

Evaluation of the Congressional Hunger Center's Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program

Executive Summary & Recommendations



Cover photos, clockwise from top left:

Emerson Hunger Fellows Eric Hoffman and Raquel Oriol with their field supervisor Varga Garland (center) of the Tucson Community Food Bank in Arizona

Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD) with Emerson Fellow Girmay Zahilay

Emerson Fellows Stephany Whitaker and Cristina Sepe

Executive Summary

“Learning from the field and about policy was invaluable. I realized that while working at the DC policy level is a needed aspect of doing... social change work, I am better suited to do direct service and field organizing.”

ALUMNUS, CLASS 13
(INTERVIEWEE)

“The program helped me realize my potential as a leader. As a person of color and a person who has experienced poverty first-hand, the program gave me the courage and skills necessary to utilize and share my experiences constructively with others to diversify the discourse of anti-hunger and anti-poverty.”

ALUMNUS, CLASS 15
(INTERVIEWEE)

The Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program of the Congressional Hunger Center (“CHC”) celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2009. Each year, approximately 20 participants receive an eleven-month fellowship that provides first-hand field and policy experience. The Emerson Program has survived the tests of time, evolving into a unique, highly-regarded, and sought-after leadership development opportunity.

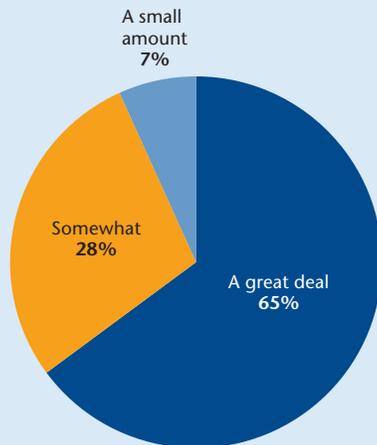
CHC partnered with Innovation Network to conduct this evaluation, which focuses on Emerson Hunger Fellows Classes 10 through 15. Innovation Network is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that provides evaluation consulting, training, research, and online tools for the nonprofit and philanthropic sector.

The evaluation team worked with program stakeholders to identify key questions to be answered by the evaluation. The team then developed instruments, including a survey administered to program alumni and interviews with field and policy site supervisors, to collect quantitative and qualitative data to answer the evaluation questions. Findings for each set of questions are summarized below.

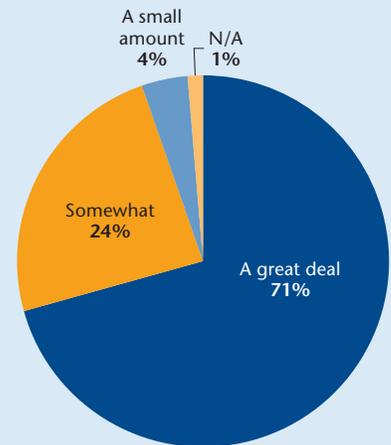
Has the fellowship influenced alumni educational and career objectives?

The Hunger Fellowship has strongly influenced the educational and career decisions of its alumni. The Emerson Program spurs fellows to think beyond the attainment of a specific degree, and onto thinking about the type of impact they want to make in the world. Over half of the alumni respondents have completed or are currently in graduate school. Of those, 30 percent indicated that the Emerson Program had a “great deal” of influence in their decision to pursue an advanced degree. The hands-on experience provided by the Hunger Fellowship’s field and policy placements enable fellows to make informed career decisions. Well over half of alumni respondents reported that their field placement (65 percent) and policy placement (70 percent) had “a great deal” of impact on their work post-fellowship. The data indicate that the variety of experiences provided by the field and policy placements enable alumni to apply their learnings across multiple strategies for social change.

Impact of Field Placement on Work Post-Fellowship (n=74)

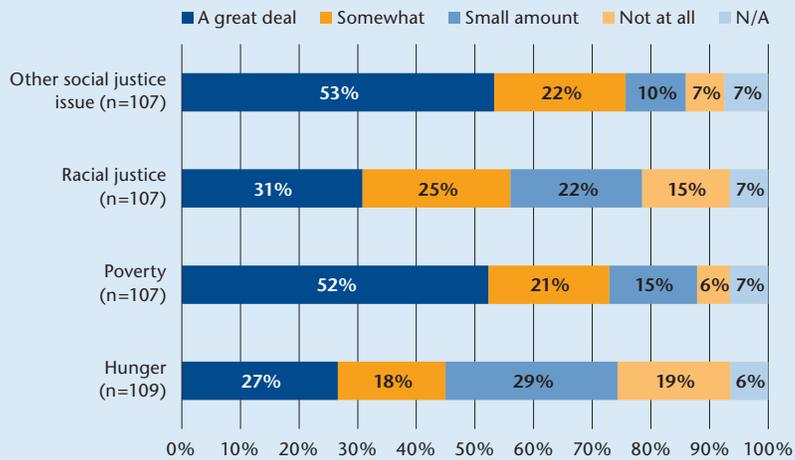


Impact of Policy Placement on Work Post-Fellowship (n=75)





What are Alumni Working On Now?



