we are, you know, looking at these community-led solutions bringing community members to the table to offer their solutions. We have lots of local conversations.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And those conversations are in a place that is walkable for the community where the community can get there, whether there's a bus stop there, there's access via, there is a sidewalk there. There is, you know, multiple forms of transportation.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And then we also make sure that if community members are coming out, that we also compensate them for their time, because I think that for us that is so important, because if they're asking me to leave my house account to a 2 hour meeting, then, whatever I thought I was going to do I can't do. And so, whatever grants or pieces we write up, we write up

an opportunity for the community to be compensated. We will reach recently, receive some NFWF [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation] with funding to do some engaging low income residents.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: and resiliency planning, and for us it's so important for us to engage the communities because these are communities that haven't been engaged and haven't been engaged a long time. And you know, you know what we would get is, you know, you go talk to a couple of people, and then that's kind of it. And then they create. The plan is, and then you find out. The plan was there was in place. And they're they're like, "Oh, we had all these meetings, you know, and people didn't come." And well did people know" And so for us our work is first and foremost, we are a trusted voice in the community.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And the community trust us so much that when we offer, whether it's a food program like during Covid, when we had to multi-task and kind of like pivot our services because we are small, we're able to pivot when other places can. And so one of them was around food access for disabled community members.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And we know that during Covid and so right now, currently, we still have lots of people who are coming down with Covid, and we knew that disabled children that are in the Cleveland schools or in the school districts can't get to the food. So we had to make sure that the food got to them.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so we sent out about 250,000 meals over 2 years from my house, because I wasn't in office, but from my house. So we did a pivot where we had hundreds of volunteers coming to take a 30 day supply of food, a menu for the families, and not just canned goods.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: But we're talking about healthy foods, where we went to the store and hand-picked it ourselves and made sure that we delivered but also making sure that we provided vaccinations for our communities when the vaccinations became available, vaccinating more than 1,000 community members in a place that was close to them that was close to home.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: Providing other services that the community so desperately needs work working on issues, particularly around lead poisoning and the impact and yet understanding the whole cumulative impact around lead poisoning, that if lead is in the soil, if lead is in your home, you know that if it is in the soil, once it leaches into our sewer grade, it is right to the river.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so that means that we have communities. We talk so much about Flint, Michigan, and the lead poisoning crisis that they have there. But when we look at Cleveland, Ohio, Flint, Michigan's lead poisoning rate is about 7.2%, and Cleveland, Ohio, our lead poisoning rate is 14, so our lowest rate is twice the size of Flint's. We have some

neighborhoods where 40% of the children are lead poisoned, some kindergarten classes where 90% of the children are lead poisoned.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: So when we talk about well, when I talk about lead, when I'm in the community talking about why, it's important for us to talk about lead, lead is public enemy number one when we look at the criminal justice system, and how lead poisoning feeds into this lead and crime, hypothesis, and all of these other things that are going on as a direct result of lead poisoning. What we look at is what happens throughout people's lives when we're talking about these environmental issues. The other thing is around particulate matter. You know what goes on when you live in a community that has all these factories that are nearby.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so all of these pollutants are in the air. So what goes up must come down. And so once it comes down, and it's there, you know, the possibility of a getting out is not. And so being able to have a garden that is free of some toxins, it's very hard in urban areas. And that's because we are the hardest hit. Not having a tree canopy. And so looking at, you know all of those things, and how those things impact our water.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: What happens at the end, you know. Grass is not a way, you don't, you don't plant grass to save a community, because grass, you know, is not deeply rooted is not something that's taking up toxins.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: and so for us is, how do we make sure that we're educating our clergy members. I'm part of one of the clergy alliances. So making sure that we're bringing those the members of clergy together, making sure we're bringing the members of the community together. And then looking at these things that we can do as these addressing these civil rights and human rights?

