

# Girl Scouts of Central Maryland Task Force Findings

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*Prepared by:*

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## **Task Force Background Information**

The Task Force, created by the GSCM Board of Directors, was charged with creating an avenue for the Council's various constituencies to share their ideas, suggestions, concerns, questions, high points, and opportunities for change that when taken together would help propel the Council forward into 2024-25 year. The Task Force's "north star" was to generate discussion and engagement around "The Girl Scout Effect."

There were 43 applications from individuals applying to be a member of the GSCM Task Force, with applications from across the Council footprint including volunteers, parents, and girls. A list of Task Force members is included at the end of this summary report of findings. The Task Force held its first meeting in January 2024, meeting monthly through May with a final meeting in August 2024. Listening Sessions were held in all five Counties – Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and Howard – and Baltimore City. All GSCM constituencies were invited to participate in the Listening Session. In addition, there was one Virtual *Girls Only* Listening Session held in June, led by the Girl and Young Adult Members of the Task Force, and attended by the Task Force Co-Chairs.

Additionally, the Task Force Co-Chairs were asked to attend the Columbia Mall Sleep-In and all the Listening Sessions; Each Co-Chair attended the Columbia Mall Sleep-In and all but one of the Listening Sessions. Task Force Members were asked to attend at least one Listening Session outside of their geographic area. Just over half of the Task Force members attended a Listening Session and approximately one third attended more than one Listening Session.

Total Attendance for all 13 Listen Sessions was 73 people with several people attending more than one Listening Session. Listening Sessions were held on weekends and weekday evenings to provide varied options for those who were interested in attending. The Listening Session with the largest attendance was one of the Harford County Listening Sessions, followed by one of the Howard County Listening Sessions.

## **The Task Force's Guiding Thought**

Within Girl Scouting we have many resources but the greatest of these is our people, our girls, our volunteers, our staff team, and our Board. It is our organizational responsibility to "do our best" to support and serve all these constituencies so that our

organization can grow and thrive. Other important resources include our headquarters and camp properties, our communications systems, our use of technology and, finally, our funds.

### **Girl Experience: What Do Central Maryland Girls Want from Girl Scouts?**

What do girls want from GSCM? We know they want a strong, girl-led program. The Task Force Co-Chairs surveyed 101 girls (Junior, Cadette, and Senior) at the Columbia Mall Sleep-In. A review of the girl surveys revealed that the two most important things that girls enjoy or want more of are **events and activities** (mentioned by 71 girls) and **being with friends and/or having the opportunity to make new friends** (noted 72 girls). The next most popular activities girls enjoy or want more of include **camping, nature, and/or outdoor activities** (53 girls stated). **Additional interest commonalities were** cookie program (22 girls mentioned), helping the community (22 girls listed) and earning badges, engaging in journeys, and earning awards (20 girls cited). The Senior girls most often mentioned friends, helping the community and activities. One smart Junior scout said, “life skills” and another said, “it’s just girls!”

Adults – parents, guardians, volunteers – are key to bringing the Girl Scout experience to fruition for girls. 79 adults were surveyed at the Columbia Mall Sleep In (it should be noted that these adults were motivated enough to agree to attend an “up all-night event for the girls”). These 79 adults represented: leaders, co-leaders, first aiders, cookie program volunteers, outdoor volunteers, and parents. They reported having Girl Scout experience ranging from 2 to 32+ years. **All were asked “Do you feel supported in your role at Girl Scouts of Central Maryland?”** 49 responded yes, however, of the 22 leaders or co-leaders answering the survey only 7 responded “yes,” with 7 others responding “sometimes” and 6 more people stated either “no, minimally or by other troops.” Although it is a statistically small percentage of the overall number of adults involved with the Council overall who took the survey, it is important to note that of the responding adults, less than half of those that are most connected to the Council replied in the affirmative.

