

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



Erika Bernal is one of the Climate Justice Youth Ambassador Program Coordinators for the Newark, NJ Office of Sustainability. In 2020, she received her Masters of Science Degree in Marine Biology & Coastal Sciences from Montclair State University, where she concentrated on marine debris and its impacts on the environment. Through her research, Erika became passionate about science communication and spreading awareness to the general public. When the Covid Pandemic began, Erika reached out to her local green team in hopes of joining the movement to a brighter, greener future for her city. She also co-founded a non-profit called “The Plastic Wave Project,” where she spends time educating groups of all

ages on the harmful impacts of plastic pollution. Ultimately, Erika would like to pursue a career centered on ecological health as she believes that protecting the people AND the planet is crucial. In her current role as Newark’s Fellow, Erika will assist Newark youth in becoming climate ambassadors, empowering them to become climate leaders in their community and beyond. She spends most days sharing her passion for the outdoors with her five-year-old daughter, baking bread, and developing a personal brand called “The Crafty Scientist” during her free time.

### **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>

## JaVonne Bowles, 2021 EDI Fellow for Richmond VA



JaVonne is an adamant believer in the healing powers that each individual possesses. This belief is currently being fulfilled in her work as a member of the RVAgreen 2050 Roundtable and Community Working Group, as well as a Community Advocate with Virginia Community Voice. Visions of both entities align in serving residents of the Commonwealth in making equitable decisions. JaVonne has always believed in taking holistic measures to maintain a sustainable lifestyle. To name a few of her accomplishments in supporting holistics you can look at her work in teaching the practical skills of hatha yoga and meditation, contributing hours to local community gardens, and helping to establish a non-profit that teaches students interpersonal skills through the game of chess.

Her education exhibits how interdisciplinary scholars make the most of their resources to craft unique solutions to personal and societal issues. Addressing environmental injustice is the current subject that sits heavy in her heart and mind. She finds it nurturing to balance this passion with soulful conversations between herself and her allies. Such conversations are often enjoyed over culturally diverse meals and interacting with nature. No matter the project, JaVonne chooses to live her best life by staying purposefully engaged in all ways.

### **Project Overview and Role**

My role as the Equity Fellow for the Richmond Office of Sustainability was to support Community Engagement and Communications. A portion of my work was done by building out a youth engagement council program (paying students in middle and high school to be supported in crafting a program that will further engage their peers and families). Partnering with stakeholders to offer mentor services and technical expertise. I also invited Roundtable and Working Group Members from RVAgreen2050 to host Community Walks. Alongside our partner, the Science Museum of Virginia, we gathered air quality data and noted the environmental injustices when comparing an affluent predominantly white neighborhood (Windsor Farms) to a historically black community that had a highway built through it just a few decades ago (Jackson Ward). Neighbors responded very positively to these events and are suggesting we do walks in different council districts.

- [Here is a link to the aggregated data from Windsor Farms.](#)
- [Here is a link to the aggregated data from Jackson Ward.](#)

Regarding communications, I conducted RVAgreen Profile Interviews. These interviews desired to tell the stories that make up the people behind EJ work in the city. It is an invitation to open the doors for neighbors to share why they are invested and the various projects they are producing. The RVAgreen Profile Interviews are continuing with the current intern for the office. This project has reinforced the importance of relationship building. I also witnessed the pivotal

distinction between Community Engagement and Communications. They are separate and deserve distinct attention, NOT to be lumped together. Doing so, does a disservice to the project, staff, and the community. The intended impact of the work was to share stories of optimism with neighbors that are typically not engaged in EJ projects. We hope to continue nurturing spaces for storytelling to ensure healing and trust is rooted in everything we do. Here is a link to the [RVAgreen Profiles](#) highlighting EJ work and personal experiences of living in Richmond.

