

BY Caity Pinkard

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION
COMMISSION 

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One Picks Up Where the Other Left Off

THE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES OF ACCREDITATION HELP MAKE STAFF TRANSITIONS EASIER

When a critical member of the finance team at Chikaming Open Lands in Michigan transitioned last year, Executive Director Ryan Postema did not panic—even with the annual audit approaching. Instead, he relied on the procedures already set in place by accreditation. “Having standardized systems to rely on was a great benefit,” Postema says. As a result, the “departure of the employee was not as great of a burden as it might have been,” and he points in part to accreditation for this success.

“I think a primary benefit of accreditation that helps during staff transitions is that we have systems for organizing and storing files, both paper and electronic,” Postema says. “With these systems in place, when a staff member leaves there is confidence that other staff will be able to pick up on any ongoing projects or find information they need because it is documented and organized in the proper files.”

And accreditation doesn’t just benefit staff transitioning out of roles, it also benefits staff transitioning into new ones.

“For new employees, particularly those that might be new to the nonprofit or land conservancy world, reviewing and understanding *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and accreditation requirements provides a crash course in how a nonprofit land trust should operate,” Postema says.

Accreditation helps new employees to “get up to speed and settle into their new positions more quickly and efficiently.”

This is something Elizabeth Friel can personally attest to.


When Friel was hired in 2015 as the executive director of the Northern Neck Land Conservancy (NNLC) in Virginia, she had just completed the first-time accreditation process at her former land trust, the Historic Virginia Land Conservancy. “I knew exactly what accreditation meant and why it was critically important for the management of any conservation organization,” she says. “I was very interested in the position, but when I found out the NNLC had just earned accreditation, I knew I would be able to succeed in the job.” Using the accreditation principals as her guide, Friel says she “transitioned easily and with confidence.”

And Friel has also seen how accreditation benefits her staff during tough transition periods. “Since accreditation, the NNLC has changed its stewardship and administration organization and the personnel in both positions,” she says. The standards and practices and adopted accreditation requirements “helped guide the optimal organization of NNLC” and helped with the “recruiting and retention of employees.” And they continue to see the benefits of accreditation in their work every day.

“As a very small office with a huge conservation area, we use those accreditation standards on a daily basis to guide both our easement and administrative work,” Friel says. “What’s more, with the knowledge that

the key financial and transactional standards were in place, I was able to lead the organization in conserving 75% more land, winning both Farm Bill and Department of Defense funding for creative easement partnerships, and growing the organization’s fundraising efforts to an all-time high.”

After initially becoming accredited, an organization that goes through accreditation renewal five years later ensures that its systems are working well moving forward. As Friel explains, “Accreditation is important to show our board members, our easement holders and the public that NNLC is responsible and trustworthy.”

When asked how she sees accreditation benefiting staff now and in the future, Friel says, “I see accreditation as the foundation for NNLC’s future.” 

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Children learn to build a shelter during a Chikaming Open Lands educational program.