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: That are going on when we talk about climate resilience and what's going on in our community? Because at the end of all of this we know that the reason that Covid was able to decimate so many communities in that so many people died is because of all the chronic conditions that people already had, and then the environments of which they live.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so for us at the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition, our work is important and vital to the community. But our main part of our work, of anything that we do, of everything that we do is trust. Trust is the number. One thing that we can carry wherever we go is that when people hear the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition, they know they can trust the work that we do in the things that we say. And that is why it's important for us to be here with you all today, and to be able to be with other like minded folks who are doing these things across the country. So thank you.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much. Yvonka. Joe Fitzgerald, from Milwaukee Water Commons. I'd love to turn now to you to talk a bit about climate readiness. Hoping you can talk about the ways federal funds are helping Milwaukee neighborhoods prepare for future flooding.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: Yeah, absolutely. And I'll echo it's really good to be in this room with like minded leaders around Great Lakes. I guess one thing that I wanted to really say that I appreciate about what Yvonka was talking about here is just the how seamless, seamlessly you're connecting people and planet through your work. And I think that that's so much of what the conversation needs to be here with these these funds.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: You know, thinking about the work on climate readiness, I've seen funding from the federal government through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, through the Inflation Reduction Act, have a real, significant injection

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: into work that's happening here locally, but really supporting folks who have been doing this work for a long time, folks who have been organizing in their community and calling about the need for action on flooding, and tree canopy, and improved air quality. And all this. So seeing that funding be injected into work that's been happening on the ground. I still think, though, and I'll give a couple of examples of that here in Milwaukee.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: But I still think also that there's more that could be done to really track that implementation and impact. To make sure that we're meeting the values of what's been put out around these programs. And also to make sure that we're really directing that funding equitably and supporting those local initiatives. So one thing I'll I'll highlight here is that

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: We've been organizing a program since around 2018, called the Branch out Milwaukee Network, which was focused on increasing tree canopy in the city of Milwaukee equitably, and looking at disparities, and where tree canopy exists, and also really having conversations at a cross sector so like Yvonka was saying, like breaking down the silos and talking about also like, how do we not just increase the tree canopy through a planting program?

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: But do the maintenance of the tree canopy that does exist and support folks who have had their canopy disinvested in, and so the the City of Milwaukee, the sewerage district, the county, and public schools recently received \$12 million dollar grant from USDA to do a big forestry initiative. And what we're seeing as more of this funding comes out with that kind of like equity values approach that there's more flexibility on how dollars are being able to be spent.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: So where it's been very hard historically to fund tree maintenance work. There's more of an appetite to do that still. Still, you know, now it's even difficult to fund canopy work in a city in general. But kind of breaking that question of like, "How do you work in neighborhoods? How do you work on private property? How do you do that tree maintenance?" And so we've been running a tree maintenance program in a mixed income

neighborhood, really subsidizing tree maintenance for folks to try to repair that relationship that folks have.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: They've been living with trees growing out of their house, out of their garage. And so the relationship, you know, we don't understand is environmental groups about the the benefits of trees on reducing particulate matter, reducing, flooding, avoiding heat.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: But for neighbors with a tree that's knocking into their house strapping branches, however, so so I think that there's a lot of work that needs to be done both to support that kind of growing space around the tree maintenance work. And also to invest in some of the repair of that relationship between people and planet as well. But really exciting to see that money going into that space.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: Another example I'll pull, I'll mention. Really quick is the Milwaukee Area of Concern. So the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which is a big Federal Great Lakes Restoration program, had an infusion of about a billion dollars from Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and a big chunk of that, the largest amount of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative money that's been invested in a particular community is coming to Milwaukee for the restoration of its waterways.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: There's about 450 million dollars coming to Milwaukee to remove contaminated sediment that's come from this legacy of industry and marginalization in our city is really exciting. And it's also, you know, because of that work that's gonna be happening, which, again, is a cross sector coalition kind of figuring out how to implement those funds. What we're gonna see is also concrete removal on Milwaukee, South side and the Kinnickinnic River.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: The Kinnickinnic River has about 97% of its watershed, covered in impervious surfaces, and when it rains, it's a flash flood almost every time. So it's dangerous for folks to go down by that river. So for us it's been a conversation then, too, about what does it look like for us to invest in restoring that waterway, not just for the ecological benefits, but to repair folks relationship with water, and also to reconnect that community to their to the environment that they're living in and make it healthier also.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: You know. I'll say, I think one more thing I would say about this kind of investment is that there's still work to be done: one, to increase this money amount, that to see the additional money going into this is really exciting. But I think there's still a need to invest more money in water infrastructure. The amount that we've seen is not enough right now, and what we're running into is that folks are still having to pit communities against each other in terms of who gets funded.



Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And it's not okay. Environmental justice issues exist all over our state, and we shouldn't have to have a community that's disconnected from a wastewater system competing with a community that wants to address flooding issues. And in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And so there's a need to increase that funding. Now also, look at the opportunities for state policies to really make sure that we do have programs, so that when the funding is there that it's moved into investment.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: A few examples of this one is that for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, right now there's a push on the Hill and DC to try to increase the annual authorization amount of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. So what was possible for a community like Milwaukee this year will be possible for other areas of concern in future years.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: Another example is that in Wisconsin, there currently isn't an infrastructure for having that principle forgiveness or forgivable loan funding go specifically to urban flooding issues. There are other stormwater issues. There are ways that you can use SRF [State Revolving Fund] funding to address water quality issues. But we also need to be thinking specifically, if this money is aimed at addressing those flooding issues, that we have mechanisms and policy to ensure that the dollars are going there. So I'll I'll stop there.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much, Joe I love you started out with tree canopy because I think that what we don't always think about street trees and parks and gardens as infrastructure, but they absolutely are, for all the reasons you mentioned. And speaking of places that we need additional funding, can you talk a bit about the lead pipe work and other gray infrastructure areas that Milwaukee Water Commons is working on?

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: Yeah, absolutely. And so I you know, I did. I talked a lot about green infrastructure and kind of climate readiness. But there's a need generally across our water systems for investments in our capital plans.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And addressing these big, hairy problems that are coming with climate change. The city of Milwaukee. I'll focus on lead pipes. The city of Milwaukee, historically, has had 70,000 lead service lines. I think we're down to about 64,000. Now, after a program that started in 2017. And so what we're really looking for is an acceleration of that replacement and also to see a more equitable implementation.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And through both local and State advocacy, we've seen a lot of progress towards that. So the city of Milwaukee has now committed to a 20 year replacement program. As a result of more confidence from this funding coming in from the Federal Government and actually, they also recently submitted a letter in

support of the Federal lead and copper rule through the Environmental Protection agency which is calling for there to be a 10 year replacement timeline. So I'm optimistic that we'll actually be committing to 10 years to replace those pipes. And the reason that that's possible right now is in part because there's this Federal funding coming down, especially through principal forgiveness, to be able to support this work.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: But also we did work with our state administrators of the State Revolving Loan Fund to find ways to make sure that money was incentivized to go into small, smaller geographic areas, so that it wasn't necessarily that we were pitting larger communities against smaller communities, but that we were prioritizing communities without the ability to pay for infrastructure investments and also with the highest need for investments and water infrastructure challenges.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And so we also were able then to work locally with the city of Milwaukee, to have a mechanism for how that funding would be distributed within the city and the city of developed an equity prioritization plan, working with local partners that prioritizes census blocks based on the frequency of childhood blood lead poisoning, the density of lead service lines, and also different socioeconomic factors.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: So really measuring. What neighborhoods are best equipped to be able to pay the rate structure of replacing the service lines. And so we're prioritizing those communities that have been most disinvested in that are feeling the brunt of the lead emergency, and also that there's no cost share for residents anymore to be able to replace those pipes so that will go and be taken on by the utility.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: So this is a really encouraging thing to be seen. The one thing that I'll pull up as we start to see more urgent investments in water infrastructure is, I know. It was mentioned that I helped to work on the Milwaukee Water Equity Task Force, is that, as we're seeing hundreds of millions of dollars coming into our communities for drinking water, infrastructure, wastewater, stormwater, waterway restoration. There's a major disparity in Milwaukee of who has access to employment.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: And so we also need is the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, we have to be able to see that this is also an investment in living wage employment for communities of color, for women who have been mostly marginalized from the water sector. In the city of Milwaukee just recently did a disparity study that showed we are very underwhelmingly employing contractors that are minority owned or women owned. We did an analysis of the water sector here in the city of Milwaukee, and found that some trades like plumbers and pipe fitters, employ up to 99% white men.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: The disparity in the city of Milwaukee in terms of who has access to employment, who has higher income jobs, who's underemployed or unemployed is that it's mostly Black and Brown folks and women who are experiencing that challenge. And so we've been working really intently to make sure that as those investments are coming in, that we're pairing that with a fight for economic justice and ensuring that that's creating access to living wage employment. But I think as a as an environmental community, we need to take that challenge much more seriously.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much, Joe, and that is actually a great lead in to the questions that I wanted to pose to you, Tanner. I know that Groundwork Ohio River Valley thinks a lot about job opportunities. Bipartisan infrastructure. Law funds are flowing through 2026. So we're just about halfway through. And I'd love to hear you talk about what you see is the job and economic opportunities associated with all that spending and what Groundwork has been doing to put local youth and residents to work

