



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2027 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2027-387

Proposal Title: Leveraging Nature for Mental Health

Project Manager Information

Name: Arielle Courtney

Organization: MN DNR - State Parks and Trails Division

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: This project will develop training and guidance for student support personnel and teachers in public schools that incorporate time outside and nature-based activities into mental health practices with students.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$300,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2030

LCCMR Funding Category: Small Projects (G)

Secondary Category: Education and Outdoor Recreation (C)

Project Location

What is the best scale for describing where your work will take place?

Statewide

What is the best scale to describe the area impacted by your work?

Statewide

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project and In the Future

Narrative

Describe the opportunity or problem your proposal seeks to address. Include any relevant background information.

Since 2021, we have been living through a “national emergency for children’s mental health,” with rates of children aged 3-17 years being diagnosed with anxiety increasing an average of 6% each year and depression increasing an average of 5.3% each year (American Academy of Pediatrics). There is not one solution to the children’s mental health crisis, but many intersecting pieces – one being nature. “Empirical research over the last 40 years identifies positive associations between nature activities and wellbeing in youth and children” (Roberts et al., 2020). While professional medical interventions are necessary in many cases, time outside is one relatively easy, affordable, and joyful way to boost mental health and supplement other mental health interventions for children.

Yet, despite this relatively simple approach, many barriers exist to getting children outside more for their mental health. They need nature space, a willing adult to take them outside, knowledge of what to do, and the right gear to keep them comfortable and safe. School is the best place to introduce broad nature-based mental health solutions for children, due to high variability of barriers for families at home.

What is your proposed solution to the problem or opportunity discussed above? Introduce us to the work you are seeking funding to do. You will be asked to expand on this proposed solution in Activities & Milestones.

This project will create and implement “nature for mental health” training and guidance for educators and student support personnel in Minnesota schools. Content will be designed to meet existing educator and social work continuing education and licensure requirements, as well as connect to student health education standards and social emotional learning criteria. Linking training and guidance to these professional requirements helps ensure relevancy and adoption by school administration and staff.

Specifically, a guidebook and recorded webinars will include:

- evidence-based examples of how nature positively affects mental health;
- recommendations for taking kids outside specifically for well-being purposes;
- specific activities that support social emotional learning and mental health connected to existing educational standards;
- suggested modifications to serve students of diverse cultures and abilities; and
- activities that promote environmental stewardship and service, to both serve the well-being of the child and the well-being of the environment.

Guidance and training will be promoted widely across the state by applicable certifying boards at relevant conferences for target audiences (e.g., school leadership, student support personnel, and educators), and as part of the Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights coalition, among others.

What are the specific project outcomes as they relate to the public purpose of protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the state’s natural resources?

Research shows “direct experiences of nature are positively associated with a wide range of positive actions towards the natural environment” (Soga and Gaston, 2024). This project focuses on leveraging nature for children’s mental health, but it will simultaneously develop Minnesota’s next generation of environmental stewards.

When educators and student support personnel receive this training, we expect they will:

1. understand how nature supports children’s mental health;
2. spend more time outside with students;
3. increase incorporation of nature-based activities into health education and social emotional learning; and
4. increase environmental stewardship activities with students that include mental health themes.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Subject matter expert discussions

Activity Budget: \$20,850

Activity Description:

Plan, hold, and report on series of subject matter expert discussions to guide training and guidebook content development

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Develop series of questions and goals for discussions	August 31, 2027
Develop list of and recruit diversity of subject matter experts for discussions	September 30, 2027
Schedule and hold series of SME discussions	November 30, 2027
Completed report of SME discussion findings and recommendations	February 28, 2028

Activity 2: Guidebook development

Activity Budget: \$110,000

Activity Description:

Create a guidebook that provides educators and student support personnel a set of ideas for how to incorporate nature and nature-based practices into their mental health work with students that aligns with health education standards and social emotional learning competencies

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
First draft of guidebook content based on SME discussion report, research, and other resources	June 30, 2028
Final draft of guidebook content, after review by partners and SMEs	July 31, 2028
Initial guidebook design and layout complete	September 30, 2028
Review of guidebook design and layout by partners and SMEs complete	November 30, 2028
Final design of guidebook complete and ready for print and digital distribution	December 31, 2028

Activity 3: Video training development

Activity Budget: \$115,000

Activity Description:

Create a series of videos that demonstrate content of guidebook for educators and student support personnel and describe the importance and science of nature for children's mental health and well-being that meets requirements for PELSB and MN Board of Social work CEUs and/or re-licensure requirements