## **Kelly Sophia Soluri, 2021 EDI Fellow for Miami-Dade County FL**



Kelly Soluri is the Urban Sustainability EDI Fellow for Miami-Dade County and is a proud born and raised South Floridian. Her past experiences working with marine turtle conservation research at Florida State University, science cooperation at the U.S. Department of State, community education and outreach at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and data science with Correlation One have made her grow into someone who looks towards environmental science, technology, and communication to further equity and sustainability goals. She is grateful for her opportunity to work with Miami-Dade County to inform stakeholders and constituents of resources, policies, and strategies to adapt and mitigate climate change induced events such

as extreme heat and sea level rise. She is committed to be a force of sustainable and equitable change in her community and in others.

Kelly is currently pursuing her Master of Science degree in Marine Biology and Ecology at the University of Miami under the mentorship of Dr. Elizabeth Babcock.

### **Project Overview and Role:**

This project focused on identifying strategies and actions that the County could prioritize to tackle extreme heat and its impacts on the community. I conducted more than 20 interviews with various stakeholders and interest groups to share knowledge and perspectives. Interview questions focused on understanding the participants' current and previous work in the extreme heat space, identifying heat-related concerns, and soliciting actions that the County could take to uplift the stakeholder in their work.

My role was to research and compile extreme heat literature, lead the interviews, analyze the qualitative data, and draft an Extreme Heat Toolkit that summarized these efforts to present to the Chief Heat Officer and other municipal leaders to inform their future work.

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

Some key takeaways:

- Extreme Heat is an incredibly pervasive problem and some of our most powerful tools have various intersections and applications in sea level rise, creation and protection of natural habitats, and addressing infrastructure in our vulnerable communities of color.
- Our nonprofit sector is the most connected partner in heat to the County and thus represented the majority of those interviewed followed by academic affiliations.
- The group identified that is needed to engage more in the space is the private sector.

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

The Heat Toolkit is currently going through the communications process for printing and other distribution but a beta is accessible through the Miami-Dade Extreme Heat website.

Multiple actions recommended through the Extreme Heat toolkit have been moving forward through the goals of the Chief Heat Officer, Jane Gilbert. These actions include:

- Forming a Climate and Heat Health Taskforce for community engagement and policy to action accountability
- Gathering baseline data of heat effects including community stories, heat health
  - During the fellowship, I was able to be involved with a heat information gathering campaign for Miami-Dade County's Parks and Recreation Summer Camps.

We were able to highlight partner initiatives and strengthen the heat network in Miami-Dade.

- Miami-Dade County currently attends monthly group meetings with various partners to update, collaborate, and share knowledge about the heat space.

Creation of internal tools for the Office of Resilience

- Visual Network Analysis tool
- Compiled research including academic papers, software tools for analysis or communication, best practice reports, and more.

### **Project Links**

- Extreme Heat Measures by Miami Dade County  
<https://www.miamidade.gov/global/economy/environment/heat.page>
- Chief Heat Officer, Jane Gilbert, on Heat and Equity:  
<https://time.com/6078019/city-heat-climate-change-inequity/>
- <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-29/miami-chief-heat-officer-sets-out-resilience-agenda>

## LaRock Hudson, 2021 EDI Fellow for Lancaster PA



Mr. Hudson is a military veteran, Community Organizer, and Anti-Racist Consultant. He currently holds the position of Chair heading the Political Action Committee of the NAACP, in Lancaster, PA. LaRock is purpose driven in the work he does. Having been a victim of discrimination in various avenues in life, he has set to use his life experiences to drive change, and to normalize the validation of life experiences in professional settings. This led him to join the YWCA of Lancaster and become a member of their Social Justice Team.

Mr. Hudson works to be an agent of change in rural schools throughout PA. Through his combined efforts and that of various agencies and organizations, school cultural competency climates are being created, investigated, and amended across the state. Collaborative efforts with the NAACP, PHRC, ACLU, and other community stakeholders work to ensure young people will retain social equity in places of learning. He also facilitates necessary interactions with scholastic sports coaches and teams, in order to help build understanding and relationships which give student athletes the best possible opportunities in the path that lies ahead of them in their athletic and educational careers.

