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Reflections on the Cal Turner Program:

Establishing a Housing Trust Fund in Nashville

Before I came to graduate school at Vanderbilt, I worked with a homeless outreach program in Nashville. I spent most of my days in homeless encampments, ER waiting areas, psychiatric hospitals, cheap hotels, and jails. After all, these are the places people go when the shelters are overcrowded and they cannot access affordable housing. I began to understand that people on our streets not only need basic services like mental and physical healthcare, food stamps, and adequate clothing and shelter, but they also need accessible and affordable housing. Furthermore, many studies have shown that giving the homeless housing is actually cheaper than keeping them on the streets because of the cost of shelters, jails, and emergency services. For the last three years, I have advocated for the funding and development of low-income housing, and I viewed my graduate school experience as something that could help me become a better advocate. Little did I know that I would have the opportunity to work on the creation of a housing trust fund in Nashville through my fellowship with the Cal Turner Program (CTP).

During the CTP’s Leadership Retreat in August, I remember thinking how incredible it was to have so many interesting, diverse, and engaged students together at the same place. Because I’m enrolled in the Divinity School, I rarely get to engage students from other disciplines and I forget what amazing work is being done in other programs and schools at Vanderbilt. As a part of our fellowship, we learned that we would get to work on a project with a
small group of students during the fall and spring semesters. When the projects were introduced, all of which dealt with issues of poverty and violence, I had a difficult time choosing which project I wanted to do because they all sounded remarkable. As the last project was announced, however, I knew it was the project for me because it focused on low-income housing in Nashville. I signed up and met the other students I would be working with. Together, we represented the Divinity School (me), Peabody College (Katie), the Law School (Geraldine), and the Owen School of Management (Israel). We all had different gifts and expertise which was perfect for our project.

After the retreat, we met with Dr. Smrekar from Peabody as well as community leaders like Reverend Bill Barnes to discuss our project. Reverend Barnes had previously written a proposal for establishing a housing trust fund that would create a dedicated source of funding for the development of low-income and affordable housing in Nashville. The proposal was several years old and needed to be “dusted off” and re-energized. Furthermore, it needed the input from other cities that have successful housing trust funds. We began researching and interviewing community leaders and housing experts and identified Charlotte and Indianapolis as cities that are similar to Nashville and also have well-established housing trust funds. We decided that Geraldine and Katie would visit Indianapolis and Israel and I would visit Charlotte. We began calling city leaders and experts in those cities to set up interviews and during the month of March, we took our trips. Both trips were meaningful and enriching experiences in which we gained a deeper understanding of the politics and procedures of establishing a housing trust fund. Through our interviews and networking, we also gained valuable resources and made excellent connections that will hopefully benefit Nashville in the future.
While I feel that our group made a great deal of progress on this project, we hope that another group of fellows will continue to work on this project in the fall. The next group would build on the work we’ve done and facilitate a meeting with city leaders, city officials, and housing providers about the proposal for a housing trust fund in Nashville. Ideally, this could create enough energy and discussion around the issue to encourage the funding of the housing trust fund in the Mayor’s budget address in the spring of 2012.

Through projects like this, it is clear that the CTP is positively impacting the broader Nashville community. The opportunity to work with city leaders and other Cal Turner Fellows on an issue I’m passionate about has been an incredibly formative experience for me. I’ve also enjoyed the leadership workshops, lunches, and dinners because they provide a forum to share my experiences while also learning about the experiences and projects of other fellows. I’m so thankful for the chance to be a part of the CTP and hope to continue working with future fellows on innovative and sustainable responses to issues of poverty and violence.