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Videography contractor filming and initial video trainings completed	August 31, 2028
Partners and SMEs identify key guidebook elements to include in video trainings	January 31, 2029
First draft of video training script completed	April 30, 2029
Review of video script by partners and SMEs completed	May 31, 2029

Final video trainings completed after review and edits by partners, SMEs and videography contractor	December 31, 2029
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Activity 4: Planning for Implementation

Activity Budget: \$47,000

Activity Description:

Develop a series of next steps that includes communication, implementation, and Phase 2 direction

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
SME and partner meeting to review and recommend next steps for implementation of trainings	January 31, 2030
Recommendation report for implementation and communication is completed	April 30, 2030
Printing of guidebooks	May 31, 2030
Attend key conferences to present project findings and building ongoing awareness throughout the project timeline	June 30, 2030
Mailing of guidebooks	June 30, 2030

Activity 5: Hire contractors

Activity Budget: \$7,150

Activity Description:

Prior to July 1, 2027 if possible and throughout project - work with DNR operations services division to secure project contractors. Amount includes DNR direct and necessary costs.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Completed professional and technical contracts	June 30, 2030

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Brienne LaHaye, LMFT	Minnesota Department of Education	Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) Grant Coordinator	No
Brian Rhoads	Minnesota Department of Education	Health Education Specialist	No
Anna Lynn	Minnesota Department of Health	Mental Health Promotion Coordinator	No
Jeremy Vann	Minnesota Department of Health	School Health Services Coordinator, Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives	No
Aubrie Hoover	Northeast Service Cooperative	Regional Manager - Behavioral & Mental Health Services	No
Cathy Jordan, PhD	University of Minnesota Masonic Institute for the Development Brain and Children & Nature Network	Pediatric Neuropsychologist and Research Director	No
Kelly Kazeck	Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families	Early Childhood Workforce Collaboration Specialist	No
Carol Strecker	Minnesota Zoo	Director of Learning & Engagement	No
Michelle Auld	Brooklyn Center Community Schools	Wellbeing Specialist	No
Mandi Toegel, LICSW	Northfield High School	Therapist	No
Kari Kleven, LICSW	Minneapolis Nature-based Therapy	Owner/Therapist	No
Heather Von Bank	Minnesota State University, Mankato	Professor, Department of Family Consumer Science	No
Ryan Ihrke	St. Charles Public Schools	Principal, St. Charles Elementary School	No
Anna Callahan	Trust for Public Land	Associate Director, Minnesota Parks and Schoolyards	No
Sara Holger	Project Get Outdoors	Founder	No
Laura Duffey	Minnesota Department of	School Forest Coordinator	No

	Natural Resources		
Peter Olson	WonderTrek Children's Museum	President and Museum Project Director	No

Dissemination

Describe your plans for dissemination, presentation, documentation, or sharing of data, results, samples, physical collections, and other products and how they will follow ENRTF Acknowledgement Requirements and Guidelines.

The guidebook and trainings developed through this project will be shared at many conferences for student support personnel, educators, and school leaders to promote its use. It will also be shared and used through relevant licensing bodies and promoted through all involved state agencies, the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and other connected partners.

Long-Term Implementation and Funding

Describe how the results will be implemented and how any ongoing effort will be funded. If not already addressed as part of the project, how will findings, results, and products developed be implemented after project completion? If additional work is needed, how will this work be funded?

Most elements of this project will be contracted out, including content development, guidebook design, and videography. The DNR project manager and partners will direct all contractor activities. Once completed, the DNR project manager and partners will roll-out materials with school districts and professional boards.

Evaluation results from this project will inform Phase 2. Phase 2 will be a train-the-trainer pilot project to implement Phase 1 more directly in schools. We anticipate submitting another application to LCCMR for Phase 2. If not funded by LCCMR, we will explore other funding opportunities and continue to share results of Phase 1.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Arielle Courtney

Job Title: Partnership Development Consultant

Provide description of the project manager's qualifications to manage the proposed project.

Arielle Courtney has a B.S. and M.S. from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities in Environmental Policy and Natural Resources Management, with a focus on outdoor recreation, outreach, and social sciences. She has worked at the DNR for 13 years in various roles across Divisions including serving as a senior research and policy analyst, principal planner, and a partnership development consultant.

