



# 5 Winning Strategies for Implementing Tree Equity

In the US, a map of urban tree canopy is most often a map of income and race. Generations of discriminatory disinvestments such as redlining have left communities of color with 45% less tree canopy cover and low-income communities with 36% less. This social inequity has proven to lead to more illness and death from extreme heat and air pollution in communities because residents are often at greater risk due to such factors as lack of air conditioning, healthcare, age status and working outdoors. As Chicago summers grow to feel like south Texas and Phoenix like Kuwait City by the end of this century, heat-related deaths are projected to increase from 12,000 to 100,000 people every year if there is no intervention.

Trees are that intervention. They are a life-saving infrastructure uniquely positioned to reduce temperatures and pollution while improving [mental and physical health](#). New research from Europe shows potential to reduce heat-related deaths by 40% through a 15% increase in urban tree cover alone. However, to achieve this Tree Equity, more municipalities must move from a fragmented, project-driven approach to sustained, rigorous urban forestry programs, solving chronic shortfalls in urban forestry workforce and extremely limited funding.

## #1 Build a Coalition and Partner with an Anchor Institution

Urban forestry is a team effort across public agencies as well as private, nonprofit, faith-based and community sectors. Key city departments for engagement include the mayor's office, public works, transportation, sustainability, planning, public health and parks. In addition, find external partners that will commit for the long-haul. Vibrant Cities Lab (VCL), a free resource of urban forestry research and best practices created by the US Forest Service and American Forests, has an [Urban Forestry Toolkit](#) that can guide you through building your program. Your [Regional Urban and Community Forestry Program and State Coordinator](#) are also valuable resources.

While a government agency can play the role initially, an anchor institution should ultimately be independent to attract funding, advocate for policies and hold public servants accountable. If you do not have a local [urban forestry nonprofit](#) in your region, look to affiliates of national organizations such as [Keep America Beautiful](#) that might expand their work to include trees.

## #2 Use Tree Equity Score to Identify Areas of Highest Opportunity

[Tree Equity Score](#) is a free tool to identify areas where limited resources can have the most socioeconomic impact. It tells a simple story using complex data to help generate support from decision makers, residents and investors. Each neighborhood's tree canopy, surface temperature, population density, income, employment, age, race, and health data are synthesized on a scale of 0-100, with 100 being full Tree Equity. A lower income neighborhood or one with significant elderly residents vulnerable to extreme heat and less tree canopy would have a lower Tree Equity Score. Each analysis provides a [municipal report](#), [congressional district report](#) and [state report](#) with a slider bar to see how many more trees will be needed to achieve any score, with [i-Tree calculations](#) for ecosystem services to further measure impact.



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## #3 Engage Frontline Organizations and Community Leaders

The anchor institution can bring urban forestry expertise and capacity, and Tree Equity Score helps create a baseline, but frontline organizations and community leaders have built respect and trust of the residents, know their community, and are positioned to help address a plethora of systemic issues. The anchor institution can bring urban forestry expertise and capacity, and Tree Equity Score helps create a baseline, but frontline organizations and community leaders have built trust of the residents, know their community, and are positioned to help address integrated systemic issues. [American Forests' forthcoming Community Action Guide](#) provides a structured process and worksheets to help center resident priorities and strengths in the process.

## #4 Develop a Tree Equity Action Plan with Clear Commitments and Goals

Every city should have an Urban Forestry Action Plan or include Tree Equity in its citywide Comprehensive Plan. A thorough, locally-relevant plan usually takes 6 months to a year to develop in close collaboration with diverse stakeholders. Utilizing the latest landcover and socioeconomic data, the plan sets a strategy, canopy goals and policy objectives to address needs and opportunities over the next decade or more. A Tree Equity lens can orient the plan toward life-saving urgency and is more easily supported by the community and funders alike.

Begin with Vibrant Cities Lab's free [Community Assessment and Goal-Setting Tool](#), calculating a gap score for where your urban forestry program currently is and the goals you set.

## #5 Fund Implementation

Funding is a critical component of this work, but there is no silver bullet for how to finance living infrastructure like trees across thousands of public and private properties. However, there are a number of resources cities rely on, as articulated in more detail in VCL's [Urban Forestry Funding Guide](#):

- **Grants:** Foundation and corporate grants are effective, though not always consistent for generating cashflow. Foundations often support planning and stakeholder engagement, while corporations usually fund tangible activities like tree plantings. There are also [unprecedented levels of federal and state investment](#) in urban forestry that are accessible to governments, tribes and nonprofits.
- **Citizen Advocacy:** Organize citizens and influential leaders to advocate for tree canopy allocations from the city budget. VCL's ["Make the Case" section](#) provides scientific arguments for how investment in trees can contribute to desired outcomes for education, human health, air and water quality, transportation, and resilience.
- **Impact Investing:** Conduct an impact investing analysis that looks at every possible way the urban forest can be financed to generate self-sustaining revenue, particularly for hard-to-fund long-term maintenance. These revenue streams might include carbon, stormwater, public health, transportation, urban wood reuse or prison recidivism.