In light of 2020 and the Black Lives Matter Movement, police accountability and transparency became directly in his purview. Having close friends being prosecuted for peacefully protesting in Lancaster and other areas helped to strengthen this purpose. In various localities, LaRock is either actively engaging law enforcement departments or consulting community groups in judicial and law enforcement procedure. Lancaster City, Carlisle Borough, East Pennsboro Township, and Gettysburg Borough are a few departments that he has actively been engaged with, to date.

LaRock has been able to use his life experiences as a springboard into a life of community service. Having been a military child, traveling, an inclusive mindset, and the will to help others has always been a part of him. Activities like cooking and playing soccer have also contributed to a wide view of the world and a sense of teamwork that follows him into all engagements.

### **Project Overview and Role:**

The Comprehensive Plan Equity and Community Outreach Fellow will be directly involved with coordinating and analyzing community outreach activities and producing key deliverables for the City's Comprehensive Plan. Specifically, the Fellow will be tasked with supporting the integration of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility into the 2-year planning process. Throughout the summer, the Fellow may collaborate with a variety of stakeholders, including: staff from multiple departments at the City of Lancaster, two teams of professional planning and engagement consultants, a resident committee, community leaders and stakeholders, and the general public. In collaboration with City staff, the Fellow will also participate in the

development and implementation of the communications and public engagement strategy, which the Fellow will have opportunities to assist City Planning staff in presenting to the City's Executive Leadership Team, Planning Commission, and City Council.

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

There was a plethora of knowledge I was able to acquire from my position within local government. The most important things would have to be:

1. Government needs to be more intentional about developing relationships with residents and would-be community partners.
2. Marginalized people in institutional work need ready-made support systems from the beginning to the end of career navigation, from the application process to the exit procedure. Until the institutional structure is accustomed to building the partnerships and engaging with the public as a procedural norm, this need will exist.
3. Those in legislation and policy-making have an immediate need for the knowledge and unconventional design thinking BIPOC and other marginalized people bring to the table with their life experiences.
4. The need for on-going Trauma-informed training amongst all institutions in order to better communicate with and serve people.
5. It does not take years of schooling to be an agent of change, or to be a voice that influences the next 20 years of change. It takes the fortitude and determination to be the change you want to see, and others to see the power of that determination, as USDN did for me.

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

Success markers for this project have been unconventional, and not always apparent. This also begs the question, how do we quantify relationships and relationship building? Inclusion would mean to look at residents beyond the census tract and demographic numbers. Due to adverse relations between some communities and the government's role, a major indicator for this project has been overall collaborative engagement. The overall goal for the life of the project is 10% of the residents in a city of 60k, roughly about 6000-7000 individual direct contact interactions. Currently, we have slightly over 1700 direct contacts with a diverse range of residents. Through the application of multiple tracking methods, we have been able to identify exactly those groups of residents we have not fully interacted with. Analyzing the data collected in the first round of engagement has allowed more deliberate focus directly on those sub-groups within the greater community structure going into the second phase of engagement which will include Fall/Winter 2021.

Being a community advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and being in a professional position with that lens as the mandate, put me in a unique circumstance. In addition to breaking the engagement stigma of the residents towards the city officials, there has been the duality of teaching government officials how to alleviate those stigmas. This spoke to me on the higher level of needed culture change on the inside, to allow both parties to reach the goal of collaboration they both seek so desperately.

## **Any links to project deliverables?**

### *Project Specific*

- <https://lancaster-pa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=40db7a5e435948afb035039769418adc>
- <https://engage.cityoflancasterpa.com/en/folders/planning-our-future-Lancaster>
- <https://www.ourfuturelancaster.com/>

### **Media**

- [A New Plan for Lancaster City | City of Lancaster, PA \(cityoflancasterpa.com\)](#)
- [Lancaster city to begin creating new comprehensive plan for community development | Local News | lancasteronline.com](#)
- [Citizens can shape the comprehensive plan that will shape Lancaster - One United Lancaster](#)
- [The 1993 comprehensive plan: How it changed Lancaster - One United Lancaster](#)
- [Bike lanes, new housing, parking and more: Lancaster city takes input on key 20-year plan | Local News | lancasteronline.com](#)