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Great. Well, thank you again, it's great to be here. The vibes are high and just to be in the the zoom room with one of the architects of Justice 40, with Ms. Hall and everything that Joe said. I'm gonna build off of some some of that. And say something that is might sound funny. But I'll explain, which is that the climate crisis excites the hell out of me.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And you've maybe you've cut to the end of that which is, there's so much opportunity within this crisis, particularly what we're seeing from the Federal Government now now, and people like Ms. Hall, who who made these initiatives happen through BIL [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law], IRA [Inflation Reduction Act], or EPA, etc., and to build on what Joe said.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: This connection to nature, whether it's through genocide, slavery, immigration, co-opted messaging, whatever has been taken from so many of us, particularly folks of color, low income folks. And this generational, this crisis opportunity that we have to reconnect through things like jobs, it's it's incredible. So I find myself being very optimistic within all this, the biodiversity collapse, the climate crisis, etc., because of folks like who are on this call.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: So as it relates to jobs, that's an obvious hook, an economic hook. And I tell our all of our youth employees, you know, young adults, it's it's there. It's their fight to change capitalism. It's above my pay grade. And until that happens. We're just gonna outwork everybody. And what we've done at Groundwork Ohio River Valley is build one of the largest youth green workforce programs in the country, call it our climate conservation corps.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: We employ over 150 youth per year. They're like a small green army that go around the city making it more resilient and green. And they do this off of what residents in our front line communities have identified as potential programs, problems or

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: projects. That's something we call our Climate Safe Neighborhoods Program, like, Ms. Hall said again, we pay residents to be involved with their own climate resilience plans at the neighborhood level. They use this to advocate and take over processes at local government, such as our Green Cincinnati plan, and then we put our green workforce to you to work through funding, whether public or private, on these plans. So it creates a really nice symbiotic circle there

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: The goal is to keep health and wealth in our communities. Again, when you think of what's been taken, whether it's messaging identity, economic opportunity, we have enough. We have this chance to undo some of those historic wrongs.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: The goal, also, quite frankly, is not clean water or clean air. These are outcomes. The goal are things like the goals are things like lead pipe pipe replacement, with our new EPA Brownfields workforce grant, we're going to focus not only on the green infrastructure in the energy efficiency as we have been. But this idea of restoration, in the face of all the problems I've been talking about restoration.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Mind, body, soul, land is one of the ways that we reverse the historic wrongs from from the prejudice and racism of the past. And say, here's some economic opportunity, but you're also healing the land while also healing your community and your neighborhoods at the same time. So again, that includes lead pipes, that includes vacant lots, and transforming them into community identified places that can help retain or detain water that can provide tree canopy, whatever it may be.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And transforming them into community identified places that can help retain or detain water that can provide tree canopy, whatever it may be. Our workforce kind of levels of playing fields, particularly for young folks of color to have these opportunities into these worlds if they choose.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And then to go the extra step into a professional Urban Conservation Corps, or to work with our contracting agency partners, and then, most of all again, something that Joe said, the business incubation behind this because the real power is not just working for someone. It's being involved as a small business or a minority business, where you can take advantage of the criteria around the equity and the economics.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And the last thing, maybe the elephant in the room, too, is it's not like the green economy has hit a place like Cincinnati. We're having to create the market just because we have federal flow dollars, large dollars, i doesn't mean we're there yet. It doesn't mean all of our public agencies, or the large contractors are doing these things and walking the walk. So we pressure and or work with our government entities to to try to create schema like, let's have things like the clean water certification which all of our kids get trained in on and be part of your bids. Let's have minority requirements as far as business and contracting.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Let's build in these equity pieces to our city plans and our policies, so that whether it's new businesses or businesses already that are happening, we can get a head start for what is hopefully in an eventual, more equitable green economy, with all of the opportunity to undo a lot of the historic wrongs.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much. Tanner. Do you wanna say more about the Climate Safe Neighborhoods work that Groundwork Ohio River Valley is doing?

