

Fellowship Reflection

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Jeremy Nowak Fellow 2024-2026

Graduating college having spent the first twenty-two years of my life in Philadelphia, it is no understatement to say I was anxious to get out. I assumed I'd hit my ceiling for what more I could learn in this city. As it turns out, there was something else in store for me here. Now, almost two years later, I can recognize the Nowak Fellowship as the best decision I could have made to begin my career and lead me toward my next steps.

Truthfully, though, I began the position with uncertainty. As the hours passed on my first day at Reinvestment Fund, I worried that I was in over my head. I sat across from my new manager setting goals and thinking to myself, "Am I cut out to do this for the next two years?" Looking back, the answer was simple. I was about to step into a team that not only aims to support its partners and their communities, but is also made up of thoughtful people committed to seeing everyone thrive. My many questions were welcomed and encouraged. Each time I sat face-to-face with failed code or struggled to grasp an analytical process, my frustrations were always answered with patience and reassurance.

One of my most meaningful takeaways from this experience is the immense sense of worth I felt on this team. I can thank the wonderful analysts on Policy Solutions who continually reminded me of my value on the team, and in the work that we do. As I took on more assignments requiring skills that were entirely new to me, they helped me build a confidence I hadn't known in many other professional spaces. With new responsibilities, I began to truly feel like an integral part of the team.

The Nowak Fellowship gave me the opportunity to continue working in the housing space. My background, however, had been entirely qualitative before now. In my academic research, I aimed to learn directly from the people most impacted by inequitable housing and social policies. I struggled to understand how numbers could possibly replace what we hear from people with lived experience. But at RF, I discovered how the data and voices come together to build a complete picture.

Approaching this work, we never assume that we know more about a place by simply looking at the data than the people who live there. Whether examining housing stock or childcare gaps, I grasped how to engage local voices in data practices, ensuring our analysis represents lived realities on the ground. Some of my most fulfilling moments during the fellowship were those collaborating with stakeholders to make our results most representative of the communities we're working in.

This people-centered and data-driven approach motivated me to pursue a Master of Public Policy after my fellowship. In the past few months, I've submitted applications to programs across the country. While I may be leaving Philadelphia behind (for now), I will leave with lasting support from my team and a strong foundation for my future.