

Shaquille Fearon, 2021 EDI Fellow for Newark NJ



Project Overview and Role

This summer, I served as a fellow in the City of Newark's Office of Sustainability and aided with the creation and launch of the Climate Justice Ambassador Program (CJA). The vision of the Climate Justice Ambassador Program is to establish a new norm for City-led environmental planning initiatives, to confront systemic inequity in government planning, that being the alienation of black and brown youth from the process. The goal is to do this by centering the voices of Newark youth in a broader, citywide conversation about ensuring a just transition through Newark sustainability and climate commitments and programs.

As a coordinator of the CJA Program, one of my roles was to help design the six-week program geared towards high school youth. This included constructing a schedule that reflected what days of the week we would meet in-person, what would unfold on these days and what activities/tasks were more suited for a virtual day. Other aspects of the program design included the number of hours per week dedicated to content delivery of different environmental issues, the number of hours dedicated to professional development, and real-world experiences of content covered through trips. Facilitation was another key role that I served in that ensured that each day went as planned from a logistical perspective. I conducted outreach to different experts in their respective fields to present content to the ambassador and in the process, build crucial partner relationships. I also undertook the task of helping to create a manual/guide of how to run the CJA Program for the city of Newark or other cities. Therefore, the next group of fellows or interns to take the lead will ensure that youth of color can have their voices heard in government planning for years to come.

What did you learn from the project?

This project offered me a lot of insight into multiple aspects of working within government, complemented by the importance of youth engagement. Some core learning takeaways include:

- The power of one's network can be the difference between success and stagnation. Building a network as I progressed throughout my fellowship was key to the outcome.
- Youth-based programs constructed by the government offer a bridge between the community and the future wellbeing of that community. The youth are eager and excited to get involved in these opportunities with the government and such involvement can be pivotal in how younger people are represented within government.
- It is impossible to speak on climate issues without mentioning the effects that this has on local communities.
- There needs to be a bridge between environmental justice communities and their leaders to local government to better serve these communities.
- Having the topic of Climate Change incorporated into the high school curriculum, sets up generations of students to not only better understand the impacts of climate change but to be more equipped to address climate change as well.

- We need to normalize looking up to youths/younger generation as leaders and attribute to them the respect they are owed.
- Local governments may want to look into training/certification programs that align with green technologies such as solar installations etc.

What was the impact of your work?

Being that Newark's Office of Sustainability is in the process of updating the city's Sustainability Action Plan and the Master Plan, the youth ambassadors with who I was able to work played an integral role. As mentioned, the objective of the project is to give black and brown youth a voice in government planning. By opening up the eyes of the youth ambassadors to the extensive struggles of climate impacts on minority-majority communities, they can make their suggestions as to what the city of Newark should do to address different climate injustices. Youth ambassadors would share how they would educate their peers and parents based on content knowledge they acquired through the program. Many of the youth ambassadors entered the program with a very rudimentary knowledge of climate justice and environmental issues, but at the end of the program, each ambassador was an expert on some major climate justice issues. Community leaders, government workers, experts in different environmental fields, and residents demonstrated their support of the CJA program through various ways such as wanting the program implemented in their neighborhoods and schools, wanting their students to be involved, or even offering their services in any way that they can.

The impact made will be long-lasting on the city of Newark, and hopefully will spread to other cities as well. The longevity of the impact will be because of the Climate Justice Ambassadors who are dedicated to serving in Newark's Office of Sustainability, offering continued support through the transition of their roles. The ambassadors could potentially serve as the coordinators for the next group of ambassadors and so on, continuing to grow the CJA Program and tackling environmental justice concerns.

Any links to project deliverables?

- <https://www.newarkgreenteam.org/post/introducing-newark-climate-ambassadors>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5-tDqqYQcs>