

Inside Citywide Podcast Transcript

Episode 6: Exploring NYC's Urban Fellows Program

Michael Santos: You are listening to the Inside Citywide podcast, brought to you by the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services. Inside Citywide provides you with a behind the scenes look at some of the work we do to serve the people of New York City.

Nick Benson: Hello, welcome to Inside Citywide. I'm Nick Benson.

Belinda French: I'm Belinda French. Thanks for joining us today.

Nick Benson: This episode we'll be delving into one of my favorite programs we have at DCAS, our Urban Fellows program. The Urban Fellows program is sort of like the Peace Corps or AmeriCorp, but for New York City government.

Belinda French: Urban Fellows is a highly-selective, nine-month fellowship program that combines work in mayoral offices and City agencies with volunteer service opportunities and a seminar series that explores urban issues impacting public policy.

Nick Benson: One of the great things about the program is that it is designed to introduce a diverse group of America's best college students and graduates to local government and public service. Fellows come from all over the country to work here in New York City.

Belinda French: The unique opportunity to work with current decision-makers and assist in the implementation of public policy, distinguishes the Urban Fellows program as the premier training program in government.

Nick Benson: Our two guests have a wealth of knowledge and experience about the Urban Fellows program, the difference it makes, and how to become a fellow.

Belinda French: Our first guest is Ewa Rzepka, the program director at DCAS who oversees the Urban Fellows program. Thanks for being here, Ewa.

Ewa Rzepka: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Nick Benson: We're also joined by Mahbuba Hossain, a recent graduate of the Urban Fellows program who continued her journey in public service as Project Coordinator for the City of New York's Young Men's Initiative. Thanks for joining us, Mahbuba.

Mahbuba Hossain: Thanks so much for having me.

Belinda French: So, Ewa, we gave a brief overview of the Urban Fellows program but tell us more about the history of the program, what the fellowship experience is like, how long it lasts, and what a fellow can expect to do and experience.

Ewa Rzepka: Absolutely. So, the program has been around since 1960. We celebrated our 50th anniversary last year. We accept 25 fellows for each cohort. Each cohort runs from September through mid-May. Fellows start with a three-week orientation during which they participate in a large number of trainings and team-building activities in addition to participating in interviews for their placement. At the completion of their orientation, they are placed at a large number of city agencies or mayoral offices where they work full time. In addition to working full-time at their placements, they participate in a large number of various engagement opportunities.

We have weekly seminars where I invite high-level city officials and other subject matter experts who share their leadership experiences and expose fellows to various city initiatives. They also participate in working groups. Depending on their interest, they might be working, let's say, on our newsletter or planning service activities for the cohort.

In the past year, we also added a couple of new program components to allow for more opportunities for them to develop relationships within the cohort. We added a buddy system where they are assigned to connect one-on-one with another, and an ambassador program where they're connected with previous cohort members, from let's say the past five years or so, and those ambassadors serve as their mentors.

So, they're there to guide them to their experience, the initial sort of adjustment period, but also throughout the fellowship experience.

Belinda French: Thanks, Ewa. I knew that there was teamwork and collaboration. I'm so glad that there's a mentorship component of it now. And I didn't even realize that the program has been with the City for 50 years already. So that's really awesome.

Nick Benson: And Mahbuba, I'm so glad you joined us because your story really represents why the Urban Fellows program is so valuable – both to the fellows and to New York City. You finished the fellowship in June and then immediately transitioned into your current position in city government. How did you initially hear about the program and what made you want to become an Urban Fellow?

Mahbuba Hossain: So, I initially heard about the program from my dean at Fordham university. I remember I was in my last semester at Fordham, and I was looking ahead after graduation and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do yet.

She had suggested that I look into fellowship programs, especially as I wanted to keep learning and exploring and build my work experience at the same time. And one of those fellowship programs she had recommended was the Urban Fellows program based off of my interest in studies. And when I looked into the Urban Fellows program, I really wanted to be

a part of this experience as I wanted to get the specific experience working in city government, while also being able to learn about the different agencies that make up our local government. And I saw it as a great way to explore my interests and learn more about what I want to continue perusing.

Nick Benson: Yeah, that's great. It's a wonderful partnership with local colleges and universities. They're a great feeder for the program and as are schools across the country. So, we're really glad you found your way into the program, and we're glad that it was a meaningful experience for you, and it led to the career opportunity you have now.

Belinda French: So, Ewa, another the question for you. What has been the most rewarding part of being involved with the Urban Fellows over the years? You've seen many fellows come and go, what stands out to you about the talents and abilities of our fellows?

