



Govern For America

Empowering a New Generation to Address Big Challenges Through Public Service Leadership

PRESENTED BY

Siegel Family Endowment

We are a foundation focused on understanding and shaping the impact of technology on society.



ABOUT SIEGEL

Siegel Family Endowment employs an inquiry-driven approach to grant making that is informed by the scientific method and predicated on the belief that philanthropy is uniquely positioned to address some of the most pressing and complex issues facing society today. Our grant making strategy positions us to be society's risk capital. We support high quality work that will help us derive insights to timely questions and has high potential for future scale. Our focus is on organizations doing work at the intersection of learning, workforce, and infrastructure. We aim to help build a world in which all people have the tools, skills, and context necessary to engage meaningfully in a rapidly changing society. Siegel Family Endowment was founded in 2011 by David M. Siegel, co-founder and co-chairman of financial sciences company Two Sigma.



OUR FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE

We believe that strong social, physical, and digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for cultivating an equitable society. Our work aims to make the infrastructure of today and tomorrow work for all people. We do this by supporting organizations that foster the growth of resilient social networks and communities, strengthen public spaces and buildings, and expand access to digital life.



PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY

As technology's role in all parts of society continues to expand, it's our goal to ensure that everyone is conversant with technology as it affects all areas of our lives. We work with policymakers, technologists, researchers, and educators to ensure that the design, deployment, and use of technologies are leveraged in a way that advances the public interest. Our grantees use technology to enhance public institutions, imagine solutions that will fulfill unmet needs, and to critically examine technology's impact on civic life.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Establishing sustainable pathways for diverse young people to become public service leaders can create systemic change over time. Young people—particularly those from historically excluded communities—can offer important perspectives and community connections that are often underrepresented in government. When embedded in governmental agencies, young people are well positioned to identify and address shortfalls in how government serves the public.

Changing public perceptions and trust in government hinges on providing positive interactions between residents and government and demonstrating that government action can result in material improvements to people's lives. Public interest technology initiatives, such as equity-driven approaches to broadband access, offer pathways for government to listen to and respond to community needs, building deeper trust and positively impacting residents' day-to-day lives.

Fellowships can be a powerful tool for demystifying governmental institutions, bringing fresh perspectives to policymaking and governmental processes, and building the communities necessary to sustain involvement in government in the long-term. These fellowships are most effective when accompanied by formalized leadership training, pathways to long-term careers in public service, and meaningful connections among fellows. Crucially, that support and training must focus on serving vulnerable communities in compassionate and user-centered ways.

GOVERN FOR AMERICA

About Grantee

Govern For America (GFA) addresses a talent crisis in government by building a pipeline of young, diverse emerging leaders to serve in public sector positions. GFA offers a two-year fellowship to launch recent graduates into full-time, salaried positions in government. Fellows receive support and guidance from GFA and their peer cohort while filling a critical need in government agencies and developing a more responsive, inclusive, and solution-oriented governmental sector. GFA also supports fellowship alumni to continue on a lifetime of public sector leadership.

Executive Summary

BRING UP THE GOVERNMENT in conversation and you might find yourself discussing a distant and ill-defined entity rather than institutions that affect your day-to-day life. Yet government in the United States is enormous, and composed of a complex network of bureaus, agencies, and services that shape every aspect of life. The breadth and scope of its impact—affecting everything from transportation to housing to public space to education—is vast, and can be challenging to quantify and navigate. In our current era of record-low trust in public institutions, demonstrating the government's capacity for positive, tangible change in the lives of every American has never been more urgent.

Govern for America (GFA) was founded on the belief that tackling big problems and demonstrating that government can work for all requires bold, equitable, and inclusive leadership in partnership with the public. Young people are key to this transformation in both governmental operations and actions. At a time when [almost a third of government employees](#) are or are soon to be eligible to retire, GFA's founders believe that it is vitally important that the next generation of public sector leadership is well-positioned to take ambitious action that will make positive change in the lives of

all Americans.

GFA's fellowship program is designed to help facilitate these changes in how government operates and is perceived by the public. GFA [recruits](#) recent graduates to serve in governmental agencies around the country. The two-year fellowship is fully paid by governmental partners, and offers pathways to pursue a long-term career in public service. Fellows have the opportunity to engage in substantive work to address challenging problems, and develop leadership skills to help drive bold and equitable action that responds to community needs and priorities. They offer unique perspectives that help reframe conversations, and pursue policies that help improve people's lives.

GFA hopes to drive both incremental and systemic changes through its fellowship program. In the short-term, the program is changing the talent pipeline, introducing a new generation to government work, and demystifying the application process for employment in government. In the long-term, GFA hopes to demonstrate the impact that diverse, passionate, and skilled young professionals can have to encourage better, more responsive operations and policymaking in government.



