

SAIL August 2025 Donor Newsletter

Plain Text Edition

Grit, Gravel, and Growth: Inside our Summer Work Program



Damien, a Summer Work Program student, spoke at the community SAIL Picnic in Sitka, just after wrapping up his final day on the job. All eyes were on him as he shared his positive experience.

“Yesterday was our last day of summer work! This summer, ten of us did trail work on all the trails in Sitka. We helped maintain trails taken care of by the State, City, Forest Service, and Sitka Trail Works. One of my favorite projects was removing a dead tree and re-graveling a section of the Indian River Trail. We communicated well with each other to haul heavy wood and rocks. I had a lot of fun!”

Damien is one of dozens of Southeast Alaska teens who participated in the Summer Work Program, a hands on, 6-week experience that’s far more than just a paycheck. For many participants, this is their very first job which is an exciting and sometimes nerve wracking milestone. Through guided support and real-world job placements, teens practice both soft skills (like communication, teamwork, and responsibility) and hard skills (like trail maintenance, customer service, or food prep).

As Damien said, in Sitka, a team of ten crew tackled several impactful projects, including removing a damaged staircase at Halibut Point Recreation Area and widening sidewalks in partnership with the Department of Transportation. They also worked alongside the City of Sitka and Sitka Trail Works to improve local trails, including re-graveling a half-mile stretch used by elementary students to get to school. What would have typically taken a week to complete was finished in just half a day, thanks to the dedicated effort of the team. Through these projects, the crew not only honed their teamwork skills but also developed a deeper appreciation for the popular community spaces they helped maintain.

In Ketchikan, nine students rotated through a variety of roles: trail work with the Forest Service and State Parks, cooking classes at the Presbyterian Church, working on the public library, gardening for Revilla Junior/Senior High School’s food forest, and even planning and shopping for their own team lunches. “It was incredible to watch the growth,” said Bradley, a Recreation & Employment Specialist in Ketchikan. “These teens came in shy and unsure, and left as confident teammates. For most, this was their first job and they crushed it.”



In Juneau, the Summer Work Program partnered with Trail Mix Inc. and the Zach Gordon Youth Center to take on projects at the Eagle Valley Center ropes course, the Mt. Jumbo Reroute, and Switzer Creek Trails. Crews also completed a beautification project at Housing First, combining hands on trail work with meaningful community service. Their efforts kept these well-loved public spaces safe and accessible and demonstrated how, with the right support, the Summer Work Program can address real, immediate needs in the community.

Across Southeast Alaska, communities faced a significant reduction in funding for trail maintenance, leaving outdoor spaces at risk of falling into disrepair. With agencies and nonprofits stretched thin, the Summer Work Program stepped up to help fill the gaps providing essential labor while giving youth a meaningful opportunity to serve their communities and gain hands on working experience.



“Juneau has 250+ miles of trail, but only around 30 trail workers spread throughout Trail Mix and government agencies to conduct maintenance to one of Juneau's most valued resources. The Summer Work program adds 15 trail workers to that total, and in 2025, they helped Trail Mix address 4 trails that we otherwise would not have the capacity to address.

This program is truly one that gives back to the community as a whole: youth are able to gain tangible job skills, Trail Mix is able to employ two crew leads who gain hands-on experience leading and facilitating trail work, and the community benefits from additional trail maintenance.”

-Meghan Tabacek, Executive Director of Trail Mix Inc.

Individual Placements Offer Exploration



Not every Summer Work Program participant swings a Pulaski or clears trails. Some are exploring career paths in retail and food security.

In Haines and Juneau, students took on individual job placements tailored to their interests and goals. In Haines, a student thrived at Olerud's Market Center, gaining the confidence and skills that led to a job offer by summer's end.

In Juneau, the program expanded to include its first-ever individual placements at Don Abel Building Supply and the Southeast Alaska Food Bank. These students embraced the chance to work in real world settings. These experiences not only opened doors for the students but also strengthened community partnerships and proved just how impactful personalized support can be.

A Trip of a Lifetime and the Chair That Made It Possible

When Stephen reached out to SAIL, he had a goal to help his father, who lives with multiple sclerosis, fully experience a trip of a lifetime, a National Geographic cruise through Southeast Alaska with their family. The landscapes would be breathtaking and the wildlife unforgettable, but only if his dad could truly be part of it.

Accessibility, especially on rugged Alaskan terrain, is never a given. But thanks to SAIL's adaptive equipment, it was possible. After some back and forth coordination, a Grit Freedom Chair was delivered to a hotel in Juneau just in time for the cruise departure. From there, the chair went on the journey alongside the family, empowering Stephen's dad to do and see far more than he could have otherwise. At the end of the cruise, the chair was dropped off in Sitka, and it was flown back to Juneau. It was a small logistical effort with a big impact. As Stephen later shared, "My dad definitely did more than he would have if we didn't have the Freedom Chair." Stories like this are at the heart of why SAIL continues to grow our adaptive outdoor equipment lending program.

Through support from the Next 100 Coalition and the U.S. Forest Service, more communities across Southeast Alaska now have access to Grit Freedom Chairs. Klawock, Angoon, and Kake have recently joined Juneau and Sitka in making this life changing equipment available at no cost through our local SAIL offices.

The Freedom Chair is a lever powered, all terrain wheelchair designed for rugged trails and uneven ground. This chair opens up Alaska's wild beauty to people who might otherwise have difficulty managing these types of terrains. With its rugged design and user powered levers, it is built for the trails, tides, and towns that define the Southeast. Whether it is a once in a lifetime cruise or a quiet local trail, more Alaskans can now say yes to the journey and truly be part of it.



To borrow a Freedom Chair or learn more about adaptive equipment in your area, contact your nearest SAIL office.

Still Here, Still Fighting: Standing by Alaskans in Hard Times

With the passing of "The Reconciliation Bill", critical funding for essential services has been cut. This is a disappointing outcome as these changes are already beginning to stretch a long and complex process into something even longer especially for people applying for Medicaid and the Medicaid Waiver, programs that are lifelines for those who need a nursing level of care to live independently.

Before the funding cuts, the process of getting a Medicaid waiver took months if not years in some cases. Now, with fewer resources and more red tape, it will take even longer. In the meantime people will rely on SAIL staff for continued support, longer than ever before.

Our staff is here still walking beside each consumer. Still navigating systems, filling out paperwork, attending appointments, and assisting people in making choices that will positively affect their independence and productivity in society. We believe in every person's right to live independently, and we're not stepping back, even as the work becomes harder and slower.

Consider donating today! With your support, we can extend support more sustainably, and ensure every consumer gets the time, energy, and resources they deserve.