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Yeah, it's it's fascinating. And I'm sure all of us are involved in the data and the satellites in our own way in the GIS, and we have all these layers for our neighborhoods. You can tell who lives longer, who doesn't? Who has more trees? And they all correlate right?

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Go back further to the plans of the 1920, the 1940s to the redlining, and what happened particularly to our low-income community of colors. It's not just a correlation. It's intentional, right? Our neighborhoods didn't end up how they look on accident, and they're not gonna change on accident. So we have all that we've amassed it in something called the climate Equities Indicator Report. There's even our kids even work with NASA and do temperature readings of like the ground surface and everything to to groundtruth. The data that we do have. So you can see in a certain neighborhood it's hotter, has fewer trees, has more impervious surfaces. Life expectancy might be 20 degrees, or, excuse me, 20 years less than a neighborhood 10 miles away. And generally these are more low income communities of color.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: That's the data. We know that we don't have to stop. We can get moving. However, it's not enough, because to democratize that data, we need to train up our residents there, and we need to also learn from them, particularly decisionmakers and the politicians about what it's like to be frontline living in these areas. And what are the solutions that they say? See because they know it best. So it's a shared learning experience where we create these climate advisory groups around the city in our highest priority neighborhoods, where again they create their own resilience plan through a shared learning experience, and we use that to fund, the green workforce and other projects and partners.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: As a foundation to have local resilience and climate adaptation strategies right there identified by the community, for the community, and then the youth, environmental green workforce, or residents being paid to execute on these things, including the monitoring of air, quality and water quality.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much Tanner. David, I'd love to turn to you now to talk about water democracy. Can you talk about what that term means to you, and how you and Junction Coalition are working to advance it.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: Yeah. I would like to start with just saying that a lot of low income communities don't have a voice or a seat at the table tith things directly affect them.

Water is life, is essential. And as we know, the more we had to use, like, a creative approach creative process where we had to have conversation. That's where we started with conversation and community identify the... ee have layers and layers and layers of harm. We have layers and layers and layers of barriers. How do we get people to see that water is essential, and it's something they have to fight for and keep their rights intact?

David Ross, Junction Coalition: So a lot of the people in community that we address said that I don't have the luxury of thinking about water, thinking about environment, not knowing that that is one of the essential things to life and us having to teach them about lead, and how contaminants affect their youth, in their families, in their homes, and some of the effects are irreversible. And that's that's a lot of with the historic harm that Tanner mentioned, and equipping people and community with this voice to say, we want a seat at the table.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: And we have these basic rights that we deserve and are willing to come together and fight for. That's water democracy. That's that fight right there on just activating people as leaders and and doing some of the work that government and a lot of people aren't accountable for so creating a system where community can't activate, be the voice and be the workers. Sit at, sit at the table and make these, make water a democracy.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Seeing snaps from Tanner. So yeah, it sounds like a a lot of what you're talking about, creating seats at the table, is about community engagement. And you mentioned you also do youth engagement. Can you talk more about what that looks like for you and Junction Coalition?

David Ross, Junction Coalition: So we know, as well as others, we know that sustainability is everything, and making environmental work sustainable is, is is active. If we don't activate our youth, then it won't be sustainable. We, the the future, the stakes all affect them, and also the information, the poverty of information in our communities. We stop there,, we educate our youth.

182

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David Ross, Junction Coalition: We try to create solutions, and we ask them like, so some of our kids in our program they're as realistic as you can get. They're not trying to sugar coat anything They don't wanna hear the fake version. They want to know the raw version of "Look, if our environment and our water, everyone on the planet deserves clean and affordable water. But it's not accessible to everyone." And when you tell a child that, a lot of the the communities where the lead contamination is high is in communities of color, they say. "Why?"

David Ross, Junction Coalition: Why? Why? Why? Is it my area code that has the highest concentration of lead? What did I do wrong? Where? What happened in my family, in my home

to where I got these errors? Irreversible? What what I'm told they are irreversible effects. Why am I going through that?" And what we taught them was about equity.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: And they said to themselves, like, "So water is something where everybody deserves equality. We've already been denied it historically. Now, equity is a conversation where we deserve. We deserve to be hyper focused and we deserve to get special treatment because we have a harm that hasn't been addressed, and it's continuum and cycling. And they said to themselves, How do we address it. What do we do?"