Core Elements: What Makes the Program Work?

GOVERN FOR AMERICA (GFA) began as a set of queries from two twenty-somethings—one a public school teacher and the other a state employee. What if it were easier for young people to enter careers in government? What if the public experienced government as an innovative entity committed to solving big problems? What if governmental employees reflected the diversity of the communities that they served?

GFA launched in 2018 to address these issues head on. Since then, dozens of GFA fellows have been deployed across 20 governmental agencies and nine states, to change the way the government operates, and to build a pipeline of diverse talent to fuel government innovation. Along the way, GFA has learned important lessons about what it takes to support fellows; how incremental changes can inspire broader, systemic change; and how to demonstrate the value of government to historically excluded communities.

▶ INVESTING IN A NEW GENERATION TO DRIVE INCREMENTAL AND SYSTEMIC CHANGES

AS INSPIRED AS SHE was by her work, GFA co-founder Octavia Abell felt a little lonely as a young person serving in state government. “I saw the power that government has to solve big problems. But I also had the experience of being the only person in the room under 30 when we were talking about the rising cost of college tuition.” It wasn’t just crippling student debt that was unfamiliar to many of her colleagues. Abell recalls, “I saw how often people who are most impacted by these decisions were left out of those conversations with policymakers.”

Abell recognized an opportunity to change the composition of the rooms where policymakers sit. In Abell’s view, young people not only offered unique perspectives that were underrepresented in government, but they could also serve as a critical workforce bridge at a time when a significant number of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers eyed retirement. The challenge was twofold: first, convincing young Millennials and Gen Zers that government was a space capable of doing big things; and second, ensuring that young people’s voices would be heard and valued in governmental agencies.

Addressing those challenges has become easier over time as GFA has established a foothold in government, and alumni can share stories of how their voices have impacted significant policy change. For example, a GFA fellow working in the Colorado Department of Corrections had experienced the financial burden of staying connected to an incarcerated loved one. Recognizing that as much as one-third of families contacting people in prison go into debt because of the high costs of communicating, the fellow created a pilot project to



TOP: Members of GFA's 2023 cohort gathering at a community mixer in Denver, Colorado.

BOTTOM: GFA Chief Program Officer Sophanite Gedion leads members of GFA's 2021 cohort through a graduation celebration.

provide free videoconferencing technology to prisons. This work led to the [passage of a bill](#) in the state legislature to provide state funding for prison phone calls. Such examples demonstrate how having diverse voices in policymaking positions can drive long-lasting change, and in turn, serve as powerful advertisements for careers in government.

► SHOWING THAT GOVERNMENT CAN WORK FOR ALL

ABELL HAS A THEORY about why trust in government is at [near historic lows](#), and how to fix the problem. “If you never experience your life getting better because of the choices and the actions that government is taking, it’s not at all irrational to say, ‘Why should I trust this system?’” She says the answer is to figure out “how to make those systems work and deliver better results that are for people and coming from what people are asking for.” In other words, positive experiences with government can go a long way toward building trust, particularly when people see their lives materially improved by governmental action.

Abell says that public interest technology initiatives such as equity-driven approaches to broadband access offer an important way of demonstrating how government can positively affect daily life, particularly in underserved communities. “So many of the ways that residents interact with government come through technology initially,” Abell says. “The fellows see public interest technology as a tool for advancing the work and the priorities that they hold closely.” In fact, GFA created [a new program](#) whose primary focus is on broadband and digital equity placements.

The work of fellows around public technology can be enormously impactful and help build trust in government, especially for historically excluded communities. For example, two GFA fellows conducted a listening tour in every county across the state of Missouri [to understand](#)

► BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

FROM THE BEGINNING, GFA’s founders envisioned the program as a long term talent pipeline for government careers, rather than a two-year stopping point between a bachelor’s degree and graduate school. To build continuity and long-term commitment, GFA has supported fellows in their placements in two key ways. First, GFA provides a social network of relationships that each cohort can rely on to cultivate a sense of belonging, and to combat the loneliness that Abell had encountered as a young person working in state government. Second, GFA supports fellows in skill development, and provides workshops and learning opportunities on everything from building data visualizations to developing leadership skills.

Over time, GFA has formalized these supports and developed a comprehensive leadership program aimed at providing fellows with the skills, mindsets, and approaches that will make them effective public sector leaders for years to come. Abell explains that there was an early focus on adaptive leadership that was insufficient for best supporting fellows. “We realized that we were missing some components that answer the question of how you actually move the work forward,” Abell reflects. GFA staff researched the skill sets and competencies required for early career professionals in government, senior leaders, and everyone in between to lead teams successfully. The result was the development of nine leadership competencies that guide all of GFA’s development programs, from quarterly training sessions to coaching.