## **Shaquille Fearon, 2021 EDI Fellow for Newark NJ**



Shaquille Fearon-Elliott was born and raised in Jamaica. He moved to the United States where he completed high school and following that attended The College of New Jersey. Shaquille self-designed his major in Environmental Anthropology and minored in Chemistry. During his undergrad career, he got involved with initiatives to reduce the carbon footprint of the college campus. This was done by laying the foundation of the Transit Campaign group, of which Shaquille was a founding member. He later transitioned into the role of a Learning Assistant to a course centered around policy, campaign, and social action against climate change in which I assisted students to develop and structure their climate campaigns. Shaquille was

excited to have interned as an Assistant to a Senior Researcher at Sustainable Jersey during his final year of undergrad. During this time, he was able to contribute to the creation of a Lead Guide, a crucial resource for communities such as Newark and Trenton. The USDN fellowship further helped him to develop his knowledge, network and skill set, and he was eager to immerse himself in all it had to offer. The experience that he has garnered will help to catapult his next step in pursuing his Master's, which he anticipates will be in Urban Planning.

### **Project Overview and Role**

This summer, I served as a fellow in the City of Newark's Office of Sustainability and aided with the creation and launch of the Climate Justice Ambassador Program (CJA). The vision of the Climate Justice Ambassador Program is to establish a new norm for City-led environmental



planning initiatives, to confront systemic inequity in government planning, that being the alienation of black and brown youth from the process. The goal is to do this by centering the voices of Newark youth in a broader, citywide conversation about ensuring a just transition through Newark sustainability and climate commitments and programs.

As a coordinator of the CJA Program, one of my roles was to help design the six-week program geared towards high school youth. This included constructing a schedule that reflected what days of the week we would meet in-person, what would unfold on these days and what activities/tasks were more suited for a virtual day. Other aspects of the program design included the number of hours per week dedicated to content delivery of different environmental issues, the number of hours dedicated to professional development, and real-world experiences of content covered through trips. Facilitation was another key role that I served in that ensured that each day went as planned from a logistical perspective. I conducted outreach to different experts in their respective fields to present content to the ambassador and in the process, build crucial partner relationships. I also undertook the task of helping to create a manual/guide of how to run the CJA Program for the city of Newark or other cities. Therefore, the next group of fellows or interns to take the lead will ensure that youth of color can have their voices heard in government planning for years to come.

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

This project offered me a lot of insight into multiple aspects of working within government, complemented by the importance of youth engagement. Some core learning takeaways include:

The power of one's network can be the difference between success and stagnation. Building a network as I progressed throughout my fellowship was key to the outcome.

Youth-based programs constructed by the government offer a bridge between the community and the future wellbeing of that community. The youth are eager and excited to get involved in these opportunities with the government and such involvement can be pivotal in how younger people are represented within government.

It is impossible to speak on climate issues without mentioning the effects that this has on local communities.

There needs to be a bridge between environmental justice communities and their leaders to local government to better serve these communities

Having the topic of Climate Change incorporated into the high school curriculum, sets up generations of students to not only better understand the impacts of climate change but to be more equipped to address climate change as well.

We need to normalize looking up to youths/younger generation as leaders and attribute to them the respect they are owed

Local governments may want to look into training/certification programs that align with green technologies such as solar installations etc.

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

Being that Newark's Office of Sustainability is in the process of updating the city's Sustainability Action Plan and the Master Plan, the youth ambassadors with who I was able to work played an integral role. As mentioned, the objective of the project is to give black and brown youth a voice in government planning. By opening up the eyes of the youth ambassadors to the extensive struggles of climate impacts on minority-majority communities, they can make their suggestions as to what the city of Newark should do to address different climate injustices. Youth ambassadors would share how they would educate their peers and parents based on content knowledge they acquired through the program. Many of the youth ambassadors entered the program with a very rudimentary knowledge of climate justice and environmental issues, but at the end of the program, each ambassador was an expert on some major climate justice issues. Community leaders, government workers, experts in different environmental fields, and residents demonstrated their support of the CJA program through various ways such as wanting the program implemented in their neighborhoods and schools, wanting their students to be involved, or even offering their services in any way that they can.

