

Reflection essay

Through the Sillerman Center, I completed an internship at the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation (BCBSMAF), which works to expand health care access and improve health care services for low-income folks across the state. To this end, BCBSMAF provides grants to organizations that provide community-based health programs and organizations that conduct advocacy, outreach, and enrollment efforts. My experience at BCBSMAF exceeded my (high) expectations. I couldn't have asked for a better group of individuals to learn from during this pivotal time in my career or a better introduction to the health philanthropy world in Massachusetts. I am extremely fortunate to have been afforded an opportunity to work with the brilliant individuals who work at the Foundation.

I applied for the Sillerman fellowship with a strong desire to work specifically at BCBSMAF. In addition to their grantmaking work, BCBSMAF also conducts policy research to inform the general public and policy stakeholders about important issues relating to health access. Having come across a few of these publications while doing research for classes at Heller, I knew that BCBSMAF was a unique organization and an ideal setting in which to learn about the relationship between philanthropy and public health policy. In addition to grantmaking and policy, I was very interested in learning about the evaluation work done at BCBSMAF. Program evaluation is an area that I am hoping to pursue in my future career, and I was curious to know how it was implemented in a philanthropic setting, as opposed to in academia or government. While at BCBSMAF, I was able to work on projects in all of the three areas I had hoped to learn about: grantmaking, evaluation of grantees, and policy research. I learned a great deal from my experiences working in each area.

My summer started with the Catalyst Fund, an annual campaign in which BCBSMAF raises funds from associates within the larger BCBSMA insurance company. These funds are distributed as mini-grants by a group of BCBSMA associates who are passionate about philanthropy and interested in the Foundation's work. Because the campaign only runs for two short weeks, it requires significant preparation and coordination. My work helping the Foundation's program officer with the campaign primarily entailed coordinating with BCBSMA employees who volunteered to help run the campaign, advertising the campaign across the three BCBSMA offices, and helping to facilitate grantmaking decisions. Working on the Catalyst Fund was a fantastic way to learn more about fundraising, with which I had no prior experience, and to get acclimated to the Foundation's grantmaking processes. This experience came in handy throughout the summer when I read grant applications and helped out with grantmaking for areas that were up for renewal, such as Strengthening the Voice for Access, through which the Foundation funds advocacy-related initiatives.

In terms of evaluation work, I was lucky to be able to see the results of a recent round of funding for the Fostering Effective Integration (FEI) grant area, which supports grantees working at the intersection of behavioral health care and primary care. The evaluation work, conducted by a consulting firm, was fascinating to see; it made me even more interested in pursuing a career in program evaluation, potentially in a philanthropic setting. I was also able to accompany the Foundation's grantmaking director on a site visit to one of the FEI grantees, a high-performing community health center offering both primary care and behavioral health services. We spoke with the center's staff and met a patient who spoke candidly about her experiences there. This experience was grounding: it helped me to visualize the Foundation's grantmaking and evaluation work and to more properly frame the work I hope to do in the future.

It was also very inspiring to be exposed to, and involved in, to the policy work done at BCBSMAF. Throughout the summer, I was able to contribute in minor ways to various policy projects, for instance by performing data collection and analysis, literature reviews, and proofreading for reports on behavioral health access. The project that I was most heavily involved with was one that I will remember extremely fondly. The Foundation is part of a working group convened by the Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association (MHA) working to advance an initiative called 'Behavioral Health: The Unfinished Agenda for Reform' (BHUAR). As part of this initiative, BCBSMAF, MHA, and the Brookline Center for Community Mental Health is working together on a task force to explore the potential for a comprehensive, statewide database of community-based health and social services. Such a tool is critically needed in Massachusetts and would drastically improve the ability of care coordinators and patients to identify and obtain services. Over the summer, the task force worked on an environmental scan of existing databases and directories in order to

Sarah King
2017 Sillerman Center Master's Fellow
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation

develop recommendations for the creation of a future database in Massachusetts. This work was guided by a number of meetings with the larger BHUAR team and stakeholders, demonstrations by organizations with well-developed databases, and smaller task force brainstorm sessions. My contributions to the project included reviewing a number of databases and evaluating them according to specific criteria decided by the team, helping to draft a report summarizing our findings and recommendations, and creating a set of appendix tables for the report that summarized the results of the team's scan of roughly thirty databases. I absolutely loved working with the many incredible individuals involved with this project and thinking critically about how to create and maintain an important public health resource.

From these larger projects and the smaller initiatives that I worked on, I saw many ways in which a foundation can have an immense impact on its community and became even more interested in pursuing a career in health-related philanthropy. I feel very grateful to have had the chance to work with as remarkable an organization as BCBSMAF.

Two things in particular made my experience what it was. First, the staff at BCBSMAF are incredible: they have a great passion for the Foundation's mission and they work tirelessly to leverage their astounding wealth of knowledge and expertise to improve the health of individuals in Massachusetts. Second, they are dedicated to sharing this knowledge and expertise as broadly as possible with the public health community in Massachusetts. The Foundation often convenes stakeholders, advocacy groups, and policymakers for discussions of important health issues. At one Foundation event, I spoke with someone from a state health agency who told me that the policy discussions convened by BCBSMAF in the mid 2000s were the impetus for the state's comprehensive health reform in 2006. Without the Foundation to act as a convener, she said, the reform may not have happened. What an incredible legacy for a group of under a dozen people – all women, no less – to have. I feel so privileged to have met and worked alongside them, and so thankful to the Sillerman Center for giving me the opportunity to do so.