**PROJECT TITLE:** 450 Underserved, Diverse Youth Gain Environmental Education

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

The YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities is for Youth Development, Healthy Living, and Social Responsibility. We were founded in St. Paul in 1856 and are a trusted partner in communities from the northern border to Rochester. Our trained staff have taken young people on wilderness trips for decades and currently take 300 diverse teens on weeklong canoe trips, in small groups (up to 12 or as few as 4), using a special curriculum to coach leadership skills and environmental stewardship.

We propose to EXPAND this leadership and environmental education program to an additional 450 disadvantaged teens (most from YMCA after-school and teen programs) who, without funding, might never see the Minnesota wilderness. Youth will live immersed in nature with goals that they gain an appreciation of the Minnesota Wilderness and then use their knowledge and future leadership to use and preserve outdoor spaces.

The program was born of a recognition that youth were facing an equity gap in the cities and not participating in outdoor activities, and had little access the true Minnesota wilderness. A survey conducted in 2013 of youth through non-profit organizations in the cities indicated that 89% of youth stated they did not participate in outdoor activities, but they wanted to. In 2015 the YMCA began operation of this program to give underserved, diverse youth experiences in the wilderness. Today the program has grown to serve over 300 teens each summer, and is the second largest YMCA program of its kind in the nation.

Providing this opportunity for urban teens will advance the understanding of environmental ethics in our diverse communities and build community-wide integration of conservation, as well as ongoing participation in stewardship of Minnesota’s natural resources.

We are expanding this program because many any underserved youth are unaware of the value of our Minnesota wilderness, or how the loss of habitats will affect their future lives. They have had little or no experience in the outdoors. These at risk and underserved kids do not have the means to travel in nature without financial assistance.

On these expeditions youth will have some fun and an opportunity to experience nature firsthand, and see the world that exists beyond the sights, sounds, and smells of the city. Using the YMCA curriculum, they will:

* Learn camp craft and how to leave a small footprint in nature.
* Study wildlife and its natural habitat.
* Learn about native plants as pollinators and food sources.
* Learn about careers in natural resources, ecotourism, and environmental science.
* Gain experiences that will inspire further support, study, and volunteer service for the preservation of Minnesota wilderness.
* Develop lifelong leadership skills.

Expanding this program for an additional 450 underserved youth ages 12-17 will allow a total of 750 youth to camp and canoe through the natural laboratory of Minnesota’s lakes, rivers, and forest areas investigating bio-systems and seeing firsthand both pristine and environmentally impacted areas.

Minnesota benefits as youth participants from underserved communities, who would not have this opportunity without financial aid, will understand the impact they have on the environment and gain a lifelong conservation ethic.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

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| **Activity 1 Title:** YMCA outdoor education for urban teens.  Our goal is to expand our program to add an additional 450 teens who have few opportunities to experience nature, camping, or gain knowledge of Minnesota’s wilderness. These youth would not be able to participate without financial assistance.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $428,250** |  |

***Goal:*** *An additional 450 youth from underserved communities will access and explore Minnesota wilderness.*

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| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| *YR 1: 150 urban teens each year*  *Outcomes:* ***1)*** *Indicate increased understanding of ecosystems, pollution and their effect on habitats, and food sources.* ***2)*** *Indicate increased conservation values and environmental stewardship behaviors through understanding their own footprint in the wild, and learning campership skills.* ***3)*** *Gain knowledge of opportunity for careers, and volunteer service in natural resources, environmental sciences, and ecotourism, that will inspire life-long conservation endeavors.* | *12/1/2021*  *12/1/2022*  *12/1/2023* |
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**Outcome Measurement**: Before the trips, participants will be asked to put in writing what they expect, and hope, to learn. After their weeklong, curriculum-based wilderness immersion they will be asked, “What did you learn?” Trip leaders will also watch for, and record, examples of leadership development and environmental education. Our goal is to develop youth who are lifetime advocates of our Minnesota outdoors.

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS:**

We work with numerous partners (none of whom will be funded by ENRTF): Learning Works, Hiawatha Academies, Venture Academy, LEAP High School, EmpowHer (Northfield based), Bolder Options, Project Success, Hmong American Partnership, St. Paul Police Athletic League, Minnesota Public Schools: Minneapolis, St. Paul, Brooklyn Center. These partners will refer youth and provide chaperones to accompany youth to and from base camp, providing a smooth transition for teens who have never experienced nature before and many who have never been away from home overnight.

As this program continues to develop and grow, it has the support of the YMCA staff, the Peter J. King Family Foundation and dedicated volunteers who serve on our community Advisory Boards who ensure that all teens have the opportunity regardless of their background or ability to pay.

**IV. LONG-TERM IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING:**

Program outcome evaluation will provide the YMCA a solid basis for leveraging sustainable funding going forward. The YMCA will use the outcome data to engage funders through foundation and corporate grants, annual giving, events and sponsorships to help sustain this program at the greater capacity.