Ewa Rzepka: There is so many parts, but I think the most important one is being able to bring in a new group of highly dedicated individuals every year, and to give them the entry path into city government. They're known for their dedication, for their interest in public service, for their ambition and hard work, and being in the position to guide them through the fellowship and provide them the support and the mentorship that they need to succeed, I think for me, it's the most, most rewarding part of it.

Belinda French: I can definitely understand that too, thanks.

Nick Benson: and Mahbuba, what was the fellowship experience like for you? I know you were at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), but what did you do in your role there? What did you learn and how do you think the experience benefited you?

Mahbuba Hossain: The experience was very interesting. It was very difficult at first, I will say, adjusting to working full time remotely, especially during the pandemic, as I'm sure it was for many other people in city government and other roles. I left college on a random one day in March and then all of a sudden, I was working full time later in the year. So, it was a bit hard at first, but I really enjoyed my time there at ACS. I was in the office of education and employment initiatives, and I worked on a lot of different projects, some of which I did research on best practices and youth programs specifically as it related to foster care youth. I also worked on coordinating a lot of different programs. One of those programs was called tech link, and that's a stem career pathways program for transition age youth in foster care. And I really enjoyed working on this project because I got to work with foster care youth directly. Talk to them, get to know them, learn about their experiences.

And from working on tech link, I learned that I really enjoy program management and I wanted to work in a small team and a collaborative space. And working at ACS, I learned that I want it to be in city government, specifically in program management. And this experience overall benefited me because I was exposed to so many different agencies and I was connected with a great group of people in my cohort, even though it was all virtual, we took the time to really get to know each other and try to meet up when we could outdoors. Great group of people and I still talk to them to this day.

Nick Benson: Wow. That's incredible that you transitioned from school to this position in March of 2020. You really couldn't have had a more difficult time to do that, I guess. But you know, I'm glad you had that connection with the other fellows and with your colleagues.

It sounds like really meaningful work that you are doing. And one thing I tell a lot of people when they're considering working in city government is, I think unlike a lot of positions in the private sector, when you come into city government, you get a lot of responsibilities early on and you have a chance to grow quickly.

So, I'm glad you had such meaningful work and it kept your interest in public service and wanting to stay working for the city. That's really cool.

Belinda French: Ewa, I know many Urban Fellows have, like Mahbuba, gone on to careers in city government, and even risen to senior roles. In fact, Mayor de Blasio was an urban fellow himself and that's how he got his start in city government.

What is it about the fellowship experience or about the fellows themselves that leads so many of them to go on to successful careers in public service in New York City and elsewhere?

Ewa Rzepka: I think it's a combination of the fellow experience and the individuals that the program attracts. I think the cohort model provides them with a built-in support network. They go through the same experiences as other individuals in the cohort. Initially during the first three weeks of the orientation, they spend a lot of time together, which allows for relationship building and bonding. But I think that also provide a lot of support, not only through the program but by their placements as well.

So it's the combination of the cohort support, the program support, and the placement support as well. And it's definitely the reputation the program has and the kind of people it attracts. There are people that are very much committed to public service. I think every year I am so impressed by the quality of applications we receive.

They're young individuals who are dedicated to serving others. And that dedication is very much expressed through their internships, service activities, and other projects.

Belinda French: Thanks, as you were talking, I was just thinking that, you know, I wish every job could be set up the way the Urban Fellows program is set up, because it seems like the success comes from, just like you said, all of that support from colleagues, getting an opportunity to weigh in on your placement, and again, the mentorship, and then they have each other throughout the program and the resources. So, it's really awesome. Anybody who's listening, you got to do more of that in your jobs as well. Thanks, Ewa.

Mahbuba, I have a question for you. When you became an urban fellow, did you see yourself continuing to work in government or public service? How did you end up

transitioning to your role with the young men's initiative and what does your day to day look like in that position?

Mahbuba Hossain: Well, I always knew I wanted to be in a job where I was providing support to young people in some way. And when I had applied to the Urban Fellows program, I honestly wasn't sure whether or not that would be through working in government.

All I knew at the time was that I had an interest and I wanted to see what could come of it. And towards the end of my fellowship experience, I started to look ahead at what my next role could be. And in my placement, I learned a lot about what I liked, but I also learned about what I didn't like. And one of the things I learned I really liked was program management through my experience working on the tech link program that I mentioned.

And both Ewa, and one of my supervisors at ACS sent over two separate job postings at the young men's initiative. And one of them was for a project coordinator role. And I thought, oh my God, this is perfect. This is what I want to do. And at first, I did not feel like I was qualified for the role. I didn't have as many years of experience that they were asking for.

And I wasn't sure, like, would they even take me, but you know what? I thought I'll just apply, and I'll see what happens. And I ended up getting the job, which I was very happy about. I was very excited that even though I doubted myself, I still applied anyways. And I love my new role as project coordinator at young men's initiative so much, it's very exciting and no day is really the same. Sometimes things can be slow and other times it feels like so much is happening at once.

