

Reflections on the Sillerman Fellowship

As an applicant to the Sillerman Fellowship in Winter of 2019, I was invited to reflect on the meaning of social justice philanthropy, including its implications for the policy world and its personal resonance. Writing then, I described social justice philanthropy as a dialogue-focused practice – a project that is responsive to and in conversation with its respective “publics,” and that elevates community actors as collaborators and co-creators of policy solutions. Little did I know, however, how the nature of that conversation would shift during times of COVID-19, limiting our channels for engagement to the virtual world, while also amplifying the demand for robust policy and philanthropic responses to economic need. Indeed, the pandemic has exposed longstanding social injustices – in housing, health, and so much more – and, as result, has pushed foundation leaders to rethink the role of philanthropy in addressing those inequities. My remote internship with the Boston Foundation (TBF), which is continuing in a part-time capacity this fall, has given me deep insight into that process.

The turmoil of this year did make our cohort’s internship experience less traditional than most, confining us to remote work and therefore feeling like less of a tangible entry into the professional world of public policy. Even so, my remote fellowship has continued to be rich and rewarding. Working alongside leadership in TBF’s Neighborhoods and Communities division, I provided general program support to the Neighborhoods team, while also helping to plan two larger events this fall: a Boston-based “Undesign the Redline” exhibit as well as a collaborative and community-centered Town Hall on racial equity (both virtual).

For the “Undesign” event – part of a touring exhibition series that spotlights local histories of exclusionary housing policy – I interviewed key thinkers and stakeholders in the Boston housing landscape, from think tank analysts to municipal leaders. The main purpose of

these interviews was to invite feedback on exhibit content and on ways to maximize public engagement via the virtual platform. The input I received was rich and set the course for curating an “Undesign” exhibit that would focus on exclusionary zoning in the Greater Boston area, which has been an underappreciated dimension of the city’s racialized housing history.

Planning for the Town Hall has been ongoing this fall, but already promises to make a forceful statement on ways to re-center racial equity in housing organizations in the Boston region and beyond – particularly in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and [so many more](#). Convening leaders from across the fair housing landscape, TBF has played an immense role in cementing feeling into action. The changing possibilities of social justice philanthropy have thus been a critical takeaway from my summer fellowship – where foundation leaders like TBF can help to steward in a diverse brand of coalition-building, uniting actors from all ranks of power around common policy goals. I am beyond thankful to the leadership at the Sillerman Center and TBF for giving me that opportunity and insight.