David Ross, Junction Coalition: And you know we got young influencers and community leaders, and we all activate them. We we put the fuel to our youth and tell them you know you got influencers and leadership roles and community that are vacant by our young people. And you gotta fill those seats.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: And our kids is, they're they're ready because, you know. kids just have a different response. And it just it just shows that we have a brighter future. And people like our panelists are on ensuring this future and organizations, grassroots, organizations like ourselves is taking the charge in our youth with the information. You know. The drive to do it.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: And our kids, you know, they created murals. We got murals that I'll try to send you pictures of murals. And we got short documentaries and podcasts where they activate their voice, you know. And it just makes me know that the sustainability of all this work is gonna happen there. You know a lot of us had we had ambition to make great change and be change agents. But these youth, they're ready, and that's what we had to look at and be the amp to amplify that voice.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much, David. For those, and of you who are on listening, we welcome your questions in the chat, and but while we wait for those I would love to turn back to you, Yvonka, and hear more about this funded project that Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition is working on for resilience in the African American community. Can you talk about the status of planning and what what you're hearing from the community in terms of their priorities?

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: So we we're still waiting for the go, the the green light, to to do everything else. But I've met with some of the people that are going to be our partners. We've been meeting with them not just today, not just when this grant was written. But we've been working with these people for years. And so we've been working with the community for years, like we didn't just drop in one day and say, 'here we are.'

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: But I wanna go back to what David says, when I talk about this. I think, is so, I'm a grandmother, and so I my I have 2 grandsons. I have my son and I have a daughter in law and and I understand that they have a different energy than I have, and I understand that we you know, Nelson Mandela said it best, you know, there is is a time when you become the elder statesman in the room.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And I am. I am that time. I am the elder statesman in the room, and I had an Aha moment probably a few weeks ago, because, having young people so young people are the ones that have carried the baton of every single movement that we've had in America, right? Movements don't start with old people. Movements start with young people. Because those are the people, that hunger for change.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: and it's so important that you all and my organization to remember that we can't do anything without the voice of our youth. We can't move the pendulum anywhere without the young people, because the young people are the ones that are ready not only to carry the work forwards, but burn stuff down if they have to. So we understand that they look at things through a whole different lens, you know, than I have. I'm generation X. My son is not so I definitely understand that. But in our work. He leads his efforts. So there are things that he does within this organization. He's our community engagement person.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so he engages young people because it's important for us to make sure that if we're going to be talking about, how do we address the environmental issues that are impacting our folks, that the people we're not reaching aren't my grandmother, you know, who who would have been 93 years old. The people that we need to reach are my grandsons, you know, who are 5 years old and 7 years old.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so what our work is to engage the residents to identify and prioritize their solutions, and basically to work on capacity to kind of give them some of the tools that they don't have because I think that that's important, too, because, remember, we're at a table where we know the words because we've been at the table long enough to know these acronyms that start flying around. We're able to say that means such and such. But the community doesn't know that.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so what happens is, if you just send them out to say, Hey, I need you to do this, and they get into a room, and they and they're not confident in knowing the things that are there. Then what's gonna happen is they feel alienated and some walk away. And they're like, you know, I want to go there. They're they're not even talking about things that I know. And so for us, it's that whole thing around capacity and we're gonna be working to protect this wildlife habitat around the Great Lakes, because the Great Lakes.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: You know we we've had, you know, we talked about the Cuyahoga River, you know, and the whole thing around why we have the Clean Water Act is because of what happened in the in the Cuyahoga River, but we also have to protect our Great Lakes, you know. For here, for those who live in Cleveland and live on Ohio, we know what happens in the water with Toledo, when was the algae blooms and the other things that are going on here? But we also know that the industry that's still here on the lakes and polluting the lakes are still here.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so how do we talk to our community members about the excessive use of bottled water, and plastics and things that are are still going into our water sources. Or



