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Testimony for February 19th, 2019

Thank you – Great to be here and speak to the importance of the good work of VT Housing and Conservation Board, and associated partners. We are a broad net and working at the intersection of important community, environmental, and social policy strands. Asking Committee to support appropriation of \$21.8M to VHCB for high priority affordable housing and land conservations investments in FY20. This is the portion of current Property Transfer Tax and revenues allocated to the VT Housing and Conservation Trust Fund by state statute.

Speaking today about importance of Conservation and Outdoor experiences for young people. Specifically, 15-26 year-olds.

Begin with a story that speaks to the power of outdoor group work...

Quick overview of VYCC –

- 280 participants in outdoor public service jobs
- Work and learning experience
- Community based – young people from all over VT
- 1 month – yearlong positions
- Residential and Day Jobs
- Farm and Traditional Conservation Projects
 - In this work is where we intersect most with VHCB
- One example of a project is on a Nature Conservancy property – Raven's Ridge – in Monkton, Charlotte, and Hinesburg. Crews built boardwalk there. Great summer job and makes outdoors accessible to many people during all seasons. So, support does far more than conserve land and ensure affordable housing.

- Communities where we've had nonresidential crews in recent years: Newport, Burlington, S. Burlington, Williston, Richmond, Barre, Woodstock, Rutland, Dorset, Brattleboro,

Corps Member Story

- Corps Member from last year – Emily
- In total, was with us for 4 months
- 2 months into work on a VYCC crew, health issues caused her to step off crew so she could figure out cause
- Her time with VYCC gave her confidence to manage health better

Trends

- While Emily's story is a successful one, we are seeing troubling trends in our work with young people
- Measurable spike in mental health issues
 - Two times as many incidents last summer as compared to summer of 2016
- Fewer Members have spent time outdoors prior to working and learning on a VYCC crew
- Harder and harder to find qualified Crew Leaders
- More reliance on Cell phones
- These habits/trends shift over time spent with VYCC, but reflect larger societal trends.

Numerous studies and evidence confirms that VT is not alone. I offer four below.

"More than structure and more than work, what VYCC gave me was time outside. That was the missing ingredient I needed to feel grounded, fully human, and part of my community." – Emily.

Journal of Preventative Medicine

Outdoor play and nature connectedness as potential correlates of internalized mental health symptoms among Canadian adolescents

-published July 2018

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743518301312>

Summary: They explored how **youth** exposure to the outdoors, as well as self-perceptions of connectedness with nature, each relate to the prevalence of recurrent psychosomatic symptoms (defined as depression, irritability, nervousness, insomnia, physical symptoms – stomach/back/headaches/dizziness).

Results: They found that in girls, just 0.5 hours/week spent in outdoors resulted in a 24% lower occurrence of poor mental health symptoms. No association in boys – shows importance in accounting for differences in gender. They also found that a perception of nature as “important” resulted in a 25% lower occurrence of poor mental health symptoms.

Journal of Landscape and Urban Planning

The benefits of nature experience: Improved affect and cognition

-published June 2015

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0169204615000286>

“Compared to urban experience, nature experience led to greater decreased anxiety, rumination, and negative affect. Nature experience also maintained positive affect, compared to the drop in positive affect that resulted from urban experience.”

Journal of Adolescence

Mental health benefits of outdoor adventures on young adults

-April 2016

<https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/the-benefits-of-outdoor-adventures-on-teens-and-young-adults/>

Findings:

- increase in life satisfaction, mindfulness and a decrease in stress after a successful nine-day hike
- participants scored higher in life satisfaction, happiness, mindfulness, and self-efficacy and lower in perceived stress
- reported higher levels of momentary happiness and life satisfaction

Study authors note that youth from less privileged social groups may have greater difficulties with access to structured outdoor adventures, but they also stand to benefit the most. “As these

youths mostly live and grow up under adverse societal conditions, they are likely to profit the most from outdoor and adventure programs which aim at resilience and mental health,” study authors argue. Improving access to outdoor experiences—in particular for adolescents from poor backgrounds—may be a valuable component of social policies, say study authors. One way to do this, the study suggests, is to integrate outdoor programs into the school curriculum to enhance accessibility.

NYTimes

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/well/writing-prescriptions-to-play-outdoors.html>

Writing Prescriptions to Play Outdoors

-published July 2018

Summery: Dr. Robert Zarr, a pediatrician at Unity Health Care in Washington, D.C. founded [Park Rx America](#) a nonprofit that encourages doctors to prescribe parks and outdoor time. He argues that organized outdoor activities like athletics don't offer the same mental health benefit as being in nature – going for a hike or being in the woods.

“The two most common scenarios, he said, are overweight children and stressed-out, anxious and depressed teenagers.” - Dr. Robert Zarr

[Healthy Parks Healthy People](#) – an initiative by The National Park Service especially targets both children and the elderly, along with the most vulnerable communities, and also the military.