



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

Guide to Community Development Block Grants to Support Green Schoolyards

What are Community Development Block Grants?

The Community Development Block Grant Program, or CDBG, is one of the longest-running programs at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). CDBG funds are one of many federal programs that cities across the U.S. have leveraged to create opportunities to connect children to nature more equitably. Even before COVID-19 hit, some cities were already expressing the value of parks and recreation in relation to their communities' quality of life and financial health. Quality neighborhood green space has been proven to be an essential infrastructure that the CDBG program can support.

The program provides annual grants on a formula basis to over 1,200 metropolitan city and county governments and to state governments that can be used for various housing, community, and economic development activities. Serving predominantly low and moderate-income neighborhoods and households, the CDBG program provides vital resources to empower people to create vibrant, healthy, and livable neighborhoods. Eligible entitlement communities develop their programs and funding priorities which are reflected in each city's Consolidated Plan.

A joint initiative of:



Who manages CDBG funds?

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) distributes funds to each state based on a statutory formula that considers population, poverty, the incidence of overcrowded housing, and the age of housing. The City, typically the office supporting economic and neighborhood development, distributes CDBG funds directly to its city departments or acts as a pass-through entity to non-profit organizations, educational organizations, or other community organizations. Funds must follow federal and local public bidding rules, use Davis Bacon prevailing wage rates, and be "last dollars in." To learn more about your community's application process, contact your local Department of Housing & Economic Development. We encourage you to consult with your HUD field representative or state program staff to ensure your project is eligible.

How can CDBG funds be used?

Federal regulations require that eligible activities using CDBG funds meet one of three national objectives:

- 1) Meet a need having a particular urgency
- 2) Benefit to low-and moderate-income persons (LMI),
- 3) Aid in the prevention or elimination of slums or blight

CDBG-funded public facilities and improvements are often categorized under the Low- to moderate-income (LMI) Benefit national objective as an Area Benefit activity. Creating a suitable living environment is one project area that can meet HUD statutory goals, including but not limited to the following items:

- Improving the safety and livability of neighborhoods
- Increasing access to quality public and private facilities and services
- Revitalization of deteriorating neighborhoods
- Restoring and preserving properties of special historical, architectural, or aesthetic value

Ways CDBG Funds Can support Access to Nature

Historically, CDBG funds have focused on affordable housing and jobs. Still, some cities have successfully funded neighborhood improvement projects, including public schoolyards, libraries, recreational facilities, parks, and playgrounds open to the general public. In cities like Denver, Houston, and Philadelphia, city and school partnerships have leveraged CDBG funds – combined with municipal funds, foundation support, corporate and non-profit partnerships, and school district contributions– to successfully implement green schoolyard projects open to the public during after-school hours.

Schoolyards are often overlooked as a valuable resource that addresses the need to increase quality open space in neighborhoods where a lack of funding might prevent the development of

new recreational areas. Highlighted at the end of this resource are a few examples of how school districts and local governments have dedicated CDBG funds to projects on school grounds. Everyone wins when schoolyards are turned into nature-filled areas for use by the general public after school hours, on the weekends, and during school breaks. Combining multiple funding sources has enabled projects to gain community buy-in while providing a more comprehensive range of benefits to the community.

Adding green stormwater infrastructure to mitigate flooding, improving drainage systems, and tree planting are eligible activities often found under the *Public Infrastructure and Improvements* category that can bring nature’s benefits to communities where they live, learn, and play.

Table 1. CDBG funding for tree planting from 2015-2022

| Year | CDBG Funds used for Tree Planting |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2022 | \$1,495,861.34 |
| 2021 | \$1,138,797.62 |
| 2020 | \$1,356,665.01 |
| 2019 | \$1,347,889.21 |
| 2018 | \$1,535,961.11 |
| 2017 | \$652,353.44 |
| 2016 | \$5,947,832.50 |
| 2015 | \$4,191,435.41 |
| Total | \$17,666,795.64 |

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Eligible projects must serve an area with at least 51% of low to moderate-income residents to qualify under the LMI national objective. From 2015 through 2022, CDBGs funded over \$17 million dollars in tree planting activities mostly serving low-to-moderate income neighborhoods (See Table 1).

See it in Action: Examples of Cities Using CDBG Funds

The Cities Connecting Children to Nature Initiative has identified four examples of cities using CDBG in varied ways for initiatives that expand children's access to nature. Houston has participated in the CCCN initiative since 2018 as a technical assistance site, and teams from Denver and Philadelphia participated in a 2019 Leadership Academy. The CDBG-supported projects described here represent one facet of each city's efforts to connect children to nature.

Houston, TX

In 1988, CDBG funds were secured to support the Houston School Park Program (SPARK), a nonprofit organization that develops neighborhood parks on public school grounds in predominantly low-income areas. The program was developed in 1983 to increase park space in Houston. An inter-local agreement, one of the first in Houston, between the city, the Houston Parks Board, and the school district formally established the SPARK program and has since built 200+ community parks in 17 different school districts throughout the Houston area. The annual CDBG grants ranged from \$300,000 per year to \$800,000 until more recent years.

Today, the program continues to leverage CDBG funds to support children's connection to nature. Houston joined the CCCN initiative in 2018.

Denver, CO

In Denver, Colorado, \$300,000 in CDBG funding was awarded to refurbish a 15-year-old green schoolyard at Garden Place Academy in the Globeville neighborhood, just north of downtown Denver. The Denver Office of Economic Development acted as a go-between with HUD and a nonprofit organization, The Big SandBox, to implement the greening project. The new features included added vegetation, porous surfaces, and the addition of 60 trees along Lincoln St. and Leaf Ct. Other upgrades included adding historical fencing to match the school's architecture and creating a welcoming community entry to the schoolyard. Denver Public Schools reviewed and oversaw the redevelopment project, which amounted to approximately \$500,000.

Philadelphia, PA

In 2015, the City of Philadelphia tapped into CDBG funding to replant 75 street trees surrounding the Dr. Tanner G. Duckrey schoolyard in North Central Philadelphia. Over the years, as trees had died, the school district paved over the tree wells. The project also involved removing chain link fencing and replacing it with decorative fencing, a rain garden, an amphitheater, a bioswale, and subsurface stormwater storage. Thanks to an existing contract with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the city's Office of Housing and Community Development awarded \$200,000 to the project. Students created tree signage urging the community to take care of their trees.

Newark, NJ

New Jersey's largest city used \$2.6 million of its CDBG funds and \$4 million in other public money, and \$2.7 million in private funds to add high-quality outdoor park space in its most vulnerable neighborhoods. A partnership between The Trust for Public Land, the city of Newark, Essex County, and the Ironbound Community Corporation helped develop the Newark Riverfront Park. Located on a brownfield next to the Passaic River, the park added much-needed greenspace while linking children and families for the first time to the water.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) is an initiative of the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network, made possible with support from The JPB Foundation. CCCN helps city leaders and their partners ensure equitable opportunities for children to play, learn and grow in nature. Find more resources at the [CCCN Resource Hub](#).