Three of the Girl/Young Adult Members of the Task Force led the discussion for *the Girls Only* Listening Session. Although few girls were in attendance, the lively, candid conversation was similar in content to the results noted above from the Girl Survey. In addition to the *Girls-Only* virtual session 11 girls attended various Listening Sessions and were actively engaged in the conversation, sharing their perspectives, ideas, and feedback.

### **Listening Session Themes**

Several themes permeated the Listening Sessions – Girl, Parent and Volunteer Experiences, Technology, Communication Processes, Resources and Tools, Cookie Program and Council-led Program Content, Delivery, and Cost, Volunteer Support and Engagement (leaders, service units, parents), Training Content, Delivery and Access,

Administrative Difficulties, Service Unit Size, Definition and Functionality, Camp Conditions and Usage, Outdoor Programming and Lifetime Member Connections.

The themes presented themselves naturally and emerged both from the Task Force Member meetings and the Listening Sessions. Some topics elicited greater discussion than others, although all themes listed surfaced in more than 85% of all discussions.

**Key points under each theme will be highlighted in this summary of findings.**

### ***Girl, Parent and Volunteer Experiences***

Nearly all parents shared that “their girls love Girl Scouting.” Girls are immensely proud to be Girl Scouts! They want the Council to highlight that they “do more than sell cookies and even when they do sell cookies it is “cookies with a purpose,” meaning they have specific goals for the funds raised. Both girls and adults raised concerns that the Girl Scout “brand” or “identity is too often defined by cookie sales, not by the value of the Girl Scout leadership experience. The cookie program is clearly important, but girls frequently stated that they want the Girl Scouts to be known “for more than cookies.”

Parents who are not volunteers seemed to be the most content, stating that “if their girls are happy, then they are happy.” When asked more than 50% of adults attending the Listening Sessions responded that if asked, they would volunteer for specific tasks for their troop and/or the Council but longer term/more involved volunteer roles are more difficult given the demands on their time. Girl Scout Troop Leaders are central to the Girl Scout experience for most girls. Many thought we need to do better in all ways to train and support leaders, especially new leaders. Some people shared that “Dad involvement” did not always seem welcome by the Council. Many noted that it was “difficult” to become a GSCM volunteer – no return calls, no interest/no follow through from staff with the persons who were trying to become volunteers. For those in Troop Leader volunteer roles, many were unclear on how to contact other Troop Leaders in their community and feel that the Council should be more proactive in finding a solution that adheres to the GSUSA privacy rules, while still facilitating communication among the volunteer leadership. In addition, it was noted by both girls and adults that Girl Scouts has little presence in local communities. People do not know Girl Scouts still exist and the benefits of being a Girl Scout.

Recognition is important for both staff and volunteers. There is not enough meaningful Council-wide celebration of staff and volunteers; volunteers and staff seem to have lost their connection and support of each other. It was specifically noted that the volunteer recognitions at the Annual Meeting take place near the very end of the meeting, making it difficult for some of the long-time volunteers and that there is no recognition of staff in that year-end celebration of the Council accomplishments and successes.

**Recognition Recommendation:** Move the volunteer recognition to earlier in the program and include some form of staff recognition at the Annual Meeting.

Given the significant presence of military families in Maryland, most Listening Sessions yielded feedback regarding the experience of military families. It was shared that at GSCM and at other Councils including interactions with GSUSA, it is hard for military families to get connected or become trained, form/find troops and that Girl Scouting overall does not utilize these families' experiences gained at other Councils to the current Council's benefit.

**Military Family Support Recommendation:** (1) Consider creating a Staff Military Liaison role supported by newly created volunteer military liaisons by Council area(s).

### ***Communication Processes, Resources and Technology Tools – Access, and Use***

Overall, the feedback is that GSCM's communication processes, resources and technology tools are not as effective as they could be, leading to frustration by GSCM's various constituencies. Overall, most stated that they believed that the Council's technology is antiquated. Understanding that no communication tool works for everyone, there needs to be multiple avenues for disseminating information.

