

## **Erika Bernal, 2021 EDI Fellow for Newark NJ**



### **Project Overview and Role**

The City of Newark is in the process of updating its Sustainability Action Plan and Master Plan. However, instead of launching a “traditional” community outreach and stakeholder engagement process, the Office of Sustainability (OoS) will bring together the expertise and insights of local environmental champions (the Newark Green Team) with our future leaders (Newark high school students). As a minority-majority city with a large population of youth who are especially concentrated in some of our highest needs neighborhoods, this project seeks to establish a new norm for City-led environmental planning initiatives. The CJYA Program seeks to directly confront an all-too-common systemic inequity in government planning efforts: a lack of inclusion of Black

and Brown youth.

The Youth Climate Justice Fellow supported two interrelated components of the CJYA program:

- supporting program design and curriculum development, and facilitating a six week summer training and youth leadership program.
- developing guidance for a youth-centered community outreach and engagement program in which trained youth ambassadors will advise City-led planning activities including, but not limited to updates to Newark’s Sustainability Action Plan and Master Plan.

### **What did you learn from the project?**

Throughout my fellowship, I learned so much. One of the biggest lessons was how important it is to have connections and build relationships among partners. One of the key reasons we successfully launched the climate justice ambassador program is the wide range of connections the office of sustainability has. Not only were we able to secure expert speakers for key topics, but we were also able to hold panel discussions centered around community engagement, train the ambassadors on proper phone-call etiquette and how to become influential public speakers. Most importantly, we were able to acquire speakers from individuals who work/live in Newark, which was another important component of the program.

Another thing I learned from my fellowship is young people must have a seat at the table. Government and society must invest in young people by ensuring they are educated, empowered, and employed. While many believe young people have a lot to learn, and they do. I also think they can teach the older generation far more.

Furthermore, young people are paving the road to climate action, and they realize more than anything that the road to a healthier, more prosperous, and more equitable future is the same.

### **What was the impact of your work?**

The main purpose of the climate ambassador program is to empower youth ambassadors to utilize their voice. Throughout the program, ambassadors were exposed to a wide-range of topics, as well as field experiences that help solidify some of the struggles of climate impacts on minority-majority communities. Additionally, they provided the city of Newark with solutions on how to address environmental injustice. During weekly reflection, youth ambassadors shared meaningful conversations with their loved ones as well as stories that were relevant to the program. The Climate Justice Ambassador Program will forever be part of the city of Newark, and hopefully other cities can utilize this work as well. As Ambassadors, their role includes listening to the concerns of their community, becoming the voice that connects these concerns as well as helping build relationships between the community and those who have the power to make a difference.

### **Project Links**

- <https://www.newarkgreenteam.org/post/introducing-newark-climate-ambassadors>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5-tDqqYQcs>