She has led and implemented many interdisciplinary projects with diverse partners over the course of her career to increase access to the outdoors for all Minnesotans. She is responsible for the inception of the State Park Library Program, which provides free, seven-day access to state parks and recreation areas in all 87 Minnesota counties. She served as a lead on various strategic planning projects from the 2015 Conservation Agenda to the Lands and Minerals Division Strategic Plan to coordinating citizen advisory committees for parks and trails. She also continues to coordinate closely with public health partners to advance the use of “nature prescriptions” with children, veterans, active-duty military members, and the public.

She is currently the lead staff person, in coordination with the Governor's Children's Cabinet, driving work and implementation of the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. In collaboration with MMB, she has worked tirelessly to build a

network of more than 100 partners to develop and implement an action plan that realizes the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights with no funding or separate staffing. Her many connections within and outside of state government, in addition to her experience managing complex, interdisciplinary projects with many partners position her well to carry out this proposal.

Organization: MN DNR - State Parks and Trails Division

Organization Description:

Our vision is to create unforgettable park, trail, and water recreation experiences that inspire people to pass along the love for the outdoors to current and future generations.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
							Sub Total	-
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Service Contract	Project management and consulting				0		\$212,850
TBD	Service Contract	Graphic design and document layout				-		\$20,000
TBD	Service Contract	Videography and production				-		\$25,000
							Sub Total	\$257,850
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	-
Capital Equipment								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Conference Registration Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Travel within Minnesota by State agency employees (DNR and MDH or MDE) to conferences to exhibit or present guidebooks and video training with key audiences (including conference registration, lodging if applicable, and travel reimbursement if applicable)	To promote and share project guidebook and training materials					\$5,000
							Sub Total	\$5,000

Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	Printing of guidebooks	To use as a resource for educators and student support personnel					\$10,000
							Sub Total	\$10,000
Other Expenses								
		Mailing of guidebooks	Cover cost of mailing guidebooks to school districts and other key audiences					\$12,000
		Stipend for subject matter experts	To compensate SMEs for their time and expertise in supporting this project					\$8,000
		DNR Direct and Necessary Costs	DNR's direct and necessary costs pay for activities that are directly related to and necessary for accomplishing appropriated projects. People Support (\$0), Safety Support (\$0), Financial Support (~\$3,521), Communication Support (~\$2,086), IT Support (\$0), and Planning Support (~\$1,543).					\$7,150
							Sub Total	\$27,150
							Grand Total	\$300,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
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Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
In-Kind	DNR employee project coordination	To support coordination and direction of project success, employee time up to 40% FTE for 3-year project period at \$51.45/hr	Secured	\$128,419
			State Sub Total	\$128,419
Non-State				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	\$128,419

Total Project Cost: \$428,419

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [73eac01b-1c9.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Graphic flyer advertising this training program about nature for mental health in schools to student support personnel and educators....

Supplemental Attachments

Capital Project Questionnaire, Budget Supplements, Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
Letter of Support from Northeast Service Cooperative	237f97a3-5f6.pdf
Letter of Support from Mpls Nature-based Therapy	32e42aa9-9d0.pdf
Letter of Support from MDH	c0114fda-0a6.pdf

Administrative Use

Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?

No

Do you understand that travel expenses are only approved if they follow the "Commissioner's Plan" promulgated by the Commissioner of Management of Budget or, for University of Minnesota projects, the University of Minnesota plan?

Yes, I understand the Commissioner's Plan applies.

Does your project have potential for royalties, copyrights, patents, sale of products and assets, or revenue generation?

No

Do you understand and acknowledge IP and revenue-return and sharing requirements in 116P.10?

N/A

Do you wish to request reinvestment of any revenues into your project instead of returning revenue to the ENRTF?

N/A

Does your project include original, hypothesis-driven research?

No

Does the organization have a fiscal agent for this project?

No

Does your project include the pre-design, design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other fixed capital asset costing \$10,000 or more or large-scale stream or wetland restoration?

No

Do you propose using an appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to conduct a project that provides children's services (as defined in Minnesota Statutes section 299C.61 Subd.7 as "the provision of care,

treatment, education, training, instruction, or recreation to children")?

No

Provide the name(s) and organization(s) of additional individuals assisting in the completion of this proposal:

MN DNR / Not applicable

Do you understand that a named service contract does not constitute a funder-designated subrecipient or approval of a sole-source contract? In other words, a service contract entity is only approved if it has been selected according to the contracting rules identified in state law and policy for organizations that receive ENRTF funds through direct appropriations, or in the DNR's reimbursement manual for non-state organizations. These rules may include competitive bidding and prevailing wage requirements

Yes, I understand