

2019 USDN EDI Fellowship - Kuann K. Fawkes – City of Iowa City IA



Kuann Fawkes hails from the Island of Great Inagua, the southernmost island in The Bahamas. Throughout her life, Kuann has been a bit of a nomad. She's lived in Nassau (BHS), Madison (WI), Atlanta (GA), Moscow (ID), Cedar Rapids and Iowa City (IA). In May, she graduated with her B.A in Global Health Studies from the University of Iowa and in August, she will begin Iowa's Master of Public Health program.

Kuann is interested primarily in global rural health, and the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. She enjoys challenging systems of oppression such as slavery and structural adjustment, as well as confronting the nation's role in both. Her past experiences have been largely within the area of maternal and child health, but she hopes to expand her scope to prepare her for a variety of challenges in public health practice.

Early on in her academic career, Kuann recognized many gaps in how healthcare was being taught and practiced. Key concepts such as intersectionality and sustainability were among them. In order to fill some of those voids, Kuann completed a gender, women's, studies minor and a cultural competency certificate at Iowa. Through USDN, and the City of Iowa City, Kuann's goal is to advance her knowledge of how marginalized groups are disproportionately burdened by climate change. The equity, diversity and inclusion fellowship is an amalgamation of every area of Kuann's interests, and she is humbled by the opportunity to serve the people of Iowa City.

Greetings! My name is Kuann Fawkes and this summer, I worked with City of Iowa City for 12+ weeks. My official title was the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Fellow and I worked closely with the City's sustainability coordinator, Brenda Nations. Cities who were already interested and invested in sustainability projects proposed an opportunity for likeminded individuals to engage in the important work of climate activism. I was selected for this position as part of a greater cohort of summer EDI fellows across the country, all of whom were funded and supported by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) and their racial equity consultant, Desiree Williams-Rajee. Developing my project on Addressing Climate change, Health and Equity in Iowa City, was an incredible opportunity.

I am originally from the island of Great Inagua. It is one of the 700 islands and cays in The Commonwealth of the Bahamas. To paint a quick picture of my home: just imagine a place where there is only one of everything. One cellphone company, one grocery store, one clothing store, one schoolhouse, one bank and one clinic. Not much has changed since then.

Throughout my childhood, I decided that I would become a medical doctor so that we could have at least one permanent position on our island. At age 16, I arrived at the University of Iowa as the typical freshman majoring in biology and pre-med. Somewhere along the way, I had realized that studying medicine was not a long-term solution to our everlasting problem of low resources, food insecurity, and lack of basic infrastructure. I then turned to global public health, which I saw as a

preventative and sustainable step toward building strength and resiliency in my community. In May 2018, I graduated from the University of Iowa with my Bachelor of Arts in Global Health Studies and I am now pursuing my Master of Public Health in community and behavioral health.

When I found the posting for the fellowship, I questioned whether delving into something as unfamiliar as climate would be impactful for my career that was so heavily focused on maternal and child health outcomes, and health disparities. However, what I learned throughout this 12-week journey was that addressing climate change was embedded in addressing all those other issues that I was interested in. I learned that the people most affected by negative climate outcomes are often women, mothers, children and that the implications are not only clinical, but social, racial, and political.

My project at the City of Iowa City was focused primarily on answering one question: Who is most affected by climate change in Iowa City? The Answer: It is not only about who is affected, but about the distribution of resources across the city. It was about asking questions such as, what levels of access to safety, housing, electricity and transportation do those who are most at risk have? What role has the City played in mitigating or even causing some of that risk? Who is sitting at the table of climate conversation in Iowa City? And so many more questions arose.

We quickly realized that the question we were asking required efforts much deeper than creating focus groups or chatting with a few individuals in the community to understand what the City could do more of. We needed to engage in community based participatory research, which is a function of public health but a process that I was just beginning to learn about as I prepared for my first semester of my graduate program.

While I did not find a comprehensive answer to our original question; I learned why change making just isn't as simple as pushing a policy and expecting things to magically fall into place. There are several levels of planning, stages of testing theory, developing measurable goals, and consulting with the right people. There is learning the art of public speaking, project management, navigating institutions and places. There is understanding different perspectives, applying new models and frameworks, considering the ethical implications, taking mental breaks, adjusting and readjusting.

What I learned was how to work and be confident in my ability to produce great results. I learned how to be comfortable being the only person of color, and the youngest person sitting at a table across from folks who have been doing climate and challenging their theories. Finally, I learned how to embody my skillset and empower myself to acknowledge the limitations of my own projects and adjust accordingly.

Overall, I spent the past three months learning about the health effects of climate change and of hazardous weather events. Things were going as quickly as a project of this scale could go. Then the unthinkable happened: The category 5 hurricane Dorian slammed my home country and killed many of my friends and family. It had of course stalled my project because there was no way that I could go into work to focus on the effects of climate change in Iowa City, when my friends and family in the Bahamas had become its latest victims.

As of now, my project is still ongoing, and I haven't had the opportunity to truly reflect deeply on my experience. However, I am proud to have worked in this role as the EDI Fellow for the City of

Iowa City and to have been the beneficiary of embarking on a project that was much larger than myself.