Both girls and adults expressed this repeatedly. Most Listening Session attendees knew that the **GSCM website** is a GSUSA mandate but they still "dislike" it and find it cumbersome and not useful. The **County Facebook pages** were frequently discussed—some love and use them, some do not. Many did not seem to know that they existed. Those that did know wish that other members used them more to share info for their county/city. **The idea of a GSCM Council app** for communication among the Council's varied constituencies – Council team members, volunteers, families, girls, and alums – was repeated frequently.

Currently it is hard for volunteers to connect with one another.

**Question: Could there be a GSCM email address or Gmail address by position for leaders, SU managers and other key volunteer roles?**

For example, a solution might be to create position-based email addresses, such as [TroopLeader2042@gscm.org](mailto:TroopLeader2042@gscm.org) or [TroopLeader2042@gmail.com](mailto:TroopLeader2042@gmail.com). This addresses the privacy issues and allows for the email mailbox to be passed on to the next volunteer thereby creating a history of engagement that could be useful to volunteers when they newly assume the role.

GSCM needs to invest in better technology tools for the Council. Doing so would create increased opportunities for member and volunteer engagement and increase the flow of communication.

**Additional ideas for the Council to consider:** (1) Live streaming meetings – specifically Delegate Forums and the Annual Meeting – as well as various training programs, focused on interactive communication and engagement; (2)

Printed GS411 (details appear later in the summary); and (3) Automated meeting, event, program, and activity calendar noticed and reminders.

### ***Cookie Program and Council-led Program Content, Delivery, and Cost***

Knowing that the hallmark of the Girl Scout Experience is that it is Girl-Led, it is important that girls have the tools necessary to create such an experience. Electronic resources are useful and cost-effective but should not be the only option available to girls, troops, and volunteers. GS411 in a printed format was extremely useful to troops; not having it has created a void. The PDF on the website is hard to find and not as helpful as the printed version. The printed version created more opportunity for girl engagement and girl-led program decision-making at the troop level. All understand the Importance of security for the girls but virtually all adults shared that they would not sign-up for a program that did not list at least the county or general area in which the activity would take place. GS411 should list the relevant details to make an informed decision regarding participation in a program.

**Program Recommendation:** Resume printing GS411 in addition to having it on the website. Perhaps a business or partner would consider underwriting the cost of printing GS411 as part of their philanthropic investment in Girl Scouting.

There was much discussion regarding Council-led programs and many people cited cost as a significant deterrent. In addition, there is little to no programming for older girls to participate in. Creating partnerships with other Councils and offering niche programming will help retain the older girls. In addition, feedback stated that the programs cost too much money, are not unique, are not well advertised, and are often cancelled. In addition, both girls and adults stated that GSCM needed to do a better job of collaborating with neighboring Councils to augment program offerings and access, maximize the promotion and use of Council properties and enable communication among staff, volunteers, and girls.

**Program Recommendation:** Have a minimum number of Council-led programs in each County/City by quarter or even yearly. Focus on having more options for Council-led field trips to interesting/unique activities, high-risk activities, and/or niche activities at locations in and around Maryland and nearby states.

Regarding the **Cookie Program**, all represented constituencies recognized the value of the Cookie Program but stated that cookie cost sharing needs to be more standardized across GSUSA; troops do not get enough money. In addition, the whole “process” for the Cookie Program is complicated and training for cookie volunteer roles is insufficient, inconvenient, or not useful.

**Cookie Program Recommendation:** Knowing that the Cookie Program is important for a myriad of reasons, more staff support for volunteers, especially for new troops and new cookie volunteers, is needed for the program to be effective, thereby maximizing both program outcomes for the girls and fiscal impact for the

Troops and the Council. Many felt strongly that the opt-in and opt-out option for cookie prizes should be girl-driven, not troop-driven given that many troops are mixed ages.

Lastly, the **Columbia Mall Sleep-In** is a universal hit, driven almost entirely organized and supported by volunteers.

