

Reflections

on the **Economic Mobility Policy Forum**

POLICY FELLOWS
2019-2020

Fellows answer:

**How have you used what
you've learned over your
year with the Policy Forum
in your work?**

Julius Moss

Seattle, WA



The past eleven months working as a member of the Economic Mobility Policy Forum have been transformative.

On August 16, 2019, the Policy Forum hosted its first virtual event led by Policy Fellows Deanna Belleny and Robbyn Lewis. I shared this perspective on my own city, Seattle: “Seattle and its surrounding areas are experiencing a convergence of multiple issues which include food and home insecurities mainly caused by the gentrifying effects of attracting large tech companies. This has been compounded by huge investments by venture capitalist firms and foreign investors. This has resulted in the creation of food deserts, over-priced housing, crowded highways and high demand on public transportation.”

My comment on Seattle set the tone for my experience with the Policy Forum and foreshadowed many of the dominant issues within my city. When the Forum began, I served as mid-level management for a municipal government department that managed educational investments for early education projects. I began my experience with the Policy Forum looking for answers to questions that existed within the work I managed for the City of Seattle. The Policy Forum created space for braided conversations that identified multiple issues from a solutions-based approach.

As my role with my organization deteriorated, I began using the Policy Forum to network future opportunities, to advance my professional knowledge, and to connect with other professionals. The Policy Forum became my refuge during a volatile period in my professional career. My colleagues, Policy Forum moderators and presenters, and the staff of the Centers for Applied Public Research became integral parts of my strategic plan to move forward. The Live Sessions became my foundation for reinventing myself in addition to providing me with a structural approach towards addressing issues of inequity and social justice.

The Economic Mobility Policy Forum was unlike anything I have ever experienced. As a professional development and training manager, I knew intimately what a well-educated workforce meant to the respective fields the Policy Forum intended to impact. Having previously created professional development content, strategies and approaches for various organizations, I know the importance of delivering meaningful content and tailoring the content to specific audiences. The Policy Forum excelled in presenting contextually designed topics for public policy managers, academics and government agency staff. Discussion topics ranged from designing racial equity assessments for municipal governments to identifying resources within inner city food deserts. We were collectively encouraged to continue our conversations after meetings with the purpose of developing strategies and making suggestions on improving the presentations and sessions.

One of the most important benefits to the Policy Forum was the evolution of my personal perspective. My approach to my work became more focused and integrated into the issues presented within the Forum. I gained a new appreciation for the work because I viewed my objectives in terms of strategic alignment. The solutions that I developed had to be mutually beneficial on multiple levels. I could no longer develop solutions that were one dimensional; I could no longer implement programs that did not consider social impacts on adjacent issues.

The Policy Forum has shifted my thought process on the work that I’ve done in the past as well as what I am currently working on and researching. It has completely shifted my entire way of approaching policy development. When it comes to policy development, especially within municipal government, there’s no handbook. The Policy Forum gives participants the tools to create effective change.

Deanna Belleny

Boston, MA



My passion and experiences lie in community health and health equity. When I first applied to be a Policy Fellow it was at the recommendation of a colleague. At the outset I was hesitant and intimidated. While being a part of the Forum sounded amazing, I kept asking myself: what value could I bring to the topic of economic mobility? This last year has shown me that not only does economic mobility intersect with health, it intersects with transportation, housing, racism, poverty, immigration, food, youth development, broadband access... and the list goes on.

There is so much value in having a space where interdisciplinary professionals can bring their different context and experiences to the table and collaborate towards improvements. It reaffirms that many of the problems we work on are hard but there is solidarity in finding solutions. In one of the first calls, a Policy Forum member discussed an innovation his city was working on. They were establishing a public private partnership with a rideshare company to increase access to food. Other attendees similarly shared their innovations in addressing transportation and food access. As the conversation continued, opportunities for this kind of partnership to address access to medical care and connectivity came up. Through these conversations and similar sharing throughout the Forum, I've been inspired by the intersectionality of all of our work.

In the middle of my time as a Policy Fellow I gained a new role at The Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care. I took on the job of managing the Global Primary Care and Social Change team at work. This global health role came with so many new experiences. I quickly learned about the global fight for universal health coverage and the complexities of health care delivery abroad. Unfortunately, once COVID-19 hit many of our global projects were halted. I was challenged to think about the global community that exists right in Boston, where I live, and ways that we can continue to

improve health care and strengthen health systems. I was extremely appreciative of Dr. Iyer's presentation on localizing the sustainable development goals to empower cities and communities in North America for sustainability. It provided myself and later my team a framework for thinking global but acting local. It helped me to develop strategies to engage with the diverse communities in shaping our team's goals and provided a feeling of a shared vision in working toward the global Sustainable Development Goals.

