



Yale College
Center for International & Professional Experience

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Class of 1960 John Heinz Government Service Fellowship
USA

Descriptive title

I look back upon this summer with immense gratitude. At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, I was given work more intensive and exciting than I could have asked for, from overseeing a \$14.5-million-dollar affordable housing renovation in my hometown (Holyoke, MA) to discovering what appears to be a \$22-million-dollar abuse of federal funding by an obscure nonprofit. Not only have these opportunities directly contributed to my EP&E major's Urban Policy concentration and to my likely senior thesis topic, it has led to a part time paid job offer from the Director of Administration of HUD. In a few weeks, I will bring what I learned this summer to a graduate course in urban planning. All of this is possible because of the incredible generosity of the Class of 1960 and the Class of 1986.

I came into the internship having already taken five courses relating to urban policy, and I was confident that it would be my primary academic interest moving forward. However, I felt that my courses at Yale had emphasized the more abstract questions without having a corresponding grounding in the empirical. For instance, discussions about displacement and gentrification concentrated primarily upon moral questions about ownership and relative "rights to the city." These questions are extremely important, and we would be lost without exploring them, but I increasingly felt that they lacked some urgency if they did not come with a deep understanding of affordable housing and the urban economy. So as I considered my summer options, I hoped to work somewhere that would fill in the relative gaps in my understanding of urban poverty and its alleviation. I hoped to explore moral questions both informed by and raised by getting deep into the clockwork of the federal government. Further, as someone who prides myself in being open to any policy, from steadfastly conservative to solidly liberal, that promises to genuinely lift families out of poverty, I sought to understand the pilot programs under development at HUD on both a moral and empirical level. For these reasons, I chose an office not on the illustrious tenth floor of the brutalist HUD building, but instead one managing a three-year-old program hotly debated within urban poverty circles and growing rapidly, albeit with a congressional sword of Damocles hanging above it. In my occasional slow days, I would head over to the other controversial pilot programs and speak for an hour or more with their architects and managers, raising objections and exploring the moral foundations of the programs. These discussions continue to inform my priorities as a student of urban policy, and give me confidence that the political debates that have defined my time at Yale will not cease when I continue my career. In all likelihood, I will work at HUD for a long time, whether directly out of college, before graduate school, or after other work elsewhere.

The most exhilarating part of my work at HUD, though, was the opportunity I had to do meaningful work on a program that I believe will make the lives of the urban poor better. Without getting too deep into the intricacies of the program, Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) provides funding for debilitated public housing projects to be renovated by restructuring the ownership and taking out private debt. The project is converted into Section 8 affordable housing, meaning that the funding for the site is more reliable and often more generous. This change enables the public housing authority to take out a mortgage and pay for serious rehabilitation rather than slowly saving up over many years for renovation while the building deteriorates. This sounds dry, but it has already generated \$2.4 billion dollars of rehabilitation for affordable housing, improving

the homes of around 35,000 families. That's a small city of families whose rusty pipes, leaky roofs, and graffiti-laden halls could be improved thanks to this program. It raises meaningful questions about privatization, as the housing projects do technically fall out of public ownership, but at the same time it makes families better off in the short, medium, and long run.

At its core, the Heinz Fellowship seeks to inspire the same love of civil service that John Heinz exemplified. It supports the optimistic notion that the next generation of Yale students will dedicate their lives towards the service of others and that government service is a means to that fine end. That mission is one I deeply respect, and I hope to use what incredible opportunities I have been given towards public service. It meant a great deal to me that I was able to assist a \$14.5-million-dollar rehabilitation of the Lyman Terrace project in my hometown of Holyoke, MA. The town has some of the deepest poverty in all of Massachusetts as well as the highest teenage pregnancy and dropout rates. While the quality of housing here is only one driver of poverty, it is a serious problem. That I was able to, in my own small way, help affordable housing in my hometown was immensely meaningful. I want to do more like that. There's a feeling that you get when you drive past the buildings you helped renovate in your home town, when you remember driving past those same homes four years earlier and thinking about the despair one must feel in such a broken community. It's exhilarating, and you want to do it again. I would very much like to dedicate myself to service, and I thank the Heinz Fellowship for helping to inspire that passion. I had done public service before, but never on this scale, where I was helping eighty-eight families not five miles from my childhood home build a stronger, safer community. I owe a great deal to every person who facilitated this internship, and to the board and donors of this fellowship I give my heartfelt thanks.

I would like to close with a short passage from your announcement of the awards: "All of the students expressed a passion about aiding some aspect of the human condition. None seemed to be motivated by a desire just to burnish their resumes." I must have read that paragraph a dozen times. That clarity of mission, aiding the human condition, provided inspiration on the slow days in the office. Bureaucratic government work may feel aimless at times, filling out labyrinthine paperwork in a humid cubicle, but at its core my goal, and my office's goal, was to provide families with decent housing within which decent lives could be led. Thank you for that inspiration, and for the support your fellowship provided me.

All the best,
Brendan Hellweg
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