

2020 USDN EDI Fellowship - Maria Jose Orejuela - Miami-Dade County FL



Hello! My name is Maria Jose (MJ) Orejuela and I am recent graduate of the Urban and Regional Planning program at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, FL. I am originally from Piura, Peru, a deserts coastal city near Ecuador, but I have lived in the United States since 2001 when my family immigrated to Miami, FL. Growing up in Miami and Peru, my main focus was playing outside. I was always involved playing soccer, tennis, jump rope, anything that my mother could afford to get me involved in. This is where I would release all my energy. As I started to get older and

had to move around the city to hang out with friends, work or get to soccer practice, I began to notice the urban disconnection that a suburbanized area like South Florida suffered from. This inefficient way in which the community was developed made me wonder why we live a certain way as humans and how did we ultimately reach this state of urbanization. After initially thinking that I wanted to work towards medical school to study neurosurgery, I eventually ended up finishing my degree in Urban Planning, drawn to the thought that I could help affect the way we inhabit our communities and work towards creating healthier realities for all of us.

From July to September, I joined Miami-Dade County's Office of Resilience as the EDI Fellow. Within the Office of Resilience, I primarily worked with the adaptation team, who was focused on completing the first Sea Level Rise Strategy report for the County. My fellowship was focused on outreach development for the SLR Report and community engagement planning for the upcoming Adaptation Action Area planning project, in an area known as Little River. This fellowship has been extremely rewarding because of the new knowledge I have gained in terms of equity and what it means for us as changemakers and for those in government who work to implement equity on a day to day basis. The team in the Office of Resilience, specifically Monica, Christian and Katie in the adaptation team, whom I worked closely with, work endlessly and passionately to plan for sea level rise and engage the community. Their knowledge and guidance were instrumental for my project. For the outreach development for the first SLR report, I crafted ArcGIS storymaps that will serve as one of the main tools that the community will use to learn about how the county is preparing for sea level rise and what it means for the communities. In addition, as part of the new adaptation action area planning project for the community of Little River, I began to layout the framework for the community engagement effort that was to begin after my fellowship ended. With this new understanding of equity within government that Desiree, our mentor, guided our cohort throughout the summer, my approach for planning the community engagement effort for Little River became an effort to push for new goals of reaching communities never before engaged by the Office of Resilience and making sure trust building and recognition of historic inequities become an integral part in any meetings or workshops that were to be planned.

Within these last three months as the EDI fellow at the Office of Resilience in Miami-Dade County, my home for the last 20 years, I have grown personally and professionally and have absorbed new ideas and possibilities that will continue to guide me probably for the rest of personal and professional life as a city planner and ultimately as human being. I am eternally grateful to everyone at USDN, Desiree, and the OOR team and hope to bump in to all of you in real life on of these days.