**Program Recommendation: The Council should consider supporting the replication of this event in other areas of the Council.**

Many recalled fondly the Harford Mall and White Marsh Mall events of the past.

### ***Volunteer Support and Engagement (leaders, service units, members, parents)***

The Girl Scout volunteer structure seems to be based on the assumption that “moms don’t work outside the home, which is clearly not the case” and even when that is the case, those moms often have other demands on their time such as caring or aging parents, home schooling and/or handling other family responsibilities. It was suggested that there is a need to reframe the volunteer experience to be doable for today’s family structure. Feedback gathered also noted that the GSCM staff team structure is not set up for efficiency. Staff team members appear to be overworked and stretched thin, which leads to strained relationships between the staff team and Council volunteers and families. In addition, there also seems to be too many volunteer roles without enough staff or volunteer consistency to sustain the roles assigned to each.

**Question regarding Girl Scout staffing and volunteer structure models:** Are there other organizational volunteers and staff structures and/or best practices being vetted by GSUSA and/or are there other alternative effective GS Councils volunteer and staff structures in place that GSCM could replicate?

**One area repeatedly called out as a pressure point for volunteers focused on partnerships.** There is an immediate need for GSCM to create and promote partnerships with schools and faith communities; Boy Scouts of America does this extremely well. BSA is highly visible in school and faith community locations and GSCM is noticeably absent. It is extremely difficult for Troops and Service Units to locate meeting spaces. GSCM should facilitate partnerships for Girl Scout meetings, recruitment events and activities with other nonprofits, libraries, community centers, businesses and /or senior centers. In the meantime, the current guideline prohibiting home meetings compounds the problem, especially for smaller troops and older girl troops who often meet on the weekend due to busy schedules.

**Partnership Recommendation:** The Council should reconsider the application of this rule with the proper emphasis on two-deep leadership by unrelated adults to ensure safety for both the adults and the girls.

Every Listening Session included a discussion about access to community resources. Repeatedly the GSCNC Council was cited as an example of a Council that “gets it” when it comes to sharing community resources.

**Partnership Recommendation:** The Council should consider adding a “Community Liaison” staff position that would gather, post and share more about events, activities, important info for each area of the Council footprint; develop and cultivate “community partnerships” across the Council to include programming opportunities, recruitment events and opportunities, cookie booth locations ad cupboards, and troop/SU meeting locations. This position would also develop and manage a Resource Page on the website, facilitate access to the partners and assist with partnership arrangements and develop and manage a list of business and nonprofit partners that have programs/activities for Girl Scout troops related to badges. This is currently being done in some Service Units/troops in Maryland and the info is shared via Pinterest or through other on-line sites. Doing it at the Service Unit and/or Troop level is not efficient or effective.

Other **areas of needed support** voiced include: more specificity/how-to’s for badges and journey activities as well as for the Bronze, Silver, and Gold Awards and how to involve Dads more fully in the Girl Scout experience. Some shared that the perception is that the Council does not encourage or embrace Dads and Male Guardians involvement in Girl Scouting.

**Volunteer Recommendation:** (1) Partner with colleges to use students as volunteers, programs, and episodic activities. (2) Increase opportunities for older Girl Scouts to engage with younger Girl Scouts. Retention can be improved by younger girls engaging with older girls more frequently. This includes troops and programming led by older girls. (3) Volunteers need more recruitment collateral available to them.

Finally, the **GSCM Store should expand its role** to be more of a one-stop-shop for the supplies that support the badges/journeys rather than just for uniforms, Girl Scout items and the badges/journeys resource guides.

### ***Training Content, Delivery and Access***

Volunteer training is central to ensuring that volunteers are effective and that the girls are safe. To that end, GSCM training needs a refresh. New volunteers are not trained to properly complete the duties of their role, which creates frustration for all.

