



2014-2015 Policy Fellows

Each year, up to 40 individuals are selected from across the state of Minnesota to participate in the Policy Fellows program at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. The program aims to prepare a new generation of women and men to assume the responsibilities of leadership and to encourage their effective involvement in public affairs and civic life. Policy Fellows come from a variety of professions in the business, nonprofit, and public sectors, from across the political spectrum, and have demonstrated leadership in their careers and communities. *Fellows' professional and community affiliations as listed below are current as of October 2014.*



Sadiq A. Abdirahman is a senior program and policy analyst at the Somali Institute for Peace Research. He has two masters' degrees from the University of St. Thomas. Sadiq served at the Institute for Horn of Africa Civic Empowerment and county director for Somalia at the Horn of Africa Studies and Affairs. Sadiq has participated in numerous forums and interviews with both local and foreign media regarding the human rights abuses taking place in the horn of Africa, and has worked tirelessly with Minnesota congressional representatives to bring those violations to the attention of the United Nations.



Huda Ahmed has nearly ten years of experience in developing and implementing effective cross cultural community engagement strategies. She has served as liaison and advisor to public health government agencies, implementing policy, systems, and environmental health equity initiatives. Her primary area of expertise is to facilitate the engagement and inclusion of underserved communities in the lifecycle of health initiatives, from planning to evaluation. She is currently the community program manager for the University of Minnesota's program in health disparities research. Huda holds a master's degree in community health education from Minnesota State University, Mankato.



Amy Aho is a speech language pathologist serving elementary aged children with the Brainerd Independent School District. She is involved with a variety of committees within her school building including child study, response to intervention, literacy leadership and the crisis team. Amy is active with the school union, Education MN Brainerd (EMB). As a member of EMB she is appointed to the governing board and co-chairs the governmental relations committee and the local communications action team. Amy earned her master of arts in communication from University of North Dakota. Amy lives in Merrifield, MN with her two daughters.



Emily Aurand is an associate director of compliance at UnitedHealthcare. In this role, Emily leads the Medicaid Integrity and Compliance program administration team, supporting the Medicaid Compliance Program and anti-fraud, waste and abuse efforts. She has six years of compliance experience at UnitedHealthcare in audit and investigative roles. Previously, Emily was a mediator at the Minnesota Attorney General's office in the consumer services division focusing on health care related issues. Emily has a bachelor's degree in communication studies and Spanish from Minnesota State University Moorhead and a master of arts in leadership from Augsburg College.



Emilia Gonzalez Avalos is the advocacy director of Navigate MN, a nonprofit organization that serves young students in Minnesota facing financial, social, and legal barriers to achieve their dreams of higher education. Emilia was born in Mexico City, and joined her father in Minnesota years after he left home to look for better job opportunities and future for his family. She is a human rights commissioner for the City of Richfield, and has been trained by SEIU, Wellstone Action, Women Winning, Emily's List and Center for Community Change. Emilia lives in Richfield with her life partner Daniel and two children.



Monica Fahnhorst Avendano is an associate attorney in the trial department at Dorsey & Whitney LLP. She received her undergraduate degree in marketing and supply chain management from the University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management and is also a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School. Monica has studied internationally at the Hague and at the University of Oxford. A highlight of her education was her participation in Semester at Sea, a study abroad program where students travel around the world visiting and learning about numerous countries and their cultures. Monica serves as a volunteer attorney with the Children's Law Center.



Kate Barr is executive director at Nonprofits Assistance Fund (NAF). NAF's mission is to strengthen community by investing capital and expertise in nonprofits through a loan fund and financial management training and advice. In addition to overall organizational leadership, Kate is responsibility for development for loan capital and program funding and communications. She is a frequent speaker and author on finance and strategy, and on emerging nonprofit issues. Prior to joining NAF in 2000, Kate was a bank executive. She has a bachelor's degree in business from Metro State University and master's degree in leadership from Hamline University.



William J. Black is the government relations director for the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association where he lobbies the Minnesota Legislature and U.S. Congress on behalf of the state's municipal electric and gas utilities. Bill was involved in shaping Minnesota's Next Generation Energy Act in 2007 and continues to monitor and influence its implementation. Prior to his current position and admittance to the Minnesota bar, Bill served as senior legislative assistant to U.S. Representative Collin Peterson in Washington, handling public policy in the areas of energy, foreign affairs, national defense, telecommunications, and transportation.



Julie Brekke is the vice president of programs, fundraising, and communications at Project for Pride in Living (PPL), a multiservice organization dedicated to helping low-income individuals and families become self-sufficient. Overseeing fundraising, communications, Ready for Success, and the self-sufficiency, youth development, employment training, and volunteer programs, she applies rigor and compassion to PPL's work. Julie fosters creativity and collaboration among the staff she supervises and PPL's organizational and philanthropic partners. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota. Julie lives in the Linden Hills neighborhood of Minneapolis with her husband, two kids, and family pets.