And I feel like you could really say that for most city government jobs, it really varies from day to day. And it's a small team that's very collaborative, which is exactly what I wanted in my next role. In terms of the different things that I work on, I support and I work alongside the executive director at YMI, Jordan Stockdale, on many different projects.

And one of the things that we recently worked on is we publish the 2021 disparity report. And this was in partnership with the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence. And it was an update to the 2016 disparity report. So, there was a lot of great, interesting data in that, and I was really happy to be a part of it.

It's related to education, economic stability, health, wellbeing, and youth justice for young people in the city. So I really liked that. I was able to be a part of such a big project like that, but also be a part of projects in many different areas than health, education, et cetera, at YMI.

Belinda French: Thanks, Mahbuba. I'm so glad that you believed in yourself and went for that job, despite everything that you were thinking, you didn't have the experience and, obviously they saw that that you did.

It's so great that you're a part of a program, with equity being the buzz word right now, just the fact that they worked on that disparity report and that you were a part of it is really, really big for the city. So, I'm so glad you're there. And I'm proud of the work that YMI is doing as well.

As we're recording today on November 1, applications are currently open for next year's cohort of the Urban Fellows. What would you say to someone who is thinking about becoming a fellow and what advice would you have for them?

Mahbuba Hossain: Well, if you're thinking of becoming a fellow, I definitely recommend applying.

It's such a great learning experience and you'll have the opportunity to work at a city agency, oftentimes with very little experience and that's what's so great about the Urban Fellows program. You'll get the opportunity to work at a city agency in the city that you may not be able to work at without the fellowship program and you'll be able to get your foot in the door and be part of an expansive alumni network and build your own network.

And in terms of advice, I would say go outside of your comfort zone. Say yes a lot more than you say no. Say yes to coffee chats, outdoor events, difficult projects. You know, as I look back at my experience, the one thing I would change is I would say yes, a lot more to opportunities that came my way, even if I was afraid.

Belinda French: That's such great advice. Opportunities, networking, and believing in yourself and saying yes even if you feel you can't, just say yes and go for it.

Nick Benson: Thanks. And as Belinda mentioned, applications for Urban Fellows are currently open and run through January 14. If someone's interested in applying or just learning more about the program, how do they get more information?

Ewa Rzepka: They are of course, more than welcome to reach out to us directly. If they would like to chat more about the program, we have all of our application instructions posted and the application link posted on our website, which is nyc.gov/urbanfellows. We are also planning with the current cohort, application webinars.

So, more information to come on that. We started doing them a couple of years ago, and they're typically hosted by current cohorts and they allow opportunities for applicants to ask questions and learn more about the application process. We also have a strong relationship with the alumni association.

So, if anyone wants to be connected with Urban Fellows alumni, they should definitely reach out to me and I'll be more than happy to connect them with the alumni association.

Nick Benson: Thanks so much Ewa. I know there is a really wonderful alumni network for the Urban Fellows program. I know across city government, there are a lot of senior officials

who first started out as, as an urban fellow, and then like was mentioned, Mayor de Blasio himself was an urban fellow. So that's definitely a great learning experience and it could be a launchpad for a lot of great things in city government.

So, I want to thank both of our guests for joining us today. The Urban Fellows program is one of the premier programs the City runs, and we're so proud of our role with it here at DCAS. Ewa, we appreciate everything that you do to make it a success. And Mahbuba, I'm glad you had such a positive experience and I hope you continue your journey in public service for many years to come.

Ewa Rzepka: Thank you for having me. It's my pleasure.

Mahbuba Hossain: Thank you for having me. This was a great discussion.

Belinda French: Thank you both so much for being here today. This was a great discussion. I agree wholeheartedly with Mahbuba. So, thank you so much.

Nick Benson: Well, I really love this program. Working in government is more than just a job it's about serving others and improving the lives of your fellow New Yorkers and this program, as much as any, taps into people who have a passion for public service and who are really mission driven.

Belinda French: Absolutely, I agree. It's so important to create pathways for people who are eager to serve and make a difference. It's a win-win because the City attracts talented emerging leaders, and the fellows have such a great opportunity to learn and launch their careers.

Nick Benson: No doubt, this program is great all around. So, once again, if you're interested in becoming an Urban Fellow or know someone who might be, be sure to check out nyc.gov/urbanfellows to apply or get more information.

Belinda French: As always, we want to thank all off our listeners for joining us. If you enjoyed our conversation, make sure you like and subscribe to Inside Citywide on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you listen. You can also leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Every review helps other listeners find our podcast. Thanks for tuning in!

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