Abell says that the impact of this focused, research-backed leadership development extends far beyond individual fellows, and



GFA Fellows Parul Kumar and Toni Aniugo collaborate during GFA Summer Institute in June 2023.

the challenges to affordable high-speed internet that communities faced. Armed with those data, the fellows were well-equipped to challenge and offer revisions to the federal allocation maps of underserved areas that were eligible for government broadband support. The result was a \$1.7 billion federal allocation for Missouri for broadband—far more than the original proposal. That is funding that will materially improve people’s lives. In addition, embedding listening tours into the process for challenging the existing maps elevated community voices that are not always accounted for in policymaking.

has implications for fellows’ supervisors and others who are already working in government. As the nine competencies become more embedded in GFA programming, they also influence the agencies in which fellows serve.

That’s particularly true of trauma-informed leadership, a process that Abell describes as the ability “to show up in these spaces that have perpetuated harm in the past and at times still do.” Acknowledging harm and using that insight to drive more community engagement and voice is at the heart of the leadership model that GFA promotes and that it hopes to move forward in the public sector more generally.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Using research on adaptive leadership, transformational leadership, and servant leadership, GFA identified nine core competencies of the most effective public leaders across the career span of a public servant:

- Vision
- Emotional Intelligence
- Collaboration
- Communication & Storytelling
- Equity
- Character
- Planning
- Mobilizing Others
- Courage & Risk-taking



Members of GFA's 2021 cohort visit the Gateway Arch during Winter Gathering in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2023.

Impact

WHEN IT COMES TO ASSESSING GFA'S IMPACT, Abell points to both short-and long-term goals. "In the shorter term, we want to build the pipeline and the pathway for government to address problems in new ways, centered on community," Abell says. "People are policy," she continues. "If you change who's coming in and how folks in those systems are operating and supported, that's how we get to different outcomes." Those different outcomes are the longer-term impacts that GFA envisions, including more user-centered and responsive governmental services; agency staff that is more reflective of the communities that they serve; and more transparent and collaborative policymaking.

When it comes to understanding the shorter-term impacts of its work, GFA looks at a variety of measures that are designed to assess how effectively it is building a sustainable, diverse talent pipeline that is achieving positive change in government operations:

- **GFA fellows come from a range of identities that are not well-represented in governmental agencies.** In 2023, GFA supported 48 fellows across 22 governmental agencies. Of those 48 fellows, 67% identified as BIPOC, 67% identified as women or gender non-binary, and 33% identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Over a third were first generation college graduates. These stats stand in stark contrast to the [predominant identities](#) represented among existing governmental staffers.
- **GFA is propelling government investment to improve the talent pipeline and empower a new generation of public servant leaders.** GFA placements leverage

approximately \$2.6 million in government funding annually, ensuring sustainable employment for a diverse set of professionals who are beginning their careers.

- **GFA fellows are adding real value to the governmental agencies where they work.** On average, government agency partners rate their satisfaction with GFA fellows as 9.5 on a 10-point scale.
- **GFA is creating sustainable, long-term career pathways for young professionals.** Over four-fifths of GFA fellows continue careers in the public sector after the completion of their fellowship.

In the long-term, GFA aspires to help propel systems-change in government that will inspire bold, transparent, community-driven, equitable, and inclusive operations and policymaking. Abell says, "We want to help create a shift so that the practices [that we're encouraging through GFA] can be deployed and embedded at all levels of government at scale." Abell acknowledges that no single nonprofit organization can generate that impact entirely on its own; realizing systemic change in government will require a coalition of committed partners. GFA is currently mapping potential partnerships to realize the broader changes that it aspires to see in the long-term. Among these are work with [The People Lab](#) at the Harvard Kennedy School, and [Coding It Forward](#).

Next Steps

GOVERN FOR AMERICA invites a range of stakeholders to get involved in its work:

- Individuals who will soon be graduating from college or graduate degree programs can [submit their information](#) to be notified when Govern For America's application process is open.
- Early career professionals can [apply](#) for a 12-month, full-time, salaried Civic Impact Corps fellowship focused on broadband and digital equity.
- Interested governmental agencies can [become Govern For America partners](#) to hire the next generation of talent in government.
- Leaders in government, academia, nonprofits, and the private sector can [join GFA's League of Innovators](#) to provide mentorship to and share subject matter expertise with GFA fellows and alumni.
- Those committed to Govern For America's vision can [donate funds](#) to sustain the fellowship program.

To learn more and contact Siegel Family Endowment, visit www.siegelendowment.org