Matt Burdick is the public policy director at NAMI Minnesota (National Alliance on Mental Illness). NAMI is a grassroots advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and adults living with mental illnesses and their families. Matt advocates on mental health issues at the state legislature and with administrative agencies in the areas of health care, human services, housing, and criminal justice. Matt also coordinates NAMI Minnesota's grassroots advocacy efforts as well as supervising NAMI's work with local communities. He holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and political science from Augsburg College.



Andrew Carlson is a project manager for the City of Minneapolis public works department. He is responsible for overseeing the operations and management of the City's fifteen Special Service Districts and other public/private partnerships. Andrew is also a councilmember for the City of Bloomington. His council duties include serving on the Bloomington Housing and Redevelopment Authority and Highway 169 corridor coalition. Andrew has a bachelor's degree in community and regional planning from Iowa State University and a master of business administration from the University of St. Thomas. Andrew is married with two daughters.



Braulio R. Carrasco is a bilingual elementary school teacher and has worked for Minneapolis Public Schools since 2007. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree from Saint Mary's University. Braulio is the Educators for Excellence 2014 teacher leadership award recipient. Braulio is the president and founder of the League of Latino Educators, a network of educators focused on issues of educational equity for Latino students, English language learners and New American youth. Braulio serves on the board of directors of Navigate MN and Corcoran neighborhood organization. Braulio has worked on efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform.



John Cooney is the state director of the Minnesota chapter of Americans for Prosperity Foundation, focused on educating and mobilizing citizens to advocate for free market policy solutions. Following the 2010 election cycle in which he managed the successful campaign of congressional candidate Randy Hultgren in Illinois, John conducted campaign schools for municipal candidates in the Middle East. In 2007, John worked as chief of staff/principal aid to incoming Hennepin County sheriff, Rich Stanek. From 2002 through 2006, John served as the political director and campaign manager for U.S. Representative Jim Ramstad of Minnesota. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, John lives in Eden Prairie with his wife and two children.



Angie Dickison is the director of information technology for Lake County, Minnesota. She is an advocate for digital inclusion and digital literacy. Angie was appointed by Governor Dayton to serve as a member of the Governor's task force on broadband; she also serves as a member of the Blandin Foundation's broadband strategy board. Angie has a master's degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin. She serves as a member of the Lakewood Township Planning and Zoning Commission / Board of Adjustment and is past chair of the Minnesota County IT Leadership Association. Angie is an avid gardener, enjoys travel and spending time with family and friends. She resides in the Duluth, Minnesota area.



Erin Gavin is program and policy officer for education and learning at the McKnight Foundation. In this role, she leads McKnight's development and implementation of strategies to advance education and literacy policy. She also vets and manages McKnight's education grants. Prior to joining the McKnight Foundation, Erin taught English and reading at Brooklyn Center Secondary School. Erin received her bachelor's degree from Carleton College in Northfield, MN. She earned teaching licensures in English and communication arts and K-12 reading instruction from Hamline University in St. Paul. Erin completed her master's degree in education policy and management at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Christopher George is a patrol sergeant with the Chaska Police Department. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota-Duluth, majoring in criminology and minoring in sociology. He received his associate's degree in law enforcement from Fond-du-Lac Tribal and Community College. In his current role at the Chaska Police Department, Christopher oversees all technology and computer-based equipment for the department. He also manages the purchasing and oversight of equipment and vehicles. Christopher heads the Chaska Police Department's Explorer Post, which involves youth ages 14-20 and introduces them to the law enforcement profession. He is married and has two children.



Ben Gerber is the manager of energy and labor/management policy at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. Ben represents the Chamber's energy interests at both the Legislature and the Public Utilities Commission. He also owned an asphalt maintenance company while attending college at the University of Michigan where he graduated with a degree in political science in 2005. He graduated from William Mitchell College of law cum laude in 2010 and is admitted to the Minnesota State Bar Association. Ben enjoys traveling (his favorite destination is rural India), running, and spending time with his wife Betsy and daughter Rozlyn.



Aileen Guiney is a senior benefits leader in benefits compliance at Target Corporation where she works on legal and compliance issues related to federal health plans, clinical health improvement strategies, health care reform and corporate policies. She also serves on the advisory committee at Honoring Choices MN. Aileen is an attorney, with her law degree from William Mitchell College of Law. Prior to attending law school, she was the women's assistant soccer coach at the University of Michigan. Aileen is fueled by innovation, exercise, problem solving, collaboration, and coffee. She is married with two kids and lives in Saint Paul.



