

URBAN FELLOWS NEWSLETTER



Guess the 2018-2019 NYC Urban Fellow

1) This Urban Fellow...

- ◆ Has been chased by a monkey twice in the last year.
- ◆ Is a member/leader of a women's craft/art/cooking group
- ◆ Spent two interesting weeks living with a French family when she was 16



2) This Urban Fellow...

- ◆ Had a goldfish who lived for 13 years (or so their parents said)
- ◆ Had their tonsils removed twice because they grew back the first time
- ◆ They grew up right by Wrigley Field and cried when the Cubs won the World Series in 2016



Answers to *Guess the Urban Fellow*
on back page of newsletter



Alumni Spotlight

Jason Labate, Urban Fellows Class of '05, is a Senior Associate at Goldstein Hall PLLC, a law firm and certified B Corp that focuses on affordable housing and community development. Jason concentrates his practice in real estate and community development, nonprofit formation and governance, and banking and finance. He also oversees Goldstein Hall's Hudson Valley office and provides legal expertise to faith-based organizations and the Joint Ownership Entity (JOE NYC) program. Prior to joining Goldstein Hall in 2012, Jason attended Brooklyn Law School, where he focused on economic empowerment and community development. He participated in Brooklyn Law School's Community Development Clinic and interned with various government, nonprofit, and private organizations including Staten Island Legal Services, Homeowner Defense Project, and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. He was a Sparer Public Interest Law Fellow from 2009 – 2012. Before obtaining his law degree, Jason worked in public service for seven years, including as the administrative director at a not-for-profit research center and as the director of program support and development at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). He was a New York City Urban Fellow from 2004-2005 and a Mayor's Graduate Scholar from 2006-2008.



**JASON
LABATE**



**EMMA ROSE
KANTOR**

Emma Rose Kantor, Urban Fellows Class of '18, is a Policy Advisor at the NYC Department of Small Business Services. In her role, Emma manages policy initiatives for the Division of Business Services (DBS), which serves nearly 20,000 New Yorkers each year through programs that help businesses start, operate, and grow. She crafts testimony, talking points, and presentations on SBS programs for external audiences and briefs agency leaders on the latest research, data, and news across a range of economic development issue areas. In addition, Emma supports operations across DBS's 54 programs and services, organizing the DBS budget review process and managing staff meetings and professional development for DBS's 60+ staff. Emma graduated from Harvard in 2017 with a B.A. in English.

What agency were you placed in as a fellow?

Jason Labate [JL]: I was placed at the The Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC)

Emma Rose Kantor[ERK]: I was placed at the Department of Small Business Services (SBS).

What is the most exciting aspect of your current job? What is the most challenging?

JL: Empowering community organizations is an amazing privilege and the most exciting part of my job. On any given day I may be leading a training on how an organization can maximize its space for mission and profit, negotiating real property transactions to develop affordable housing with new community spaces and sanctuaries, or fighting predatory developers who have taken advantage of community organizations. The most challenging part is getting the word out and building trust. By definition community organizations are of and for the community – they don't typically deal in real estate and they don't have many relationships outside of their community. Bringing knowledge, expertise, and trust into these communities and the organizations that serve them requires a lot of shoe leather.

ERK: I enjoy the variety—no two days are the same in my role. One day I'll be deep in the weeds of academic research for a project on minority entrepreneurship, and the next I'll be asked to reach out to 25 law firms to coordinate the launch of a new legal services program. The most challenging part is finding time for longer term projects. So much of my work revolves around urgent requests—from our Executive office, from City Hall, or from a business owner in need—but I'm working on making time for projects that are just as important but not as urgent.

Alumni Spotlight

Question & Answer

What was the most rewarding experience you had as a fellow? Most challenging?

JL: At TLC I was placed in the first deputy commissioner's office, which was charged with overseeing and supporting the rest of the Commission. I was able to use data to understand workflows, inequities among regulated industries, and inefficiencies in operation. It was extremely rewarding to use this information to empower divisions and staff to work more effectively and efficiently. I not only gave them the data and showed them how to use it, but also supported them in using it themselves. The most challenging experience was getting buy-in from the staff. Just like in my current work, there was frequently mistrust or skepticism of the "new guy."

