

2019 USDN EDI Fellowship - DeAngelo Bowden - City of Fort Collins CO



Hey! My name is DeAngelo Bowden and I am the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Fellow for the City of Fort Collins. I am a part of their climate team, which is currently made up of eight (8) individuals who specialize in different areas related to achieving the city's climate goals. I was chosen to be a fellow along with 6 other EDI fellows who work across the country in the following cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Dubuque, Iowa City, Philadelphia and Vancouver, which is facilitated by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). As fellows, we were a part of a

summer-long cooperation with various city departments on topics revolving around equity, inclusion, resiliency and environmental sustainability.

I personally believe that this experience has been eye-opening and really something that I wish I had invested more time in pursuing during my time in undergraduate studies. Working within local city government is a culture all within its own. Being able to experience the way things are run for communities at a local level, gave me so much context on how things operate, and decisions are made by community members more clearly. I say this because I have past work experience in the federal level of government. Working for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had a completely different feel than local government, in the sense that I was very disconnected from those who were affected by policies and programs FEMA had/has put into place. I also want to preface by saying that, the disconnect experienced was only exacerbated during times where there were no disasters to aid in.

Let's take another step back.

I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, and am an African-American male, who was raised in a southern household. That alone, should provide enough information for someone to guess how my upbringing was, especially if you are from any place south of the Mason-Dixon line. My parents are both strong and proud individuals, with my mother working as an accountant for one of the biggest energy companies in the country (Duke Energy), and my father working for the Department of Social Services in Guilford County. Now that I think about it, I somewhat understand how I came to have such a strong passion in sustainability and equity. I was taught that the truth mattered above all else, going to college was the only option and that the only good barbeque was a vinegar-based barbeque. I also had an interesting time in grade school because my parents placed me in a program called Spanish Immersion. Every class I had was taught in Spanish and at the end of the day, I would have an English class. My teachers were all from Spanish speaking countries and all shared their cultures and experiences they have had from other regions of the world. So, diversity was heavily ingrained in me at a very early age.

Moving forward, I decided to attend North Carolina Central University in Durham North Carolina, which is a Historically Black College University (HBCU). I wanted to major in Political Science, focusing on environmental policy but quickly realized that the environmental policy portion of that, was one of the things that interested me in the world of politics. I expressed this to my advisor, who is an amazing individual that helped shape who I am today. She recommended I transfer to Appalachian State University to pursue a degree in Sustainability, as it is a leading university in the field. So, I did just that, and found myself being as happy as could be, living in the Blue Ridge Mountains, within a diverse environment, learning about anything and everything from the triple bottom line perspective.

Once I graduated in 2017, I joined AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps and through networking and opportunities, I landed a job with the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Mitigation and later as a Disaster Survivor Assistance Specialist. I was able to travel across the country and met individuals who put me into contact with the Urban Sustainability Directors Network. Through some research and applications, I was selected as the EDI fellow for the City of Fort Collins.

I had never been to Colorado up until this fellowship, so I did not know anything about the City of Fort Collins whatsoever. The decision for me to pick up and move here was something that I just kind of did and has been somewhat of my thing since I left Appstate and joined FEMA. That being said, I was not aware of the systemic inequities that took place in Fort Collins nor did I understand where the governing body fell on these issues. What I did know after some research was that Fort Collins was 88.99% White, 3.11% Asian and 1.56% Black, which was a HUGE transition from my hometown, which is 48.4% White, 4.0% Asian and 40.6% Black.... just for context. Now I know what you're thinking, "He must have felt out of this element" (because that was what I was thinking). However, the challenge with living in this community was well accepted mainly because I had an amazing support system within the City itself. Recently there has been a huge push to center programs and overall strategy in equity, leading with race, for the next two years. Individuals within the service area that I would be working in like Janet Freeman, have had this on their agenda for years, and only needed the right amount of support to begin broad implementation. My supervisor, Lindsay Ex, has made a huge effort in being sure that we are applying an equity lens to the work we are doing, fully knowing that it would be a challenge. She recognizes the challenges of leading with equity, acknowledges that it is a continual learning space, and is committed to supporting fellow colleagues in executing the work. I know without the support of these two incredible leaders, it would have been much more challenging to adjust to a vastly different community than my own and feel at home in the fight for equity in sustainability.

During my time here in Fort Collins, I have been able to use tools like the one developed by Desiree Williams-Rajee called, "The Stakeholder Mapping Tool". Using this tool, I was able to map out a ton of stakeholders within the city, and address whether they have any influence when it comes to decision making at the City level and how impacted they are by decisions made. We looked to address the communities that had low influence but were highly impacted with our re-adaptation of the city's Climate Action Plan.

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As I continue my experience as an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion fellow, I hope to continue building those relationships with other cities through the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, because I know this work isn't something that one person, municipality or region can do on its own. My hopes are that us as an organization or a network of individuals, can continue to share our ideas, experiences, successes and failures as they progress in this space. I am excited to see where we all head as we continue to work on equitable work in government.