you go out to the lake. And you see all this garbage, and it's because people don't understand like they don't understand how valuable it is. Valuable it is. And so our efforts are to make sure that we're helping to create a roadmap. But we're like giving them the paper, and we want them to draw what they want.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: We want this project to be designed by the community, because unless it's a community-built design, it'll never work. If people don't have their hands in it, then it will never work like. I can give you all of my plan forever and ever. But it's not my plan. It is the community's plan. And so for us, we take that seriously. And so what we want them to do is learn how to effectively navigate the pipelines to implementation, because we know that there are going to be some ebbs and flows along this road, and there are some rocks and some hurdles.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so how do we get to equity in our community. Because, remember, we have this whole thing where everybody's talking about equity. But a lot of these places don't even know what equity is, and remember that equity is in the eye of the person is being impacted, you know. So some people are defining equity this way, and other people are like. No, that ain't. What I look at is equity. And so we have to understand that.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And I think that that's what our work, our resilience plan is going to help to get that definition out there for the community, help them with capacity, and then try to tackle this thing because it's not something that we can do overnight. So these dollars aren't going to make us change the ecosystem of the Great Lakes and make people understand everything. But what it's going to do is be enough to kinda like give it a jumpstart to get people to thinking about some of the things that can happen in the future.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And so that's why this is important to us. Well, you know. Thank you for your time. I thank you for for giving me an opportunity to talk about our work, because I think that all of our work is so important. To this region. And for us is to the nation because we talked about the Great Lakes. And we are. We still have polluters here. We we had a major oil spill here a pretty few weeks ago, and we have to understand that what happens, what wildlife is impacted because of that oil spill. What won't be here in a few years, like when people go to fish, they expect to catch fish. So you know, we want to make sure that we're giving people the tools they need in order for them to catch fish.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: Thank you so much. Yvonka. Two themes that I've heard throughout everyone's remarks are around reconnecting people and planet, and then youth engagement. And so I'd love to just open up to all of you for what, when you're talking to young people, what are the projects, what's their vision look like for reconnecting people and planet? Is it about street trees? Is it about parks? Is it about being part of committees and being at the tables where community hasn't previously had a voice? What does it look like?

David Ross, Junction Coalition: I'll go first. So my process of of teaching youth what enrichment feels like, and tying into a lot of the violence is going on and letting them know that for them to change their mentality, they have to experience enrichment, and that's improving their quality of life, water included.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: So teaching them. How these things connect is how you get their minds going, and they get the same like, you know, this does matter because violence does affect these people, and one of the things we did, where we asked youth their history, their history of violence, and the things that they have have witnessed, and some of them, when they admitted their behaviors. We looked at the area codes that they lived in, and it directly tied to high concentrated areas of lead.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: So, with that, like, you know, in your best sensitive way of teaching a kid that this could have been the cause of your own disabilities or your cognitive, you know dissonance. It could have been those things when you teach them that it makes them wanna fight. It makes them wanna fight, but for the right thing.

David Ross, Junction Coalition: So in our and our experience, we just arm them with the tools and information for them to say that I want to be a change agent, and I don't like my community. I don't like the things that I see, and this is the best way I can fight it. And this support here, you know, you may say we need more sports, and we need more basketball here at this park, but we also need clean water at this lake. We, you know all you is just kind of tying it in and making them understand that it's a whole process, and you fight, and then you fight, and then you fight, and then you get results, and maybe your children's children, or you may see the benefits of it

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And follow kind of sequentially. Because I agree wholeheartedly with David. It's the first step is the discovery or the learning or whatever. But then there's also the hook in the barrier breaking to go farther. So as it relates to employment. You know, our kids aren't going to summer camps generally, things like that. We pay them to come out here and experience recreation, and also largely their first jobs until they maybe graduate up or do whatever it is next, and when you're there, imagine you close your eyes, and you think your most serene place in nature, or whatever. What if you close your eyes, and it's one of a public health hazard what? It's one of fear when you think of nature and all this. So there's a narrative there. Then also, what is malleable in your world? You're you're a kid sitting out there, and you think, what can I do as a person?

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Maybe you grow up in a project where you're not even allowed to pick up a hammer to fix something, because you gotta call somebody putting the tool the literal tool in the hands of kids. Once they learn what David has talked about. You know, you're part of a community. and and as as an individual you can create change and do something as simple but as impactful as planting a tree. Right? That's powerful. And you know, it's part of a bigger picture of conservation, a bigger macro lens to all of this, and you also have a 150, your other friends, and so forth, out there.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: Sand just all the way connecting it back. That's a large number of youth employees that happened because of Covid. We used to run teams of 10 kids or so through Covid. We grew to over 200 in some years, because we're outside, we're providing income and also the social cohesion which breaks down a lot of the barriers. When you think about the social engineering, between the politicization, the polarization in our world, too, these kids are interacting with folks like them, different from them, etc. And so you have all that built in, and that's that is also a form of resilience, even in the face of climate change. So they. I couldn't agree more with David and about it. It's so refreshing to get their takes. You also learn so much, and it's not all positive there's a lot of cognitive dissonance there, too, like, what do we do about this? So creating the spaces where you can inform what you can do through learning or through action. That's the beauty.