ERK: Before the Urban Fellows Program, I had never done any data analysis and had only used Excel cursorily. Learning to work with data was a priority for me, so I took the opportunity to join projects where I could learn from data-minded staff and volunteered to take on assignments that were just a little outside my comfort zone. There were moments when I felt like I had bitten off more than I could chew, but by the end of the program, I was able to perform really sophisticated analysis that I couldn't have imagined when I started. Those hard analytics skills and, more importantly, that way of thinking quantitatively have continued to serve me well in

What are the benefits of working in city government?

JL: Having the responsibility of serving the needs of the entire city (even in a small way) is an amazing privilege and a daunting task. I was constantly amazed by the new and long-standing public servants that were committed to serving the residents of NYC. So the people were the best benefit of city government—the ones I served and the ones I got to work with and meet.

ERK: I love the feeling that my everyday work is contributing to something larger. I grew up in New York, and I was the beneficiary of the city's parks and public schools and so many other invisible services that I didn't even notice. It's incredibly rewarding to feel like I'm giving back to this city that gave so much to me.

How has your Urban Fellows experience shaped the career you have today?

JL: I have such an appreciation for the complexity and interrelation of policy problems. My favorite example was the push-and-pull between DOT and Sanitation regarding salting the roads. Sanitation wanted to lay down a foot of salt on the roads whenever it snowed because it kept the streets clean and safe and made their job easier. DOT wanted salt used sparingly because more salt leads to more pot holes. DOHMH had a similar tension with sanitation over rats and containerized garbage.

ERK: I came to the Urban Fellows Program without any sense of the type of policy I wanted to work on, but I knew I wanted to use the fellowship to try something new. I got incredibly lucky to be placed at the Department of Small Business Services, where I discovered a love for economic development policy. I've since stayed on as a Policy Advisor here, and I hope to keep working in this field for many jobs to come.

If you could give one piece of advice to the current cohort what would it be?

JL: I have two pieces of advice. Say yes and fear nothing. You'll have so many opportunities now and in your career, take as many as you can. And, there is no wrong way (or even right way) to do anything. You made it into a super competitive fellowship by doing whatever you did before now...and you said yes. Hopefully, on the whole, it has led to some pretty awesome things. Keep doing it.

ERK: Keep a list of the projects you work on. It's easy to forget all of things you do, especially months or years later, so it's been handy for me to keep a running list that I can turn to when I have to write cover letters or prepare for interviews.

Agency Spotlight

Office of Citywide Health Insurance Access

By: Haley Dougherty

In an effort to streamline services, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) consolidated under the Department of Social Services (DSS) in 2016. Under DSS Commissioner Steven Banks, DSS-HRA-DHS integration efforts remain ongoing through the development of referral resources for staff working with clients, information sharing, and cross-unit connection events for staff.

The two administrations work collaboratively on the singular mission of fighting poverty. While HRA focuses on providing people with an array of essential benefits, including cash assistance and SNAP, DHS focuses on preventing homelessness, reducing street homelessness, and helping people transition from shelters to permanent housing.

My placement is within the Office of Citywide Health Insurance Access (OCHIA), which operates under the DSS Office of External Affairs. The Office of External Affairs works on behalf of the entire agency, and its portfolio includes constituent services, advocacy and outreach, communications and marketing, intergovernmental and legislative affairs, and the IDNYC program.

OCHIA's overarching mission is "to expand access to health insurance coverage for NYC residents and small businesses." To do this, OCHIA works with a network of public and private sector partners in performing its major functions, which include

- 1) Providing outreach, education and enrollment assistance, and training on available public and private health insurance options;
- 2) Updating our website to provide information and resources for health insurance assistors who connect New Yorkers to coverage in the places that they live, work and play;
- 3) Helping people over 65 years old, those who live with a disability, and those who are visually impaired learn about and enroll in Medicaid programs; and
- 4) Staying abreast of policy developments and research about health insurance and health insurance access so that New Yorkers have the information they need to make the best healthcare and coverage choices and decisions.

OCHIA offers free workshops about health insurance and health care options via presentations and trainings for community-based and faith-based organizations, as well as for schools, colleges, local associations, and businesses. OCHIA also works with its partners to provide targeted help to those most at-risk for being uninsured: immigrants (including undocumented residents) low-wage workers, freelancers, young adults, and small business owners.

