Catholic Charities
Government Relations Dept:
A Beacon of Hope in the Mission to Confronting the Community Disinvestment Crisis

Grace Ruane
Hey there! I'm Gracie Ruane.

Social Justice Intern

As a part of Loyola's Social Justice Internship program, students are offered the opportunity to engage in an experiential learning program involving local agencies like Catholic Charities, Misericordia, GirlForward, and ONE Northside Police Accountability. As a part of this program, students are expected to spend a minimum of 250–275 hours working with their respective agencies. Each organization falls in line with the social justice initiative, working towards the common goal of fostering a more equitable world.
"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."

= Catholic Charities Government Relations Department
PRIMARY FUNCTIONS OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS INCLUDE:

1. To develop and maintain positive relationships with policymakers, 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.
As the issue of systemic racism remains a prevalent societal conversation, conversations surrounding crises of community disinvestment and how systemic racism often manifests through disinvestment have become a part of this larger conversation. During my time with Catholic Charities, I gained some amazing insight into the role Catholic Charities' Government Relations department plays in combating disinvestment by implementing government-funded programs designed to confront certain issues in various communities.
WHAT IS A LEARNING OBJECTIVE?

A learning objective is a statement made by the participant in the internship program concerning not only what they hope to achieve by the end of their internship, but also what they hope to have learned by the end of their internship.

Let's take a look at mine!
LEARNING OBJECTIVE (1) – PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, KNOWLEDGE

As a result of participating in this academic internship, I will develop a deeper understanding of prevalent social justice issues which will cultivate my knowledge on these issues to strengthen my role as an ally.

I believe wholeheartedly that I did successfully meet this learning objective, as cultivating dialogue wound up being one of the central elements of this internship program. Additionally, I do feel like I strengthened my role as an ally by learning about specific elements of allyship but also how to progress one's allyship journey.
LEARNING OBJECTIVE (2) - PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, SKILLS

As a result of participating in this academic internship, I will be able to demonstrate my stance on prevalent social justice issues in such a way that cultivates an environment where articulating my opinions in a sophisticated manner without offending anyone with opposing stances is not only possible but inevitable.

I haven't quite had the chance to develop this learning objective throughout my internship, as most of my coworkers and I felt the same way about prevalent social justice issues so most of our conversations were pretty one-sided. However, I do think this internship developed my ability to have polished, productive conversations about such issues while maintaining a necessary amount of professionalism.
LEARNING OBJECTIVE (3) - PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, ATTITUDE

As a result of participating in this academic internship, I will develop a sense of professionalism where it will be less difficult for me to engage with organizations and corporations that differ greatly from me in terms of ideology. In addition, this new sense of professionalism will also help me listen to understand these corporations that differ from me ideologically, rather than listening to respond.

Admittedly, when I heard that I was interning with an organization that had Catholic in the name, I was a little skeptical about how my political ideologies (specifically with regard to social justice issues) would align with the ideologies of the organization. I got caught up in the stereotype of the Catholic church that presents all Catholic organizations as close-minded, however, I learned that Catholic Charities is pretty progressive. While I was obviously prepared to do bipartisan work, either way, I learned two valuable lessons: (1) don't assume an organization's political leanings before getting to know the organization, and (2) don't focus on the political ideologies of the organization, focus on the work they do.
Personal Projects

Given that COVID has taken a significant toll on internship opportunities, I have been very fortunate to gain a lot of writing experience with Catholic Charities.

- In addition to answering specific questions for real grant applications, I also was assigned many "model narratives" that served as mock grants for me to practice my grant writing skills. By doing this, I learned how to use persuasive language more effectively while also gaining valuable exposure to the world of grant writing.
- In addition to gaining exposure to the grant writing process, I worked on formulating template language in response to questions about Catholic Charities' Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives while also engaging in conversation with my coworkers about what the organization could do better to further DEI initiatives.
- At the end of the semester, I compiled a guide of everything I've learned as a Government Relations intern with Catholic Charities complete with advice for grant writing and navigating resources.
Why is this Important?

It is incredibly important that when we think about the issue of disinvestment within communities, we consider why these issues exist. While I always knew that systemic racism played a big role in the reason why communities largely populated by communities of color, I never knew the specifics – until I began working with Catholic Charities. By working on grants that dealt with very prevalent issues (youth violence, homelessness, etc.), I began to understand how social justice issues are incredibly intersectional, meaning discriminatory issues often overlap, sometimes creating more issues of inequity.
Example of this Intersectionality

One of my mock grant proposals dealt with youth violence in the Roseland community. When conducting my research, I came across a survey that 59% of elementary school students had friends in gangs and 47% of these students wanted to avoid gang involvement but did not know where to turn. This information played a large role in my reaction to the murder of Adam Toledo, who was shot by Chicago Police in Little Village, a largely Latino community on the West Side of Chicago. While many people claimed that because Adam was carrying a gun, he was a criminal.

When hearing this claim, I think of that 47% who felt they had nowhere else to turn.
Brief Reflection

By delving deeper into the historical and societal implications of these systemic issues, I have become quite frustrated with the way our systems function. When people are killed by police, people often come to the defense of the officer by arguing some sort of criminal history. However, one must consider where the history of criminality comes from as well as what context it comes in.

Especially with eviction crises on the rise due to the pandemic, people are in desperate need of financial help. However, when they do not get the help they need, they figure out other ways to survive. Sometimes, this includes committing low-risk crimes like stealing bread from a grocery store. On the surface, it is criminal. However, it was not done with malice; only the intention to survive. When looking at it that way, that's where the waters become muddied for me.
Acknowledgements

I want to extend a special thank you to the following people:

My lovely Catholic Charities team: Stephanie Johnson (Director), Laura Mizicko (Grant Writer), and Sarah Ogle (Government Grants Director)
Andrew Miller (Community Partnerships Coordinator)
My fellow 2020–2021 interns