

The Importance of “Bad Stats”

Catholic Charities: Government Relations Department

By: Maddie Drescher, Social Justice Intern '19-'20

Social Justice Internship

The Social Justice Internship program is a program run out of the Center for Experiential Learning at Loyola University Chicago. It provides an experiential learning opportunity in our neighboring communities at sites including Catholic Charities, Misericordia, GirlForward, and ONE Northside Police Accountability. 13 students spend 250-275 hours with engaging with their respective internship experience, meeting regularly with their internship cohort throughout each academic semester to develop community, reflect with one another, and learn about community development and social justice.



Government Relations Department

“The Office of Government Relations furthers the mission of the agency by working collaboratively with stakeholders to improve the lives of those we serve through advocacy and program sustainability. The primary functions of the Office of Government Relations are:

1. To develop and maintain positive relationships with policy makers, community leaders, social service providers, and advocacy groups;
2. To cultivate and maintain relationships with elected officials in order to develop trust and enhance communications;
3. To identify issues and their potential impact on the agency and its clients that can be modified through the legislative process;
4. To develop and communicate a consistent, focused message to policymakers on agency positions and legislative priorities at the local, state and federal level;
5. To present resource assistance on legislative topics, track key legislation and provide strategic assistance and grassroots training; to collaborate with program managers in developing applications for government funding; and
6. To work with elected officials on community projects of interest to their constituents and to share with them information about agency programs in their district.”



The Government Relations Department of Catholic Charities raises about 77% of the funds that Catholic Charities uses. Governmental funding is the main source of income for Catholic Charities and its numerous programs. This speaks to the importance of the Government Relations Department and their direct and indirect impact on our communities. These raised funds are used to not only support returning programs, but also to start a variety of new programs.

Learning Objectives Explored

At the beginning of each academic semester of the internship, interns created learning objectives, following the Center for Experiential Learning’s framework:

- As a result of this internship, I will have an increased knowledge of the community areas of Chicago (demographics, resources) through my research for grants (civic/justice-orientation)
 - In an exploration of a variety of data driven sites, interactive online maps, and conversations with my colleagues, I achieved this learning objective. While this knowledge is something that I will always strive to develop further, I do feel much more informed on Chicago’s community areas.
- At the end of this academic semester, I will understand the skills needed to write a narrative for a grant (Professional Development).
 - I achieved this learning objective primarily through directly working with my colleagues who provided me with a number of successfully funded grant narratives and resources to study, prompted me to write sample narratives, and guided me through the process of writing the narratives for several grant applications that our department submitted.
- At the end of this academic semester, I will be able to identify and apply advocacy strategies (Professional Development).
 - I certainly believe that I accomplished this objective, but recognize such strategies are infinite and unique to one’s respective audience. I learned a bit about strategies ranging from phone calls to government officials, advocacy days and visits, and their approach of non-partisan advocacy, finding that the greatest progress made for our clients happens when partnerships are made across the aisle.

Personal Projects

After Supper Visions Grant Narrative

I took the lead on writing and preparing a grant application for one of Catholic Charities’ programs, After Supper Visions. Following Tuesday Night Suppers at the LaSalle Catholic Charities location, some guests choose to remain for the After Supper Visions program.

This program provides photography classes and guidance to participants. Participants also receive a 24-exposure disposable camera – their choice of either black/white or color.

There are few rules to the program, as participants are encouraged to keep their cameras by their sides and take a photo any time they are struck by an interesting or beautiful site. They are instructed not to take photos of family, friends, and artwork.

The participants eventually turn in their cameras, their photos are developed, and their best 3-4 photos are displayed at an exhibition held later in the year.



After Supper Visions, 2019 Exhibit

It was a pleasure being able to assist and take lead on a grant application for a program that took place a few floors away from where my workspace was. I often would pass by Tuesday Night Supper attendees as I’d leave for the day. It was unique to my other projects to have the opportunity to see and interact with the individuals who would be on the receiving end of the funds we would apply for.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Brief

One major project that I worked on during the spring was gathering information on the proposed changes and restrictions to SNAP from the Department of Agriculture in regards to how they would affect our clientele. Through a three wave proposal, the Department of Agriculture put forth a plan that is expected to eventually pull 2.7 million people off of Food Stamps.