Alex Hontos is an attorney at Dorsey & Whitney LLP, where he advises clients in litigation and disputes with the government. Hired through the Attorney General's honors program in 2009, Alex served as an attorney at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. until his recent return home to Minnesota. Previously, Alex clerked for Judge Myron Bright on the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit and Judge Bruce Willis on the Minnesota Court of Appeals. He earned his law degree from the University of Minnesota and bachelor's degree from St. Olaf College, where he majored in ancient studies and political science.



Munazza Humayun handles unemployment insurance appellate matters at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development since being appointed as an unemployment law judge in 2012. Munazza previously worked at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, where she frequently spoke on civil rights issues and trained attorneys and corporations on employment discrimination law. Munazza holds a bachelor's in sociology from the University of Minnesota and a law degree from Tulane University Law School. She is a past board member of the Conflict Resolution Center, and committee member at Minnesota Women Lawyers. Munazza enjoys reading, running, and performing stand-up comedy.



Hassen Hussein is the director of the Oromo Community of Minnesota, a nonprofit serving the over 40,000 Oromo-Americans in the Twin Cities. Previously, Hassen worked as the international advocacy director at an organization aimed at introducing competitive electoral politics, democracy and peaceful resolution of conflicts in the Horn of Africa region. He also brings corporate experience as an IT manager and business analyst. Hassen is a graduate of Rochester Institute of Technology with a master's degree in business administration. He is currently finalizing a doctoral program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota where he is also an assistant professor. Hassen resides in Brooklyn Park with his family.



Chandra M. Kilgriff is an attorney with Dorsey & Whitney, LLP in Minneapolis, where she specializes in federal and state tax law. Chandra also provides pro bono representation to nonprofit organizations and leads Minnesota's Election Protection program. She serves on the board of two educational organizations, Minds Matter of the Twin Cities and American Model United Nations. Chandra holds a law degree and a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University and a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and son.



Chad T. Lorenz is the founder and chief executive of The Lorenz Clinic of Family Psychology. Dr. Lorenz is dual-licensed as a psychologist and marriage and family therapist. His bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in psychology are from the University of St. Thomas where he will also complete his healthcare master's of business administration in the fall of 2014. Dr. Lorenz is an expert in child development and interpersonal attachment. In addition to his work with patients, he teaches in the graduate psychology program at St. Thomas. He provides consultation to area health systems on integrated behavioral health in accountable care environments.



Stephen Manuszak is program manager for international initiatives at Arts Midwest, a nonprofit that serves artists, audiences, and organizations across the Midwest and the United States. Stephen helps bring international artists for residencies in smaller U.S. communities and sends U.S. artists on cultural exchanges abroad. Since 2011, he has worked with artists from eleven countries to produce more than 1,100 educational and performance events. Stephen was a fellow at the Foreign Policy Association, sailed around the world with Semester at Sea, and holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and a master's degree from New York University.



Joan Mellor is a senior portfolio lead at Medtronic Philanthropy. She is responsible for developing and executing programs under an overall vision of expanding access to chronic disease healthcare for underserved communities, both locally and globally. Joan is also currently leading programs to improve acute cardiovascular systems of care in the U.S. and emerging markets, with a current focus on Russia, India, and China. Joan holds her bachelor of arts degree in business administration and French language from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. Joan currently lives in St. Paul with her husband and three sons.



Luis Moreno is a senior marketing manager at GE Capital. He has a master's degree in business administration from the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, majoring in marketing and strategy. He co-founded and co-leads the Twin Cities Business Peer Network, a 1,500-member organization that helps students and peers grow personally and professionally. Luis received the outstanding member of the year award from the National Society of Hispanic MBAs, the President's award for leadership from the University of Minnesota, and the Forty Under 40 award by the Minneapolis-St Paul Business Journal. He lives in St Paul with his wife and their two sons.



Nasser Mussa is the volunteer service director and program assistant at the Cedar Riverside Adult Education Collaborative, which serves East African immigrants in Minneapolis. Nasser graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in sociology of law; political science; and African American and African studies. Nasser is very active in political campaigns and is currently nominated to the DFL central committee at-large and state delegate. He is a board member for the Oromo American Citizen Council, the Cedar Riverside Neighborhood Revitalization Program, and the health action committee at the Brian Coyle Community Center.



Cari Ness Nesje owns her own consulting business that focuses on public media and is currently the director of station/nonprofit services for the Car Talk Vehicle Donation Program and Vehicle Donation to Any Charity. She also does executive search and programming consultation for public radio and television stations and previously worked at Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media. Cari has a master's degree in nonprofit management from Hamline University and a bachelor of science in mass communication with a minor in political science from St. Cloud State University. Cari serves on the board of directors of the Cedar Cultural Center in Minneapolis.



