At the August Cal Turner Program fellows’ retreat, when the various projects were presented to us, I was immediately drawn to the “Edgehill affordable housing” project. I do not have any housing expertise but, as a former sociology major, I am interested in the concept of residential segregation and the effects of housing on a person’s social status and access to resources. Because Dr. Claire Smrekar, the faculty advisor for the project, was unable to attend the retreat, I joined the project knowing little about it but I was nonetheless excited to work with my group—Katie Knies, Israel Ovalle, and Lindsey Krinks—and learn more about the project.

In less than one year, I not only learned a great deal about housing in Nashville and housing trust funds but also worked with my group to shape and expand our project into something with significant and exciting potential—something I did not foresee in August. Furthermore, I have really enjoyed getting to know the other fellows in my group better. The four of us come from different academic and life backgrounds but worked (and traveled) very well together. As I wrap up my year as a fellow, I am grateful for the new friendships I have formed, the new knowledge I have about housing trust funds, and the new connection I have to Nashville and its community of housing advocates.

A. The Expansion of Our Project

Although Lindsey and I were unable to attend the meeting, Katie and Israel first met with Dr. Smrekar, Reverend Bill Barnes, a local community leader, and Mike Hodges of the Neighborhoods Resource Center in Nashville. From there, our project came to life. Reverend Barnes presented our group with an old proposal for a housing trust fund in Nashville. The proposal had been unsuccessful but the idea was exciting. A housing trust fund is a dedicated source of funding for housing-related projects. I would later learn that a housing trust fund is
special because it is completely local—local funding going toward local projects that are not weighed down by outside and federal restrictions. Thus, it opens the door to “out of the box” projects. Our three advisors presented us with the task of researching the question of how to establish a housing trust fund in Nashville and suggested that we make site visits to other cities.

Based on the task before us, my group formulated a proposal of our own and four primary research questions:

1. What are Nashville’s unmet housing needs?
2. How does Nashville compare to other similarly situated cities in terms of unmet affordable housing needs?
3. How have housing trust funds fared in other similarly situated cities?
4. Based on the experience of other cities, what does Nashville need to develop a housing trust fund?

With such questions in mind, my group spent the fall semester researching Nashville’s housing needs and contacting local housing experts. In addition to Nashville-focused research, we reached out to Mary Brooks, the Project Director of the Center for Community Change’s Housing Trust Fund Project. The teleconference with Ms. Brooks represents a turning point in our project. Not only did Ms. Brooks share with us her interesting background (including a role in the civil rights movement) but she gave us key information on what cities to visit. She first suggested that we visit a city with a metropolitan city-county form of government, which is what Nashville has. The suggestion was directed at the political process, which will serve as the vehicle for establishing a housing trust fund—Nashville’s Metropolitan Council will need to pass legislation establishing the fund and dedicating a source of revenue for the fund.

Through Ms. Brooks, we set our sights on Indianapolis, Indiana, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Indianapolis-Marion County, located 5 hours north of Nashville, not only has a metropolitan form of government but also has a successful housing trust fund. Recommended by both Ms. Brooks and Dr. Smrekar, our group chose Charlotte because Charlotte and Nashville are connected in many ways—both cities are often compared to each other in many contexts,
notably the educational context. Katie and I visited Indianapolis, while Israel and Lindsey visited Charlotte.

In both cities, we met with and interviewed local housing advocates, experts, and city officials to discuss their efforts, as well as how their thoughts on how Nashville can establish a housing trust fund. Katie and I had a great road trip and stay in Indianapolis. The people were friendly, the lessons learned were important, and the architecture in downtown Indianapolis, to our pleasant surprise, was impressive. From Katie’s and my experience in Indianapolis, we learned several key lessons about the development of housing trust funds that we hope to impart on the group that takes over our project next year.

To establish a housing trust fund in Nashville, you need: (1) a strong political push, in the form of elected officials and prominent leaders; (2) stable sources of funding, whether private or public, that is tied to housing—for example, in Indianapolis, funding came in the form of an extra few dollars added to the real estate recording fee (which has unfortunately waned in the bad economic times) and a generous donation from a public hospital; (3) established connection between housing and other important public sectors, such as public health and education, so that city officials will see greater long-term benefits of improving housing; and (4) the right parties at the table to manage and maintain the housing trust fund. For example, in Indianapolis, a committee of various leaders from the non-profit and business world accepts, encourages, and deliberates over applications for funding, and a local government office administers the fund.

The overall goal for next year’s group is to plan a presentation to city officials, members of the housing community, and community leaders. The presentation will serve as a catalyst for action and set out a plan for establishing a housing trust fund in Spring of 2012. I am excited by the progress my group has made and the impacts our work could have in the future. Although I will no longer be a fellow next year, I intend to help next year’s group in reaching the goal of establishing a housing trust fund in Nashville.