Do fellows develop an understanding of the connections between hunger, poverty, and oppression during their fellowship?

Beginning with Class 10, CHC made changes to the application and recruiting process aimed at increasing the Emerson Program’s racial and socioeconomic diversity. Beginning with Class 13, an anti-racism component was added to the training curriculum to help fellows develop a stronger understanding of the connections between hunger, poverty, and oppression. These changes helped fellows broaden their understanding of how race and racism impact hunger and poverty. Over half of the alumni surveyed reported that the fellowship had “a great deal” of influence in their understanding of the connections between racism and poverty. Almost all of the alumni surveyed (88 percent) indicated that their current position had some level of involvement with poverty. In addition, 40 percent of the alumni reported that what they learned about racism and oppression through the fellowship had “a great deal” of impact on their work, studies, and other post-fellowship activities.

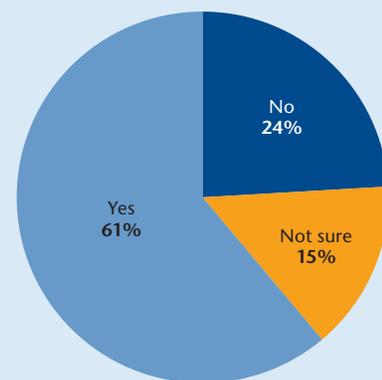
“In my field site I was working in low income communities, communities of color, etc. The training helped give me a perspective to approach the communities with respect and provided me with an understanding to talk to people with different backgrounds.”

ALUMNUS, CLASS 15
(INTERVIEWEE)

What has been the overall impact of the connections made during the fellowship program?

The vast majority of alumni (94 percent) reported that participating in the fellowship enabled them to develop a network of helpful professional contacts. Alumni also reported that they stay in touch with CHC staff (92 percent), policy site staff (70 percent), and field site staff (60 percent). More than half of alumni (60 percent) reported developing a mentor relationship associated with the fellowship program. These connections are often lasting: Even alumni who participated in the earlier classes remain in close contact with individuals connected to the program.

Percentage of Alumni who Developed a Mentoring Relationship with Someone Associated with the Fellowship (n=108)





“One fellow’s experience working with low income people enabled [them] to tell our staff ‘this doesn’t make sense in terms of policy’. So from working with low income families and studying program literature, the fellow brought the field perspective to [our organization in] D.C. It really makes a difference to be grounded in those field issues.”

POLICY SITE SUPERVISOR
(INTERVIEWEE)

How are field and policy sites benefiting from the work of the fellows?

Interviews with site supervisors revealed that fellows have a positive impact on the organizations and communities in which they work. Fellows increase the capacity of their placement organizations by creating systems, designing initiatives, and contributing to organizational strategy. Many of the projects that fellows work on have far-reaching effects long after the fellowship ends.

How do trainings prepare fellows for their field and policy placements?

The trainings are a core component of the fellowship program. They not only prepare fellows for field and policy placements, but also help to foster a sense of community that lasts well past the term of the fellowship. Over sixty percent of Program alumni rated the field and policy trainings as being “extremely valuable” to their work as a fellow. Site supervisors from both the field and policy sites felt that fellows came well-prepared to their placement organizations.

How do fellows rate the quality of support provided by CHC staff advisors?

Alumni rated CHC staff highly for the level of support provided during the Emerson Program. Over three quarters of the alumni who responded to the survey categorized the quality of support provided by their CHC staff supervisors as “great” in the areas of answering questions, providing support, and enhancing the fellowship experience. Areas for improvement include helping alumni maintain their network after graduating from the program and providing professional development opportunities for staff of the placement organizations.

In sum, this evaluation finds that the National Hunger Fellows Program continues to provide a high-quality and effective leadership development experience that is helping to build the next generation of leaders in the fight against hunger.



Fellows and CHC staff visit the White House Kitchen Garden

Recommendations

This section highlights key recommendations as CHC continues to implement its Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. These recommendations are grounded in the data collected for this evaluation and our conversations with CHC staff.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Continue efforts towards building a stronger alumni network.

