



Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Senator Lisa M. Boscola, Chair
RE: Hearing on Outdoor Recreation
Tuesday, September 15, 2020 11:00 am

Good afternoon; my name is Valerie Beichner and I'm the President and CEO of Venture Outdoors. I'd like to thank the Democratic Policy Committee Chair, Senator Lisa Boscola, as well as Senator Lindsey Williams for the invitation to participate in today's discussion.

Venture Outdoors is an almost 20-year-old nonprofit headquartered in Pittsburgh. Our mission is to ***INSPIRE. EDUCATE. EQUIP. We remove barriers and create access to outdoor experiences.*** Our organization has had the honor of creating over **800,000 outdoor experiences** over the last 19 years alongside over 100 dedicated volunteers introducing participants to a cadre of events such as kayaking, canoeing, fishing, climbing, caving, hiking, camping, backpacking, birding, cycling and more! What we do is bring people together to learn from one another; find wellness through outdoor experiences; and create advocates for our natural environment.

Core to our mission as a nonprofit and to all programming and experiences with Venture Outdoors is equity in the outdoor industry. While outdoor places and spaces are created for all, many members of the community remain alienated and feel unwelcome. We are proud to host the Outdoor Inclusion Coalition; a cohort of over 40 nonprofit and for-profit organizations within the outdoor and environmental fields working toward an inclusive and equitable industry. The Coalition aims to not only remove barriers to entry for participants in programming and spaces, but to create action internally providing opportunity for workforce development and careers within the industry. We are currently fundraising to create a new model for mentorship and career readiness within outdoor and environmental fields and hope to launch the first cohort of mentees in early 2021.

Consistent with our emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, our team has built strong programming over the years working toward bringing outdoor experiences to those individuals most in need, with the least resources. Our Youth Programming, called Junior Jo, works with both in-school and after school partners to engage children in outdoor education, leadership training and new and fun experiences. Over the last five years, we've provided over **39,200 youth experiences** to children 18 and younger. They learn about not only technical skills, but environmental ideologies building future advocates for environmental sustainability. Junior Jo programming is fun, but we also take it very seriously. We work to ensure the value of our programming isn't just for the fun of the outdoors, but for individual social, emotional and physical wellbeing. We survey our participants and they have reported significant positive impacts on their appreciation of themselves and other people as well as a change in their behavior and outlook toward a healthy lifestyle. One parent reported, "[Junior Jo] helps my child be braver, an independent worker, and a

33 Terminal Way #537A Pittsburgh, PA 15219
info@ventureoutdoors.org
412.255.0564





team leader...”. It’s results like these that we hope to continue to produce through sustained Youth Programming.

We also believe our relationship with the outdoors doesn’t have an age limit. That’s why Venture Outdoors has worked over the last 3 years to create senior programming called Venture Outdoors Again. This programming is free to all individuals over the age of 50 and helps local seniors continue to develop wellness through outdoor experiences. We work with volunteers in the medical community to create programming that exercises the body and mind. Our bi-weekly Fit with a Physician tours take participants through various Allegheny County parks while taking breaks to talk about how to walk for wellness, how to keep moving regardless of age and special topics of interest like diabetes and heart disease. We also host weekly On the Move programming providing participants with engaging lessons in how to keep moving even when you can’t get outdoors.

As we planned for a very exciting year of experiences in 2020, we, like so many other nonprofits, suddenly found ourselves in brand new territory as the COVID-19 global pandemic drastically effected the community in every way; from health and wellness, to economic stability to education and more. Venture Outdoors was not only forced to cancel our largest fundraiser of the year, the Banff Center Mountain Film Festival, but all our programming. While it was a difficult decision, we knew it was the best decision to ensure the health and wellness of our community. These kinds of tough decisions are just one reason we so greatly appreciate this committee’s attention and focus on the issue of safely managing outdoor recreation, especially during the pandemic.

While the COVID-19 environment shut down pieces of our operations such as our College, Custom and Community programming, it gave us an opportunity to stretch our virtual muscles and create experiences for the community in a whole new way. As many of you know, the need for outdoor experiences only grew in the COVID-19 environment. Many of us take for granted that we have access to virtual tools and resources to find parks and trails; many of us might be able to lean on prior experiences to continue to get outdoors when all other forms of support are closed. Unfortunately, so many members of the community were without those resources leaving them isolated in a time when the outdoor environment could provide the much-needed stress-load and anxiety reduction we all need during this time.

Our team shifted quickly creating a new version of Junior Jo called the Outdoor Learning Lab. We’ve mailed and delivered hundreds of Junior Jo kits to children across the region including items such as our Outdoor Leadership Button series booklet; binoculars; seeds; soil; books; magnifying glasses; prizes and more! We also included a parent packet to guide parents through ‘on your own’ lessons complementing the daily one-hour virtual sessions with our staff. The Outdoor Learning Lab has reached children we’ve yet to engage before including children in Erie, Meadville, Oil City and Hershey PA as well as Minnesota! We also created parent and educator webinars to help caregivers keep the fun going all summer long. Now, the Outdoor Learning Lab is being marketed nationally as a new tool to help Venture Outdoors achieve our

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412.255.0564





mission. We have momentum behind these innovative programs and approaches to outdoor learning. The key now is ensuring we have the resources to sustain them.

At this point, our team and programming look much different than they did 12 months ago and we're projecting a \$500,000 revenue loss this year. We continue to work with our partners and volunteers on new ways to achieve our mission. And we appreciate this conversation today and the priority this committee is placing on looking for legislative strategies that can help support programming at our nonprofit and the others you're hearing from. Like much of what we've discussed today, flexibility isn't just about physical wellness, but organizational wellness. As the need for outdoor spaces and experiences continues to increase during this global pandemic, so will our dedication to ensuring resources and access to equitable experiences.

We look forward to continuing this conversation with you around ensuring the sustainability of outdoor programming and we thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this discussion. I wish you all wellness and healing as we continue to weather this storm together.

Together Apart,

Valerie A. Beichner
President & CEO
Venture Outdoors

www.ventureoutdoors.org

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