

2019 USDN EDI Fellowship - Wanjiku Gatua – City of Dubuque IA



Wanjiku Gatua is a senior studying Business Administration and Spanish on a pre-law track at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Currently she is serving as an EDI Fellow in Dubuque, Iowa, where she has lived for the past 5 years with her family. Her fellowship is focused on sustainable and equitable procurement processes and connecting minority and disadvantaged communities to city resources.

After graduating from Coe College in 2020, she plans on attending law school to focus on international, civil rights, or environmental law. On campus at Coe College, she is actively engaged in several organizations. Currently, she is serving as the president of Coe College's chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, an action-oriented social justice organization that works to uplift local, regional, and global communities. Wanjiku is also involved in other multicultural organizations, as well as the Committee on Diversity on campus. She is committed and passionate about working with others to create more equitable communities.

In the Cedar Rapids community, Wanjiku recently served as an AmeriCorps volunteer as a College Access and Career Coach. In this position, she was able to help underprivileged students connect to different resources and reach their goals of going to college or starting a career. She also served as an intern for the Human Rights department in Dubuque, working on educating the community about housing inequities in the city.

Her family is originally from Kenya but have lived in numerous places around the United States. Outside of academics and work, she enjoys traveling, especially to Kenya to visit family. She also enjoys spending time outdoors, riding bikes and swimming, and spending time with loved ones.

Hello! My name is Wanjiku Gatua and this summer I served as an Equitable and Sustainable Procurement Fellow in the City of Dubuque, Iowa. I served as one part of an entire cohort of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) fellows; a group of intelligent and determined young sustainability advocates from various cities in the United States and Canada. While looking for positions for the summer, I was initially drawn to this fellowship because of its uniqueness. Dubuque, Iowa is not the most ethnically diverse city, so even the name of the position first caught me off guard. Upon further reading and research, I realized that an extraordinary and enticing opportunity had presented itself in none other than my home town. A fellowship focused on racial equity and sustainability sounded like the perfect mix for me. I've always had a passion and interest in sustainability but never had the opportunity to fully immerse myself into work focused on the topic. True sustainability can only be successful and achieved by integrating equity in every step, and I was able to do my part in pushing Dubuque in the right direction.

Currently I am a senior studying Business Administration and Spanish at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but I have lived in Dubuque for the past 5 years. Growing up as a child of two immigrant parents from Kenya, my experiences were vastly different than those of most of my peers in high school. My family and I faced different challenges and had a different life than others

around us. Often times it was discouraging for me, especially living in a smaller Iowa town. My senior year of high school I was selected as a Diversity Leadership Scholarship recipient from Coe College. This was one of the first times I was able to view my uniqueness as my superpower. Coe highlighted my diverse background and saw potential and passion in me to help create a better community on the campus. This USDN fellowship was a continuation of using my passion for social justice, community development, and the integration of equity into the work I do. Coupled with a focus on sustainability, serving as an EDI fellow gave me the opportunity to impact a community I truly care about.

I spent the summer researching sustainable and equitable purchasing, something that was completely new to me, but used all over the country and the world. After analyzing countless policies and procedures in many different sized cities, large corporations, and even small family owned companies, I went on to create an Equitable and Sustainable Procurement Guide. The guidelines provide policy recommendations and best practices for city wide purchases. I was able to cover “low hanging fruit,” such as not using plastic water bottles at city meetings, all the way to procuring clean energy for the entire city. In late July, I also had the opportunity to attend the Clean Cities Renewable Clean Energy Power Procurement conference in Denver, Colorado and learn about the amazing work that cities are doing to move towards 100% clean energy. As Dubuque works to update its Climate Action Plan, the information, resources, suggestions, and motivation from other success stories from the conference will be utilized. I was able to embed equity into the project most specifically with the utilization of small, local, and minority/women owned businesses. One of the best ways to strengthen and support different communities is to provide them with business. From the very first steps of creating bids and requests for proposals all the way to the purchase of goods or services, infusing equity and sustainability creates better outcomes. Business can be and often is the largest driver of change.

I was also able to work with representatives from several different departments on a request for proposals and the eventual selection for a consultant to create an Equitable Poverty Prevention Plan for the city. Participating in the entire process gave me firsthand knowledge of the process of searching for a dynamic firm to work with the city. All this was under the guidance of Gina Bell, the Sustainable Communities Coordinator at the city of Dubuque. Gina works endlessly in conjunction with numerous departments and city partners to create a more livable and sustainable community for all. Her connections, guidance, and assistance (jokes and bubbly personality 😊) were all fundamental to the success of the project.

On my last day of the fellowship, I was able to present the guide to city leadership, all of whom can take advantage of the guidelines. From engineering, transportation, public information, sustainability, and every department in between, the guide can be referenced, and suggestions and best practices can be applied to improve purchasing practices. This way the city can create change from the inside out. By aligning procurement practices with sustainability and equity goals, the city will also be able to encourage outside vendors, local and regional businesses, and residents to adopt more sustainable and equitable practices. Any and all steps towards better procedures for all is a responsible and necessary step in the right direction.

In reflection of my time as a fellow in City Hall, I left with more knowledge (and more questions!) about research, business practices, sustainability, equity, local government and more. However, the most rewarding aspect was working on an important project and connecting with city staff and community partners -- which in the end left me with a greater love for my Dubuque community.