Findings indicate that CHC alumni would benefit from stronger alumni network cultivation by CHC. While alumni maintain their personal and professional contacts individually, alumni (and supervisors) suggested that a more centralized outlet or platform maintained by CHC would be helpful. This could include active Facebook and LinkedIn pages, a centralized listserv, and CHC-sponsored alumni events. Some of these suggestions have already been implemented, while others are in progress—still, a more direct focus will help to cultivate a more centralized platform for maintaining contacts

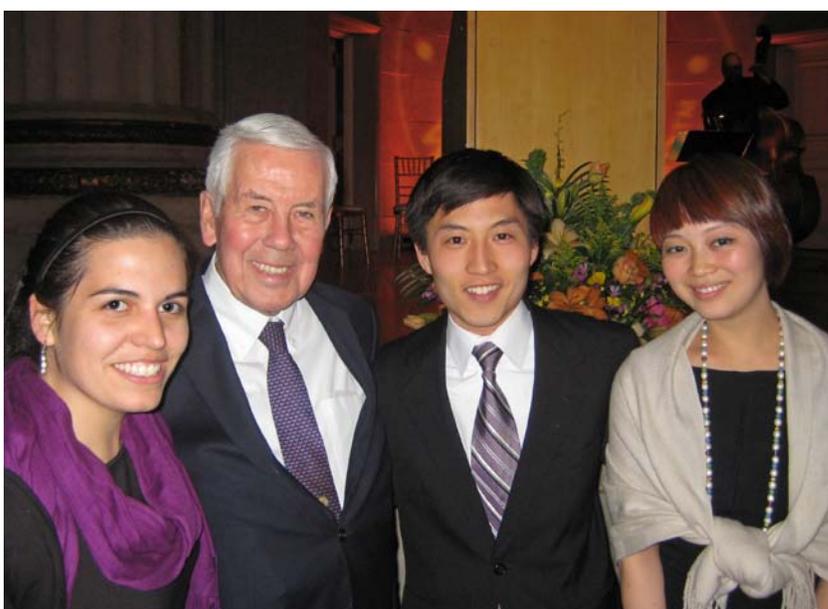
and the sharing of ideas and work. This would benefit not only program alumni, but partner organizations as well.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Provide more peer learning and professional development opportunities directed towards field and policy site supervisors.

Interviews revealed that many of the site supervisors felt that they could benefit by connecting with their peers in other organizations and by discussing issues that are important to their work. By playing a stronger role in facilitating and cultivating these relationships across the different sites, CHC staff could help ensure that site supervisors are able to share experiences and discuss lessons learned, which would benefit not only the fellows, but also the host organizations.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Continue to recruit individuals with diverse backgrounds into the program.

Findings indicate that CHC's focused recruiting strategies to draw fellows from diverse backgrounds allows for a richer fellowship experience. More diverse classes engage in deeper and more meaningful dialogue, challenging fellows to stretch their knowledge and understanding of hunger and poverty in the United States. There is also evidence that these learnings are transferred to the placement organizations, where fellows continue to build on their learnings and challenge existing norms.



Emerson Hunger Fellows with Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN)



Emerson Hunger Fellow at Growing Power, a field site organization in Chicago, Illinois

RECOMMENDATION 4: Trainings

While the trainings are rated highly in terms of content and delivery by alumni and host organizations, the following suggestions were collected over the course of the evaluation:

- **Specialized trainings:** Specialized trainings geared towards the diversity of site placements should be included in the curriculum. For example, concurrent sessions could be held during the training series, covering specialized topic areas—such as health policy, food stamps, labor market policies and dynamics, and advocacy—that relate directly to placements.

- **More hands-on and interactive events:** While the trainings were reported as being a very important element of the program, especially for learning and networking reasons, it was suggested that trainings could incorporate more “field trips” to engage fellows outside of the indoor training space.

- **Professional Development Days (PDDs):** While appreciated and valued by the fellows, the PDDs were also found to be less applicable than the pre-designed trainings. Limiting the topics to practical, usable information drawn directly from placement experience could be beneficial—that is, CHC staff could draw up a list of topics for fellows to choose from for their PDD presentations. PDDs could also teach harder skills that are immediately applicable

to the site placements, such as professional writing skills, communicating with supervisors, or conducting focus groups, for example.

- **Anti-Racism Lens:** Findings indicate that the incorporation of the anti-racism lens into the training series is very beneficial, and it is recommended that its emphasis be continued. The incorporation of this lens into the training curriculum is having an impact on fellows, broadening their perspectives on root causes of hunger and poverty in the United States. Further, findings indicate that fellows apply these tools and learnings not only during their placements, but also in post-fellowship pursuits.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Newsletter updates

Survey and interview data indicated that the newsletter would benefit from some changes. CHC alumni and site supervisors most often recommended that a web-based option and an email newsletter would be more accessible than a printed newsletter sent by postal mail. CHC alumni and supervisors also recommended that the newsletter focus on providing updates on what alumni are doing, what current fellows are doing, and news about different field sites. It was also strongly suggested that more substantive issues be covered in the newsletter, perhaps authored by alumni and fellows, about issues of hunger and poverty. Making these changes to the newsletter may also help facilitate recommendations the evaluation recommendations concerning the alumni network (recommendation 1) and peer-learning opportunities (recommendation 2).



Congressional Hunger Center

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