As the Urban Fellow in OCHIA, my primary responsibilities fall under the purview of the fourth function listed above. I analyze proposed federal regulations and state bills relating to health care, track developments in the courts, and follow political debates relating to health coverage. In addition to preparing issue briefs for OCHIA, I also contribute to policy update presentations to partner organizations.

2019 HOPE Count Reflections

Belen Flores, 2018-19 Urban Fellow at the Administration for Children's Services, shares her experiences volunteering at the 2019 HOPE Count.



BELEN FLORES

I lived in “temporary housing” for years, couch surfing with my mom and sister in several cities across two states, staying with family members and friends. Volunteering for the HOPE Count was therefore an immeasurable privilege because I have personally experienced homelessness with shelter. On the night of the HOPE Count, I met with the other Urban Fellows at 40 Broad Street, the “End of Line” training site, where we ate donuts, drank coffee and juice, and mingled with the other volunteers. After the training, we traveled to the New Lots Avenue Station – the last stop on the 4 train in Brooklyn – around midnight. We paired off into groups of two and dispersed along the platform, clipboards and pens in hand, survey explanation memorized. My partner was Urban Fellow Swetha Saseedhar. Swetha and I alternated between asking each passenger who

remained on the train scripted survey questions designed to assess their housing situation and documenting their responses. Early in the night, we were met with confusion: many passengers declared, “I’m not homeless.” In response, we would explain the purpose of the survey and the methodology being used – talk to everyone you encounter, since “homelessness” does not have a fixed look. As the night progressed, we met increasingly more people experiencing homelessness without shelter, the acutely marginalized subpopulation that the HOPE Count survey was aiming to tally. Swetha and I settled into a rhythm of explaining the survey and ticking off the multiple-choice responses. As we waited for each train, we discussed our encounters with the other fellows inside the heated MTA employee breakroom at the center of the platform.

Swetha and I had just finished administering another survey when I was asked to serve as a translator for a train passenger who only spoke Spanish. As I approached, I saw a frail, elderly woman who could have easily been my *abuelita*. Our group leader, an experienced HOPE Count organizer, joined me. After I asked her the survey questions, the passenger recounted horrific stories of the violence she experienced in shelters and challenged the organizer’s guarantee that the drop-in center we were offering her transport to would be safe. She pleaded for an unshared shelter to prevent being raped or robbed. I stood there, stiffly translating her stories and questions. I knew I couldn’t retroactively change the experiences she was sharing, but I felt compelled to change her experience that night. The conundrum, however, was that the solution I was taught at the training: offer those seeking shelter the option to be transported by NYPD officers to a nearby drop-in site, only seemed to trigger the woman; shelters were the site of her traumatic experiences. After minutes translating the group leader’s reassurance of the shelter’s safety, the woman appeared on the cusp of acquiescing, but once I translated that NYPD would transport her, she quickly changed her mind. After a few more minutes of what regrettably felt like invalidating her experiences with NYPD by reassuring her she would be safely transported, she no longer wanted shelter. The organizer left her card with the woman and had me tell her that if she changed her mind, she should locate a phone and call her. The group leader got off the train and cried.

I would unflinchingly volunteer for the HOPE Count again. However, this volunteer experience was conflicting: heartwarming, because I could in a small way help those living on the streets find shelter for the night, and heart-wrenching, because of the powerlessness I felt in not being able to provide long-term help while knowing that many of the marginalized people we encountered will still face countless barriers after the night of the count. This volunteer experience also gave me a window into what it looks like to identify and execute a solution to the need for an accurate count of people experiencing homelessness without shelter. This solution requires collaboration among many government agencies, including the NYPD. I found the interplay between NYPD, the volunteers, and the people we were counting to be a learning moment. One of my take-aways was that while everybody involved shared a goal, situational factors and preexisting beliefs uniquely affected each party’s approach to that goal. I’m interested in learning more about the HOPE Count, how the voices of people experiencing homelessness are being centered in decision-making, and the ways in which the HOPE Count enhances lives, informs policy, and challenges entrenched beliefs about homelessness.

2019 NYC Urban Fellows



Answer Key:

Guess the Urban Fellow

1)

2)

Aarati Cobly Rachel Aaronson



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