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**Nearly 90 HACC Youth Graduate from Summer Jobs Program in the
Forest Preserves of Cook County**

High school students learn skills to serve them for the future

(South Holland, IL) – A summer of learning, outdoor exploration and service culminated this morning in a graduation ceremony for 89 Cook County youth at South Suburban College in South Holland.

Now in its 10th year, the Forest Preserve Experience (FPE) is a collaborative program coordinated by Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with generous support from the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Housing Authority of Cook County (HACC), the Forest Preserve Foundation, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and others.

“This program would not be possible without the hard work and partnership of these organizations, who work tirelessly to provide the youth with incredible opportunities to explore potential careers paths as well as experience Cook County’s natural beauty,” said Cook County Board and Forest Preserves President Toni Preckwinkle. “I am also grateful that the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development was able to once again provide additional funding to the Forest Preserve Experience thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act.”

For five weeks this summer, young people ages 14-19 who live in households that receive services from HACC worked in crews at several Forest Preserves sites in the south and southwest suburbs, learning about environmental conservation and contributing to the health and beauty of the preserves.

"The youth participating in the Forest Preserve Experience got their hands dirty this summer and for a good cause," said Forest Preserves Resource Management Director John McCabe. "121 participants worked at seven different sites and contributed more than 2,500 hours of conservation service. They learned how to remove invasive species, which is critical to the health and survival of native plants and wildlife, and they did it as a team."

"We consider it an honor to work with the next generation in caring for our forest preserves and our planet," said Radhika Miraglia, Program Director of Friends of the Forest Preserves. "The FPE program nurtures a connection between young people and nature, while training them in job skills such as teamwork, goal-setting, diversity and inclusion, financial literacy, and more."

Most crew members worked at Forest Preserves sites near their homes, allowing them to engage in projects that their families and communities would most easily be able to enjoy. In addition to career and life skills workshops, the summer included a variety of recreational outings and activities, ranging from kayaking local waterways to visiting Brookfield Zoo.

"The Forest Preserve Experience offers more than summer employment," said HACC Executive Director Danita Childers. "It gives young people real work experience, builds environmental responsibility, and lays a foundation for future success. By restoring local natural spaces, they are helping to create a culture of care and stewardship in their own communities."

A special element of the Forest Preserve Experience is the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Crew members work and learn under the guidance of crew leaders, many of whom are themselves former crew members, and many of the youth return for multiple summers.

"At the Forest Preserve Foundation, we are deeply committed to advancing both environmental health and meaningful community engagement," said Debra Walker Johnson, President and Executive Director of the Forest Preserve Foundation. "By investing in the next generation of conservation leaders, we're not only helping steward the Preserves—we're empowering young people with the skills, training, and confidence to drive lasting environmental impact. We are proud to champion their development and grateful for the vital role they play in building a more sustainable and equitable future."