A final key moment that had an impact on me professionally was the idea to develop my own "beautiful question." This term was introduced by Policy Fellow Catherine Crago and was described as "an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something and that might serve as a catalyst to bring about change." She argued that instead of having a mission statement, organizations should have a beautiful question, and went on to describe the beautiful questions that have shaped her career. I haven't gotten to the point of knowing my beautiful question but, it is an inspiring concept to think on and one I have also considered with my non-profit, Diversify Dietetics. How does my beautiful question shape my own career and the way I am able to make an impact in the world? I find joy in searching for that answer.

My time in this Forum has allowed me to take both a surface level and deep dive into so many topics that I don't think I would have accessed independently. It has challenged the way I view challenges, intersectionality, race, class, innovation and policy. It will forever impact my work and I am grateful for the brilliance the other Fellows have shared and for the experience overall.

Robbyn Lewis

Baltimore, MD



I came into the Policy Fellowship program expecting to deliver information and discuss ideas. This image of creating webinars on topics I know and care about - that's what I pictured. What I didn't really envision was the richness that would flow from discussions and collaboration with the other Fellows and program staff. We organically created an ecosystem for a type of learning that is new to me: virtual but warm, rigorous yet grounded in empathy and a drive to really understand each others' perspectives. I discovered that the real value of the Policy Forum is in the ecosystem for learning that we all created together.

As a state legislator, making policy is my bread and butter. I have a background in public health, including service delivery and clinical research. During my tenure, I've worked on a range of matters outside my expertise, such as primary education and criminal justice. One of the things I really love about my job is that I'm constantly learning. No two days are the same, and I'm always pushing at the boundaries of what I already know, always trying to find new ways to solve problems for my constituents.

The thing is, making policy about issues outside one's expertise is daunting. It's kind of scary, actually, because your decisions have life-and-death impact, and fiscal impact, not to mention the risk of unintended consequences. Unlike biomedical clinical trials, you can't run a randomized, controlled, longitudinal study to test policy decisions. Sometimes you're just stumbling blind. Even if you're actually able to do "data driven decision making" you're still doing experiments in the real world, where conditions are unpredictable.

When I applied to the Fellowship, I was actually a little concerned about my lack of direct experience working in the "economic mobility" space. I think I made the case that my experience in public health and community development are important factors, but I was still a little insecure about what I could offer to any

highly technical conversation about economic mobility. As I got to know the other Fellows, I realized that none of us were economists, and that each brought a unique perspective. The diversity of perspectives was the point: that's where the learning happened for me.

There were a number of breakthrough moments for me - I'll just mention a couple. First, the discussion on food security on May 15th. One of the participants discussed efforts she'd taken in Arkansas, involving partnership between food distribution and census implementation. At that point, early during the COVID-19 shutdown, I was volunteering each week at a food distribution point, and at my next shift I asked the organizers about adding census materials to their food packets. It was a simple idea on its face, but one that had been overlooked, or not taken seriously. That has since changed.

Another lesson came from Policy Fellow Catherine Crago Blanton's presentation about the digital divide. She said something, almost in passing, about how her program made a point to center the perspectives of residents. I recall her referring to the importance of asking folks what they need and want - not because they are experts in fiber optic cable technology or engineering, but because the wisdom for problem solving rests with the folks who are most affected. We all know this, but we do not always practice it in our work. Well, that stuck with me - ask the affected folks what they think, what they want. Here's how that idea changed something for me:

A few months ago I learned that there is an encampment of people experiencing homelessness in the southern part of my Baltimore district. I had no idea about this until residents there started raising alarms to the police department. The encampment has about 300 folks, including families with small children. The folks there have actually organized a type of governing body, a kind of structure for things like decision making and conflict resolution. With an elected spokesperson who

talks to official entities. Amazing.

But the conflict between homeowners and residents of the encampment was reaching the boiling point, especially during the pandemic. Baltimore's housing department and police seemed to have given up. The property on which the encampment was located turned out to have confusing ownership (some said it was owned by the state Department of Transportation, others said by the state Department of General Services, and yet others claimed the city had jurisdiction – chaos). Homeowners were ready to set upon the encampment with pitchforks and torches. You get the picture. So of course my colleagues and I were asked to join a call and help figure out what to do. All solutions discussed involved measures like policing and enforcement – extreme measures that would criminalize the homeless, privilege white property owners over black and brown unhoused folks, some of whom had health and mental/behavioral issues, and utterly fail to address the root causes.

Because of what I'd learned in the webinar I mentioned, it occurred to me to ask: has anyone from any official body or neighborhood or stakeholder group actually talked to the folks in the encampment? What do they want? Does anyone know? The answer is that no one had bothered. Some people said that "homeless people don't want housing," while others mentioned the dangers of shelters during the COVID-19 crisis. Some really just threw up their hands. No one had anything productive to add.

Until I asked that question, we were turning in circles. Now, as a result of that question, I have become the person in charge of figuring it all out. I'm pulling together an inclusive task force right now – dubbed the "Task Force on Housing & Health for Brooklyn." We'll see what we can do. This Fellowship experience gave me the tools to ask different kinds of questions, in domains where I'm not an expert, like food security or housing, to help create different outcomes.