

Sean Michael Volavong – City of Fayetteville, Arkansas

EDI Fellowship Blog Post

Hello everyone! My name is Sean Michael Volavong and between June and August 2018, I have collaborated with the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas' Sustainability and Resilience Department as an Equity and Sustainability Planning Fellow. I was selected for this position as part of a greater cohort of summer equity, diversity, and inclusion fellows across the country in the following cities: Austin, San Antonio, Eugene, Milwaukee, and Baltimore facilitated by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN). Through this position, fellows participate in a summer-long partnership with city departments who applied for the opportunity to host fellows who would work on a variety of relevant projects focused on topics such as equity, diversity, and social and environmental sustainability.

Before describing my project this summer, for those wanting a more holistic sense of myself, I am a first-generation, lower-income Asian-American who was born in Fort Smith, Arkansas and grew up in Van Buren, Arkansas. With my father immigrating from Laos and my mother being adopted from Vietnam during the Vietnam War period (both relocating to Fort Smith, Arkansas), my upbringing has been a mixture of southern hospitality, discovering the wonders of the Ozarks, and exploring my own racial and ethnic identity in a fairly-homogeneous yet very welcoming and warm community.

Moving forward, during my junior year at Van Buren High School, I was awarded a scholarship to attend Stanford University in California through Questbridge, a nonprofit organization that connects high-achieving, lower-opportunity high school students with colleges they and their families might not envision being able to afford without financial support. Although for some, the largest culture shock moving from Arkansas to California might be the endless sunshine, an expanded focus on technology, or differences in ethnic communities, the largest culture shock I witnessed as I have been living and studying in the San Francisco Bay Area is the sheer gravity of socioeconomic tensions and dilemmas the area has faced, is currently facing, and will face in the future. Whether it is a transportation issue (the Bay Area has over 27 different transportation agencies) or a housing affordability issue (the average 1-bedroom rent in San Francisco in 2017 was roughly \$3,300), my courses and community internships have allowed me to engage with populations facing inequities, hear their diverse stories, and expand my perspective on urban planning. As of now, I am majoring in Urban Studies which is a field in which I have grown a passion as it is critical to understanding how to mitigate growth and decline through multiple perspectives.

During this same period, my sister and brother-in-law moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas. Although most of my time in the past few years have been invested in Northern California, traveling back to Northwest Arkansas to visit my family every year has allowed me to witness the dramatic infrastructural and demographic changes occurring in Arkansas. Whether it's the expansion of downtown Bentonville, uptown Fayetteville, the Razorback Regional Greenway bike trails, or the growing community amenities, I have been amazed at Northwest Arkansas' growth and expected growth in the future. Specifically, the Northwest Arkansas Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers metropolitan statistical area (MSA) is expected to relatively grow faster than other notably fast-growing MSAs such as Dallas, Texas and Raleigh, North Carolina. Northwest Arkansas is distinct as it is the location of three Fortune-500 headquarters along with the nationally-recognized Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art along with a regionalist-growth mindset (rather than a center-city growth mindset) within its five main cities. These characteristics along with the southern hospitality charm has contributed to the area's high economic and demographic growth.

The question then is, are there equity challenges expected from this growth in Northwest Arkansas? Using the Bay Area as an example, I have seen how socioeconomic challenges can arise from high growth especially in areas such as East Palo Alto and South San Jose. During my third year of college, I was eager to spend a summer back in Arkansas not only to reconnect with family but to also contribute my academic experience back in my home community rather than elsewhere. After weeks of researching

pathways to return to the area, I was communicated the USDN equity, diversity, and inclusion fellow opportunity in Fayetteville, Arkansas through the Urban Studies Program at Stanford.

Fast forward to an acceptance for the fellowship and flight to XNA (Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport), I began the first weeks of my fellowship under the guidance of a steering committee including Peter Nierengarten, Director of Sustainability and Resilience at the City of Fayetteville along with Tenisha Gist and Erin Killeen of the Yvonne Richardson Community Center and the Sustainability Consortium respectively. Having representation from both the City of Fayetteville, its local community development leaders, and its sustainability specialists were essential to developing an equitable lens for my project. In summary, over the span of twelve weeks, I developed a Community Equity Profile for the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas which investigates different demographic, economic, educational, health, transportation, and housing data that influences the city. The main objective for this project was to provide the foundations for conversations regarding equity and diversity in Fayetteville, which has historically had limited data that has been analyzed for such purposes. Furthermore, the project was to communicate the state of the city during a high-growth stage along with the various equity dilemmas that the area is projected to face throughout the years. The main stakeholders involved were the Fayetteville City Council along with its mayor, Lioneld Jordan.

Throughout the span of my time in Fayetteville, I was able to analyze hundreds of rows of data, interview over 30 individuals to inform my assumptions and foster strong relationships with related stakeholders. One of the main challenges of my fellowship was the sheer independence I had while researching and analyzing my data. For example, I made the decision to focus on the six major equity points. The different datasets and sources I found were also my own choices. I had guidance and mentorship throughout the summer, but I ultimately paved the direction of the project, and I had to do so in an objective researcher perspective. Although I love Northwest Arkansas, I had to view my equity research without a subjective, biased perspective of an individual who has close ties to the area they are researching and living inside.

For those who might not know what equity is, I can give you one analogy comparing equity to equality. The first: Imagine you and your closest three friends are given three pairs of identical size-10 shoes to wear before a thunderstorm will approach. For some of you, the shoes might be too small, or it might be too large. For some of you, the shoes might fit perfectly. When all of you step outside during the thunderstorm, some of you might get water in your shoes and some of you might not get water in your shoes. This is an equality lens. On the converse, imagine that you were all given shoes, but each pair was tailored to your specific shoe size. None of you will get water in your shoes during the rainstorm following this decision, which is what an equity lens entails.

In an ideal scenario I would be able to spend much more time in the area researching and conducting different research projects with more focus on investigating and targeting specific inequities in areas such as accessibility or gender or sexual orientations in Fayetteville.

I can say that my project was a success! For example, I am glad that the baseline data that I compiled is able to contribute to existing city initiatives such as the City Plan 2040 that will assist the direction of housing and commercial developments in a land-constrained city and the upcoming Economic Workforce Development Plan that will leverage educational outreach to lower-income residents on how to improve their skill sets to compete in a 21st century environment.

As I wrap up my experience as an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion fellow, the major takeaway from my project is that data can only show one side of the story. Although the visuals I produced can contribute to a better understanding of the data I looked at this summer, I hope that future fellows who are conducting similar projects understand that to truly understand the scope and impact of the data they research, they must take an equitable approach and engage with their respective communities. By interviewing my community on the data points I analyzed, I was able to understand the nuances of certain red flags or concerns I had regarding, for example, education or housing statistics that I would have a bias for without consulting outside perspectives.

Throughout my summer, I have grown both as a community researcher and developer, but I have also grown my love for Fayetteville and Northwest Arkansas. Through living in the city and witnessing the changes happening throughout its streets first-hand, rather than through a distant lens in California, I can sympathize why Fayetteville and Northwest Arkansas is a hidden gem in the landscape of America. I am excited to see how this area can grow and become in upcoming years. I am even more excited to see what collaborative initiatives the city can develop as it begins and continues to prepare for the immense growth that is unparalleled in most places in America.