**Training Recommendations:** (1) More training options are needed to include virtual and in-person, held at various times of the day, as well as weekday and weekend offerings. (2) There should be credit for other credentialed training obtained outside of Girl Scouts but encompasses the knowledge and skills applicable to Girl Scouts, specifically outdoor and camp training. (3) The Training

Schedule also needs to be published further in advance to include date, time, and location. In too many cases, adults shared that by the time people hear about the training, it is too late to incorporate it into their schedules.

It was noted that there is a process for receiving Council approval for outside credentials, but the process was convoluted and not widely known. On a side note, several adults voiced concern that weekend training for camp is “too complicated” and needs some revisions.

Additional discussion included the need for “training of the staff and volunteer trainers” to support the delivery of training in a virtual environment, ensuring that online training is interactive and engaging while remaining focused on the necessary training outcomes.

### ***Service Unit Size, Definition and Functionality***

The Service Unit discussion was intensely discussed at many Listening Sessions but not all of them. Overall, there was agreement that some Service Units are too big; some too small. Discussion ensued as to the purpose of the Service Units, with wildly different perspectives shared, ranging from the Service Units being the key to the growth and sustainability of Girl Scouting in local communities to a total lack of understanding of why they even exist. Many did not seem to know there was a Service Unit for their area and if they did know it existed, they often did not know the Service Unit Managers. It appears as if in some areas of the Council, that the role of the Service Unit Manager is unclear to both the person(s) in that role and to the Troop Leaders. In areas where the Service Unit Managers are strong, the Troops are more interconnected and engaged with each other, often developing, and implementing Service Unit programming.

Examples of Service Unit programming include local field trips, age-level round tables, Thinking Day events, sharing of Girl Scout traditions such as planning for ceremonies, songs, and celebrations as well as opportunities for Troop Leader engagement, training and support, tips for recruiting girls and securing parent support for troop activities, managing troop finances, and uniform and supply swaps. The key to creating strong Service Units is to clearly define their purpose and to share with Troop Leaders how Service Units facilitate the delivery of the Girl Scout Experience to girls. Service Units need to hold regular meetings that hold value for the Troop Leaders; the meeting cannot consist of the Service Unit Manager reading the Council Talking Pints aloud. Each Service Unit meeting needs to have a goal with identified takeaways.

**Service Unit Recommendations:** (1) Service Units boundaries need to be clearly defined and given to volunteers to alleviate issues with cookie booth locations and merge Service Units as needed; (2) Develop and implement a more effective, clearly defined Service Unit Manager training; and (3) Recruit volunteer leadership for all Service Units, including Baltimore City.



## ***Camp Conditions and Usage and Outdoor Programming***

Camp was a hot topic at many of the Listening Sessions because the adults recognize the value of the camp experience for girls and girls clearly shared their love of camp. The one consistent message shared was that they are “tired of hearing about the **Camp of the Future** because there has been a lot of talk with little concrete information being shared.”

**Questions include:** What is the timeline? Where is the money coming from? Is there a fundraising plan? Are there phases to the construction plan? When will the camp open or at least when will each phase of the camp be completed? Many stated that they believe that their girls will be “long gone from Girl Scouts by the time the camp actually opens.”

Separate from the *Camp of the Future*, there were a lot of **concerns expressed about the camps** including (1) the significant deferred maintenance, (2) questions and comments about the rangers’ ability/expertise to do the tasks asked of them, and (3) the need for a plan tied to a timeline and funding for major repairs and facility upgrades. The feedback was that camp and camp facility maintenance should be a high priority if the Council’s goal is for girls, parents, and volunteers to use them. Current camp conditions do not engage increased usage by troops. And costs for members to use campgrounds is too high which causes Troops and Service Units to use other campsites.