The impact made will be long-lasting on the city of Newark, and hopefully will spread to other cities as well. The longevity of the impact will be because of the Climate Justice Ambassadors who are dedicated to serving in Newark's Office of Sustainability, offering continued support through the transition of their roles. The ambassadors could potentially serve as the coordinators for the next group of ambassadors and so on, continuing to grow the CJA Program and tackling environmental justice concerns.

**Any links to project deliverables?**

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

## Sylvie Guezeon, 2021 EDI Fellow for Minneapolis MN



Sylvie Guezeon is a lawyer from the Ivory Coast and has been in the U.S. since 2017. A health issue caused her to pivot to the healthcare field where she wants to use her voice to make changes for underserved, under-represented communities and marginalized people. She considers this work her life's mission rather than a job/career and will not find peace until it happens. Sylvie feels privileged to be able to explore the sustainability field with the City of Minneapolis within their Public Works' Transportation Planning and Programming (TPP) division. She will be assisting in restructuring engagement practices by providing a fresh perspective during the development of a community engagement plan for a transportation safety project in the Phillips neighborhood. She is currently pursuing an MBA in healthcare management at St Catherine University and will be graduating in May 2022. Recently, Sylvie has successfully been able to engage St Catherine's community stakeholders for the implementation of [solutions related to Intimate Partner Violence](#).

### **Project Overview and Role:**

#### *Phillips Traffic Safety Improvements*

In 2017 and 2018, the City analyzed 10 years of crash data for trends to inform future work. Based on this analysis, there are many car crashes in the Phillips neighborhood. These car crashes cause injuries and even deaths. In the last 10 years, there have been more than 1,600 car crashes on these four high injury streets: 24th street, 26th street, 28th street and Chicago Avenue.

The project goal is to reduce speeding and car crashes in the Phillips neighborhood. By meeting these goals, the streets will be more comfortable for people walking, rolling or driving.

Phillips is a diverse and low-income neighborhood with approximately 70% of BIPOC, foreign-born and multigenerational residents, who speak another language than English.

My role as the EDI Transportation Fellow was to engage those who have been traditionally marginalized in this type of project. I mainly targeted community-based organizations, neighborhood associations, schools, businesses organizations, and hospitals. I also assisted in creating a Transportation Engagement Framework.

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

I am new to the field of sustainability. There was a plethora of knowledge I was able to acquire from my position within the local government. The most important things would have to be:

1. Government needs to provide more financial (human, resources) support for ways to make engagement more enticing.

2. Importance for Government to patiently build relationships to create lasting trust among BIPOC.
3. Gain experience for public engagement with residents and community-based organizations.
4. Navigate a government Division and work closely with Government staff.

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

This project is part of the City of Minneapolis Vision Zero goal to prevent severe injuries and deaths from traffic crashes. It is a movement to reduce traffic-related deaths and major injuries to zero. In 2020, the City of Minneapolis adopted the Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan to shape how the City will grow and change over the next two decades. Vision Zero is one of the high-level policies in the Transportation Section. For 2040, one of the City of Minneapolis' goals is to reach an equitable civic participation system that enfranchises everyone. To accomplish this task, I was charged with the development of the community engagement framework, working closely with staff, and being part of the necessary conversations to provide an equitable and inclusive policy guide.

Success markers for this project have been unconventional, and not always apparent. I created solid relationships with the Native American educators in the Phillips neighborhood.

### **Any links to project deliverables?**

- <https://cityoflakes.maps.arcgis.com/apps/CrowdsourceReporter/index.html?appid=604c61a9d5fb4bfaaee5ee0089872a90>
- <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WVRNCST>
- <https://www.minneapolismn.gov/government/projects/phillips/>