

2019 USDN EDI Fellowship - Ruby Nwaebube - City of Baltimore MD



Ruby Nwaebube is the Community Resilience Fellow for the Baltimore Office of Sustainability (BOS). Ruby's fellowship is administered by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network's Equity Diversity Inclusion (EDI) Fellowship Program.

Ruby will support engagement efforts in historically underrepresented communities in Baltimore and contribute to equitable community resiliency planning efforts. Previously, Ruby was a research assistant for four years on topics ranging from the architecture used in the Transatlantic

Slave Trade to educational simulation games on current policy issues. As of May 2019, Ruby earned a Bachelors in Urban & Environmental Planning with a minor in Architecture from the University of Virginia. In her spare time, Ruby is learning Korean and informing the public on issues that are affecting communities of color through virtual reality (VR) design.

Hello USDN community! My name is Ruby Nwaebube and from June to August 2019, I was selected as the Community Resilience Equity Fellow for the Baltimore Office of Sustainability (BOS). In this fellowship, I was one of seven fellows that had the opportunity to learn about equity, diversity, and inclusion in local government in one of the following cities: Cleveland, Dubuque, Fort Collins, Iowa City, Philadelphia, Vancouver, and Baltimore. The EDI summer fellowship was facilitated through the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). Through this position, I participated in a twelve-week program to work and collaborate with BOS on a variety of projects focusing on topics that advance their sustainability and inclusion goals.

Before describing my specific projects with BOS, I need to give you a brief background on how my journey led to this fellowship. As a Nigerian-American woman, I grew up reading, learning, and sharing stories in my community. Stories define my culture due to it being a generational exchange that can uplift and guide future generations' pathways in life. These anecdotal stories range from family legacy accounts to cultural proverbs. My favorite stories growing up were the untold stories. Untold stories are stories that are unknown to the public. These stories are often not publicized due to a lack of interest, inaccessibility, limited exposure, or it is entirely kept secret. Despite these limitations, untold stories shape a community. For instance, untold stories have provided answers in why certain inequities currently exist in Nigeria. Learning about untold stories helped develop my curiosity about city government.

Untold stories are everywhere in communities, yet, they are prevalent in city government. Similar to Nigeria, historical policies and planning decisions have created a legacy of inequities and inequalities in Baltimore. Certain policies have racially segregated residents and that has contributed to the current economic, social, and environmental challenges in Baltimore today. One of the challenges in Baltimore is climate change (flooding, coastal storms, extreme cold, extreme heat, and high winds), which affects vulnerable and marginalized communities at higher rates than more affluent and white communities.

In my position, I worked with Climate and Resilience Planner, Aubrey Germ, Sustainability Coordinator, Anne Draddy, and Community Resilience Intern, Nevena Pilipovic-Wengler to perform outreach in pre-identifying resiliency hubs. Resiliency hubs are local community centers that support and provide residents resources and services that can be used before, during, and after natural hazard events in the city. Through this fellowship, I collected information on neighborhood strengths, vulnerabilities, and the opportunities that the city has to better support communities during extreme storms.

Equity Retreat

Prior to my fellowship, I did not have much experience working in equity. I graduated in May 2019 from the University of Virginia with a Bachelor's Degree in Urban & Environmental Planning. The classes that I took at Virginia touched on equity-related issues, however, it tended to be an afterthought. When planners incorporate equity in their work, it tends to be a last-minute idea or tagline that is added to design. However, equity is an exclusive need that affects all communities. Equity should frame how the city looks at its community, wholeheartedly, and not just as an afterthought.

For instance, in the second week of my fellowship, I attended an Equity Retreat for the Planning Department in Baltimore. This retreat was led by the Equity Committee in the department, which is run by Stephanie Smith. In this retreat, Stephanie discussed how equity can structure how we view our roles in city government and our specific projects. Some of the questions that framed our viewpoints of equity were the following:

- Structural Equity: *What historic advantages or disadvantages have affected residents in the given community?*
- Procedural Equity: *How are residents who have been historically excluded from planning processes being authentically included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the proposed policy or project?*
- Distributional Equity: *Does the distribution of civic resources and investment explicitly account for potential racially disparate outcomes?*
- Transgenerational Equity: *Does the policy or project result in unfair burdens on future generations?*

Out of the four questions, the Structural and Procedural Equity were the approaches that I used for my project. In Baltimore's case, the city does not address the structural and procedural inequities in underrepresented communities that are most affected by climate change. Both structural and procedural equity are huge gaps that need to be addressed in Baltimore. In working to fill these gaps, I looked at how the community and communication outreach in the resiliency hubs can start a conversation about these issues.

Community and Communication Outreach

There are two hundred and fifty neighborhoods in the city of Baltimore, yet, there are only seven resiliency hubs! Although these hubs are spread throughout the city, it is not inclusive to all communities. In the future, BOS is planning on creating more resiliency hubs, better overall support and to provide ongoing aid for the existing hubs. To achieve this goal, the BOS, Mayor's of Emergency Management (MOEM), and the Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) had a check-in meeting with the seven resiliency hubs on August 9th. Before this meeting, the hubs had not met since January 2017. My fellowship was geared around preparation for this meeting, therefore, I was tasked to purchase disaster relief supplies.

In the first month of my fellowship, I was tasked with buying disaster relief supplies for the resiliency hubs. The city had received a \$70,000 private grant from the Baltimore Community Foundation. Due to the limited time frame, I was unable to send out surveys to hubs beforehand to see the types of supplies they specifically needed. However, I found a 2017 supply purchase list that the city had bought for some of the hubs. Reviewing the supply list allowed me to improve on the equitable needs for the hubs. Some of the supplies that the city purchased for the meeting were wheelchairs, AED Defibrillators, pet carriers, etc. Through this generous grant, I was able to spend almost \$52,000 towards new supplies. As for the remaining \$18,000, the hubs will determine how they want to spend the grant.

In addition to buying supplies, I created a qualitative and quantitative survey that observed the sounds, smells, and the physical features of each hub. I wrote up a robust resilience hub profile, provided recommendations for the updated Climate Action Plan, and worked with the BCHD to interview and hand out surveys to locals attending Code Red Day Program. These tasks allowed research to serve as a point of contact and provide space for the hubs to voice their opinions about city agencies.

Final Remarks

Throughout this summer fellowship, I have grown as a designer, planner, researcher, and civically-engaged citizen. Before this fellowship, I was not familiar with the Baltimore area. I have a sister that lives in Baltimore after graduating from the University of Maryland at Baltimore in 2018; however, her experience in Baltimore will be different from my own experience. In the twelve-week fellowship, I built connections and had valuable conversations from locals residents, resiliency hub leaders, colleagues, and equity leaders in Baltimore. Also, I have expanded my knowledge of Baltimore. For instance, I took many photos of art murals around the city, tried my first crab cake, and I rode on the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) bus to work every day. There is not a perfect city that is addressing climate change; however, cities can learn about the measures that Baltimore is taking to tackle this issue. Baltimore can show the world how to use their charm to create a sustainable and equitable city for all individuals.