Many shared that they believe that camps should be used for more than overnight camping; there are not enough outdoor program options. GSCM has two waterfront camp properties, yet the Council has zero waterfront programs. Outdoor programming should be used to introduce girls to the draw of the outdoors. This exposure is often enough to pique the girls’ interest in the outdoors that for some would stimulate interest in overnight camp experiences. Many people expressed that there is too much energy expended on resident camp that only attracts a small percentage of girls, energy that would be better spent on creating additional outdoor experiences, specifically creating additional day camp experiences. The day camps run by Council volunteers are extremely successful.

**Camp and Outdoor Program Recommendations:** (1) The Council should consider having a day camp experience in Anne Arundel jointly organized and supported by staff and volunteers. (2) Reestablish Friends of Camp, a group of volunteers that could be engaged to do some of the routine maintenance and repair as well as an avenue for philanthropic support.

## ***Lifetime Member Connections***

GSCM has 1700 Lifetime Members in Central Maryland and yet it appears as if there are very few opportunities for engagement. Staying connected to the Council as a

Lifetime Member is difficult and there is little to no recognition of their value to the Council.

**Lifetime Member Recommendations:** (1) Develop a plan to cultivate and engage this group to address the needs of the Council, segmenting them based on their skills, experience and interests; (2) Consider this pool of women as candidates for the Distinguished Women Awards; (3) Create opportunities for girls to engage with these women through Career Talks, Take a Girl Scout to Work Day or Spend a Day with a Girl Scout event; and, (4) Engage them in short-term volunteer roles and/or access their networks for short-term projects

### ***Administrative Difficulties***

Girl Scouts – locally and nationally – has become risk adverse and therefore many of the administrative policies and processes are not helpful and/or user friendly. There are discrepancies between printed GSCM materials and the info that is on the website, making it difficult for volunteers, especially those that are new to the Council, to learn and follow the required policies and processes. Money-earning policies/process for troops is too cumbersome and limiting. There is too much paperwork, and it is often redundant. Also, it is difficult to transfer troops within GSCM.

Member Care response rate takes much longer than the Council says it does. This discussion centered on the response time from when cases are created. The membership department is responsible for responding, not Member Care. External customers spoke of this as if Member Care responds to cases. It was noted by Task Force members that since the launch of the Task Force and hearing this feedback from the Task Force members and at the Listening Sessions, Ms. Ross addressed this issue quickly and effectively, reducing the response turnaround time significantly. GSUSA surveys are a “waste of time.” Survey results are not shared with GSCM constituencies, no information on how the survey effected change at the national level and/or how the survey information is being used to inform GSUSA’s strategic vision.

**Questions:** (1) Could GSCM consider an “annual permission slip” as some other Councils do? Cuts down on paperwork. (2) Could the Council create/preapprove partnerships with vendors for “high adventure” activities so minimize the volunteer work necessary to bring these kinds of activities to fruition? (3) Could the Council create a Quick Tips/Ins and Outs worksheet for utilizing Robert’s Rules of Order? (4) Could GSCM share through various communication channels the role of and importance of the Delegate Body consistently and not just in the years leading up to a National Convention? (5) Could the Council create more opportunities for meaningful staff team and volunteer recognition? (6) Can the Council expand its definition of STEM to include more diverse activities?

In closing, we would like to thank the Task Force Members for the time they invested, the candid conversation, for their passion for the Girl Scout mission and vision and for their commitment to Girl Scouts of Central Maryland and to all Central Maryland Girl Scouts. This report concludes the work of the Task Force.

### Task Force Members:

Anne Arundel	David Burroughs
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Baltimore City	Kaitlyn Huizar
Baltimore City	Mary Abbott Bolte
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Carroll	Alisson Mastbrook
Carroll	Christina Bain
Harford	Gail Edwards
Howard	Hannah Ehrlich
Howard	Shivonne Laird
Howard	Jessica Hall
Howard	Patty Salazar
Howard	Erin Southard

Board Member, Co-Chair	Maria Darby
Staff Member, Co-Chair	LaSchelle Ross

Two other people were selected to serve on the Task Force, one person from Baltimore City and one person from Harford County but they were unable to complete their service on the committee and withdrew.