

Fellowship Reflection

Camille Desierto

Jeremy Nowak Fellow 2022-2024

As my fellowship at Reinvestment Fund comes to an end and I prepare for my next steps in my career journey, I can't help but look back at my time with so much gratitude. Up until the start of my fellowship, Criminal Justice was the only "world" I knew- and not to say that this was a bad thing, but you could imagine the anxiety I felt as I jumped into unknown territory. *CDFI? Reverse mortgages? Capital stack? [PFAMPOV_LT200p]? What the heck are you talking about?* To be frank, I felt like a fraud during the first few months of my fellowship. I constantly doubted my abilities to familiarize myself with topic areas or skills that others from a city planning or coding background have worked in for years. I stared blankly at queries in SQL, trying my best to make sense of this foreign language, but was ultimately met with glaring red text that read ERROR.

Policy Solutions has fostered an incredibly welcoming and supportive learning environment. I could not think of a better group of people to ask a million questions to and still be met with patience and grace. I especially commend the senior analysts for explaining to me the intricacies of SQL, ArcGIS, and Policy's products and analyses, in a way that is clear and digestible.

The team's constructive feedback was another instrumental piece in my professional development, offering insightful guidance that not only refined my skills but also instilled a sense of confidence (something I did not have much of at the beginning). If you told me that by the end of my fellowship I would have my name on a report with the National Consumer Law Center or create an interactive StoryMap that will be referenced to improve the quality of life in Central Appalachia, I would have laughed. The collaborative spirit and encouragement within the department not only made my fellowship enjoyable, but also created a space where my personal and professional growth intertwined.

One of the greatest lessons I've learned from Policy Solutions is the importance of humanizing data. Though most of our work is quantitative in nature, it is admirable to see how often project teams communicate with the client to validate what we're seeing in the data, and to ensure we are meeting their data needs so that they can better meet the needs of their target area/community. There is also a great deal of storytelling and data visualization in our reports and presentations, which I think adds even more value and utility to our work.

As I prepare for the next steps in my career, I can say that I am more confident in my abilities to make a difference in the world because of the Jeremy Nowak Fellowship. Like Jeremy, I want to amplify and uplift underserved communities with a data-driven mindset. Whether I continue to work within the community development space or find opportunities to work with immigrant and AAPI communities, my passion to address systemic racism and social inequities remains constant. I feel more empowered than ever to do this work, and I owe it to the team that has guided me and believed in me over the past two years.