The changes heavily rely on the Federal Unemployment Rate, limiting states’ abilities to grant time extensions to the restrictions that exist for SNAP resources, primarily to able-bodied adults without dependents. The reliance on the federal unemployment rate ignores how vastly unemployment rates differ, not only, state to state, but community to community. The federal unemployment rate



provides a blanket that leaves our most vulnerable communities out of site. SNAP benefits are often reliant on someone’s status as an able-bodied adult without dependents. This label dangerously ignores invisible illnesses, mental illnesses, and the fact that to be “without dependents” as it’s determined by the government, does not necessarily mean that you are not depended on by loved ones. For example, a father without custody of his children does not necessarily alleviate him of many of the responsibilities of support for his children.

Quite frankly, these changes were rooted in the ignorance of an attempt to save money now, by not spending as much on SNAP, but ignore the long-term costs that are likely to follow suit when you remove funding to SNAP. Reducing funding to SNAP also is expected to increase the costs of Medicare and Medicaid as SNAP has been proven to reduce hospital visits, so realistically, not much money is truly being saved.

Reflection: The Importance of “Bad Stats”

After taking a look back at my year as the Government Relations Intern at Catholic Charities, I came to a number of realizations. I learned a lot in this role, things that not only pertain to grant writing and governmental relations, but in how to give feedback, how to critically look at an experience, how to move forward in a role with a positive attitude and with the best intentions when, early on, I recognized that it was not something that I felt to be a perfect fit for me.

I, admittedly, struggled not to compare myself to my fellow interns throughout the year, as we would exchange stories of our experiences. So many of my colleagues worked directly with their respective clientele, they saw and befriended the individuals that they were working to advocate for. I spent nearly all of my days in an office, behind a computer screen researching “bad stats” for grant narratives. It was rare that I would interact with people outside of my department, unless it was a coincidental crossing of paths in the hallway or with the folks I shared my office space with. It became increasingly difficult to understand the importance of my work when I would virtually never actually see the programs we wrote grants for put into place, I could only read of previous successful programs online.

I began to internally battle with myself over whether or not I was truly helping these community programs that we would try to obtain grants for, especially because so much of the focus of grant narratives are on “bad stats” of each respective community. A powerful, persuasive grant narrative likely includes statistics that highlight how impoverish and disadvantaged communities are. It felt incredibly counterintuitive to devote so much time and effort toward researching information that would paint these communities out to be undesirable, while also highlighting the importance of the programs we were trying to gain funding for. It felt cheap, doing all this from the comfort of an office setting, never stepping foot into these communities I was expected to illustrate.

Even further, I struggled with this insecurity of the importance of my role in the larger picture, as it felt selfish to worry about my own fulfillment in this position, when much of what I was having a hard time with was not seeing the “fruits of my own labor.” I could not see the end result and had a hard time trusting my work without the validation of a successful end.

It has been a long and ongoing journey to understanding that not all advocacy *can* take place on the ground level, working alongside the folks you hope to help. It really clicked when we reached the discussion of Community Development with my internship cohort. Every one of us has a role in social justice advocacy. Every one of us is important in this fight to better our world. Not all of us are meant to be on the frontlines of that fight; we need people on all fronts, in all corners, and behind every curtain.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend a special thank you to the following parties:

- My supervisors, Stephanie Johnson (Director of the Office of Government Relations) and Anne Grelecki Anderson (Director of Government Grants and Advocacy)
- My colleagues, Laura Mizicko and Sarah Ogle, for their support and guidance as I learned to craft grant narratives.
- Andrew Miller, Loyola’s Center for Experiential Learning Community Partnerships Coordinator
- My fellow 2019-2020 Social Justice Interns for the infinite knowledge and insight I was privileged to learn from discussions with you all.