Tanner Yess, Groundwork ORV: And then once again, connecting maybe a future job to the environment. So it's not just seen as a place or something that's done to you, but you are part of it. That's how we, I think, fully close the wheel as it relates to the macro and the individual through the climate crisis or green infrastructure, or lead pipes, or whatever it may be.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: think the only thing that I would add to what folks have said here, and maybe just more echoing than anything else is just how immediately intersectional the younger generation is able to think about this work around the climate crisis and the environment. I get the way that we like to make those buckets and silos that Yvonka was talking about originally like that just doesn't work for young folks. In my, in my experience.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: They, it's immediately connected to that local context, to the things that they're aware about, that. What's happening in the world, and and just a real creativity in the ways to connect those dots and think outside of the box and how to create change.

Joe Fitzgerald (He/Him) Milwaukee Water Commons: You know, I would say that one challenge that we've been pushing as an organization is just to create more spaces for young folks to be in leadership. And so, as we're making these decisions again, making sure that there's forums for that intergenerational conversation, forums for young folks to be at the table, but also that there's actually a seat at the decision making table for young folks to have that voice as well. And I think that that is also one of the best ways to get folks to step into leadership is to put them there.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: And I think for me. So you all don't know my story, but I think that you know. One of the things that's important for us to understand, too, is that we can use the work that we do to heal our communities because health doesn't begin at a hospital. It begins at the community level. And so we have communities.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: that are literally dying from the things that are going on around them, or the fact that that led poisoning in crime are interrelated, you know. That's important for us to

understand. There is a Latin crime hypothesis. We understand that lead fees the maternal and infant mortality rates in all of our communities, all of our communities, mortality and infinite mortality rates are crazy. When we look at end of life, and we see that you know, if you are lead poison as a child, that as you age, you are more likely to end up with kidney failure, hypertension and dementia are directly tied to lead poisoning. For us. We talk to our children, to our young people. We have a program called Teen Truth. And so Teen Truth works to advocate help, teach advocacy skills. But it also does this whole thing around teaching them how to do, how to prepare healthy food with the things that they have at home. And yoga things that they probably wouldn't even think about but I do all of this because I am those that I see.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: You know my mom was murdered in front of myself. and my younger brothers when I was 6 years old, and I promised that I would use my life to help change the lives of others, and so I understand that I'm no different than the young people that I'm trying to get on board, because when they hear my story and they see the things that I do, they can't believe that. Okay, you you did this and you now you won Congressional awards for your work, you, you know, was named the 100 women to know in America.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: I'm a girl that lived in the hood, and I still live in the hood. I live in the middle of the hood. I live in Cleveland, I live in an old farmhouse. But when the young people come here to gather when we're having events, you know, before, Covid, you know, having things here, I mean during Covid having things here and having them outside. I remember one young man sat there and he closed his eyes, and he kept saying, Is this Cleveland?

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: Is this Cleveland, and as far as I didn't really quite understand what. And then I said, it's peaceful here. You know, there's solitude here, and that's that's what our water offers us. My grandfather used to fish because it allowed him to be able to close his eyes and just be in heaven right? And so for our young people, teaching them the things that can change their lives and their mindsets can help to ease some of the things that are going on.

Yvonka Hall, NEOBHC: You shouldn't have to walk down your street and every time a car you think is behind you you turn around because you're always on high alert all the time. And that's what we are. We. We have communities that are high alert all the time, and so, being able to have these resilience projects and teach people about how we can protect our environments and how we can use our environments to heal those things will be important for us for years to come.

Nicole Lampe, Water Hub: What a beautiful note to end on. Thank you so much. To Yvonka, Joe Tanner and David for sharing your work and your expertise and your stories. As I said, I'll be sending out the transcript and reporting and contact information for all of our experts. Just as soon as they are ready. So thank you very much again for joining us.