

Celine Rendon
City of Austin – Office of Sustainability

EDI Fellow Final Report

As the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Fellow for the summer of 2018 I worked with the Office of Sustainability to begin developing a community resilience plan, which focused on moving the needle towards equity in city government. Austin has been experiencing pressures from rapid growth that are causing affordability, displacement, and transportation issues. The effects of climate change will continue to bring compounding effects, especially in communities already facing socioeconomic stressors.

Currently, the City of Austin is focusing on planning efforts to advance the goals of the City's Strategic Direction towards a more equitable and sustainable community. This can improve our understanding of how the City can foster community resilience with an equity lens. The Dove Springs neighborhood was chosen to begin the Office of Sustainability's focus on building community resilience due to the historic devastation of natural disasters, specifically the 2013 and 2015 Halloween Floods. [Go! Austin/Vamos! Austin \(GAVA\)](#) was a key collaborator for this project due to their deep rooted networks within the community and their efforts to improve the health of the communities in southeast Austin.

By aligning efforts to improve emergency preparedness and strengthen community bonds, the community resilience project focused on how city efforts can increase adaptive capacity and reduce exposure of risks specific to Dove Springs. This began to focus planning efforts around the people who have experienced loss of life and property due to environmental impacts, and who are the most vulnerable to the risks of climate change.

Making sure I was accurately capturing the unique character of Dove Springs and addressing the inequities that undermine the resiliency of a community was incredibly important during the summer. Working with GAVA was inspiring because this team has always been dedicated to looking at systematic issues. They continue to empower me as they constantly bring these issues to the forefront. Having a network with the other five equity fellows was also very helpful as a source of support. It was rewarding to share our experiences and empower each other's efforts during the summer. I think that networking is definitely something for me to continue doing, in order to build relationships, and learn how we can center equity as a shared effort.

Navigating bureaucratic processes was challenging, but I have a much better sense of the City of Austin, and the efforts being made to address equity. Being the Equity Fellow, I had a unique role because I was working with the city, while also having the flexibility to meet with community members on a more personal level and representing myself as an individual. I was able to personally and professionally engage with people, and learn how to build fundamental relationships to begin having a shared understanding. The Resilience team was receptive to my input and understood my unique role, which helped me to be more comfortable with adjusting

my assigned tasks to be more personal. The team was supportive and opened a lot of doors for me with professional training opportunities and meeting other staff within the city.

The summer of 2018 was packed with new experiences to reflect on and to ensure that this work is sustainable and will be continued. I first completed an overview of the Dove Springs community which looked at the relationships of the social and ecological factors in the southeast Austin area. This work was then transitioned to creating a historical overview of the Dove Springs neighborhood. We developed contextual insight of the built environment and to recognize the important social networks, key people and organizations to reach out to based in the '78744' ZIP code. This revealed major community concerns and where the office can enhance and strengthen existing efforts

My final task was developing an overview of our internal stakeholder conversations focusing on community resilience and current departmental efforts focused in Dove Springs. We also met with nonprofits, service providers, and civic engagement groups to understand how we can enhance their efforts for community resiliency and to validate some of our knowledge of the community's history and learn more from their perspective. We developed a complex understanding of southeast Austin which also provided insight to where current engagement gaps exist within the city. Many of the people we had discussions with were eager for this community resilience planning process, especially due to the understanding of Dove Springs history and community leaders who have actively advocated for community needs.

- A brief overview of the community's present and past historic events and the internal stakeholder discussions were all included in a completed report titled: ["Community Resilience: Summer 2018 Dove Springs Equity Overview."](#)

This summer experience began to broaden our understanding of what sustainability means. It incorporates a multicultural lens that prioritizes voices that have not been included before, and to honor the community's experiences. The Resilience team recognized the importance of people over programs and understands the importance of leadership building. This helped to think critically of how our work needs to be sustainable to empower communities.

A major takeaway from this project is centering equity at our understanding of sustainability. Having these honest and transparent discussions recognized the intersectionality of many factors and how they influence each other on a day-to-day basis such as access to education, healthcare, food, and transportation. The work we did over the summer will continue to be a driving force for an equity-driven planning process coming from the Office of Sustainability. This summer was transformative and it was inspiring to see many people dedicated to move the needle towards equity in city government. Continuing to take a passive role when learning is incredibly important, and it continues to remind me and other people in gatekeeper roles about the people we are trying to serve in order to advance racial equity.