Ilhan Omar currently works as a senior policy aide for Minneapolis Council Member Andrew Johnson, and has spent the last decade organizing around issues like education, health, political access, immigrants' rights and women's rights. Ilhan serves on the boards of Confederation of Somali Community of Minnesota, Advancing Women's Voices, and the New Americans PAC, which she helped establish in 2012. She is proud alum of Organizing for America, Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI), and AmeriCorps VISTA. Ilhan has a bachelor's degree in political science and international relations and lives in Minneapolis with her husband and three children.



Cordelia Pierson serves as executive director of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership, a nonprofit that supports giving by employees to organizations that protect, conserve, and restore Minnesota's environment. A graduate of Princeton University and the University of Minnesota Law School, Cordelia brings nonprofit, public agency, and partnership experience at the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership, the Trust for Public Land, and the Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Association. She has focused on urban vitality, the Mississippi River, and metro greenways, and represents the metropolitan region on the Mississippi River Parkway Commission. Cordelia chose to live in Minnesota after living in Japan and on the East Coast.



Chad M. Sackett serves as the deputy post commander of the Camp Ripley Training Center, Minnesota National Guard. Chad is an Infantry Officer with over 28 years of military service and currently holds the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He has a wide variety of military experiences ranging from overseas deployments and state emergency response missions, to inter-agency operations and community support. Chad holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Bemidji State University and is a Minnesota certified emergency manager. Chad resides in the Little Falls area with his family, where they enjoy outdoor and community activities.



Cassandra Silveira manages the nutrition education programs at Dream of Wild Health (DWH) and has been with the organization since 2009. DWH is a nonprofit that works to reconnect Native peoples with land and food, and in her current role, Cassandra designs and implements nutrition education programs for youth and families. She is a registered dietitian and is in the process of completing her master's degree in public health nutrition at the University of Minnesota. Cassandra enjoys spending time with her four children, reading, trying new recipes and has a strong interest in functional nutrition.



Julia Silvis, an employee of McKinsey and Company, is a manager of the Itasca Project, an employer-led, civic alliance that seeks to improve economic competitiveness and quality of life in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. Prior to her current role, she served clients in financial services, energy, and the public sector. Julia holds a Ph.D. in transportation, technology and policy from the University of California-Davis and a bachelor's degree in the history of science from Harvard College. She serves on the Minnesota advisory board for the Trust for Public Land, and in her free time enjoys the beautiful Minnesota seasons by cross-country skiing, running, and hiking. Julia lives in Minneapolis with her husband and daughter.



John Walker is senior director of pharmaceutical sciences at Upsher-Smith Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company focusing on delivering generic therapeutic products as well as novel therapies for the central nervous system. In his current role, John works to design new products and the testing required to introduce new products to the market. He has worked extensively in the pharmaceutical industry (Merck, Upjohn, Pharmacia and Pfizer) and the Medical device industry (Medtronic). John has a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the University of Notre Dame and a doctorate in chemical engineering from Purdue University. John and his family live in Minneapolis.



Christopher L. Wendt has been immigration counsel at the Mayo Clinic since 2003. Chris graduated from Beloit College and the University of Michigan Law School. He is a member of national bar associations for immigration and health law, including committee memberships focusing on the intersection of those disciplines. He coordinates Mayo Clinic legal department pro bono activities, has served on nonprofit boards for legal service providers and serves on the legal services advisory committee of the Minnesota Supreme Court. Chris is married, has three daughters, is freely conversant in Russian, and enjoys beekeeping and the Commonweal Theater in Lanesboro.



Dave Wentzel is a veteran's constituent advocate and field representative for Congressman Tim Walz. Dave listens to and helps meet the needs of First Congressional District veterans, as well as shapes legislative policy for veterans and service members. A Sergeant First Class with 12-years in the Minnesota National Guard, Dave also served in Iraq and Kuwait. He is a licensed social worker and attending the master's of public administration program at Minnesota State University and holds a bachelor's of science in social work. The Minnesota Humanities Center Veterans' Voices award recognized Dave as "On the Rise" for his contributions to the veteran community.



Mathew Woodlee is a senior international trade specialist at the U.S. Department of Commerce/International Trade Administration, providing consulting services to companies seeking to expand internationally. Mathew has also served as director of international trade for the State of New Mexico during Bill Richardson's administration and as an analyst for the New Mexico state legislature. Mathew has taught international business at Metropolitan State University and is a graduate of the University of New Mexico, with a bachelor's degree in political science and master's of business administration in international management. He is active in Rotary and enjoys sports, reading, and spending time with his wife and son.



ThaoMee Xiong is the policy director for the Minnesota Housing Partnership, where she leads the policy team to work on federal and state housing policy initiatives. She has a strong portfolio of legal and legislative advocacy, public policy research and community organizing experience. Previously, ThaoMee managed health initiatives at United Way, organized the legislative advocacy efforts for Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, and counseled Hmong refugees with the United Nations and International Organization of Migration in Thailand. She received her law degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's of public administration from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.