

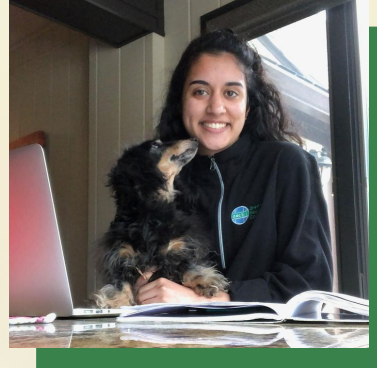
COVID Conversations

Living in unprecedented times, we desired to chronicle how our members' service changed during a global pandemic. We joined Brittanie G. of Evanston, Maya D. of Waukegan, and Robin G. of Hawthorn Woods for a COVID Conversation.

COVID Conversations: Maya D.

How has working at home changed how you view sustainability?

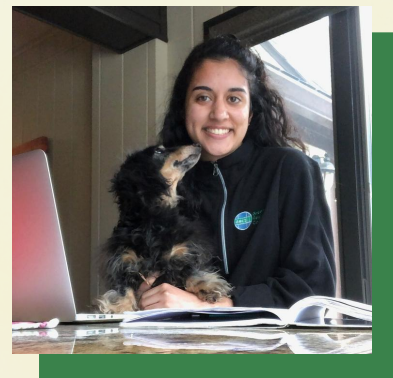
One of the big things that I think about when I think about sustainability work and my job here in Waukegan is fostering a community focused on environmental justice, health, and equity while maintaining a healthy natural world. When I think about COVID and public health in general, it makes me understand how important building community resiliency is now and will be in the future. And the reality that everything intersects, like how public health disparities are worsened in communities experiencing long-term air pollution. The current crisis is making me think more about integrating all the different facets of sustainability and how it affects many fields. Now is a really important time to get the message out to everyone who may have previously thought of sustainability as just “tree hugging” that it is much more- sustainability is about making communities resilient and healthy.



How has your work shifted since you began working from home?

I mean it honestly hasn't shifted that much. My biggest project is writing the sustainability plan, which because I already spent the first half of this program in Waukegan learning about the community, I can write from home based on those past experiences. Obviously, it would be easier to do some community initiatives if I was still there, like our planned Earth Day events. So, for those projects that are more community focused and shorter term, we had to just be comfortable with pushing them off until next year. The reality of my work is that certain projects are paused on the planning phase and having to be okay with that until things are better. Overall, it has not changed a lot.

COVID Conversations: Maya D.



For the sustainability plan, when did you start working on it and how have you been going about developing it?

I basically started working on the plan as soon as I began working in Waukegan because in order to make a sustainability plan that is relevant to the city, you must know the city itself. Not being from the Chicago region, I had heard of Waukegan but was not totally familiar. I began learning about the city by investigating what environmental initiatives were already taking place. I attended meetings concerning the lakefront, toured different facilities, like the water plant, and met with the city engineer concerning the capital improvement plan. I focused my attention on learning about those projects and working to integrate their connections to sustainability. To further help in establishing the plan, I received input from the community through an online survey that was constructed using the Greenest Region Compact (GRC). In it, citizens could choose their priorities and could list their top strategies within those categories. That was open for 1 ½-2 months. After collecting the community input and analyzing the results, I began writing the plan using the GRC categories from the framework and using the strategies to combine the work already being done in Waukegan and goals for the future.



What did the community prioritize in the survey?

The top priorities were economic development, land and lakefront, and sustainable communities, which I found very interesting as it is consistent with the triple bottom line of sustainability, which focuses on economic development, equity, and natural resources. I felt that the results encompassed sustainability really well.

Do you have any other projects you would like to mention?

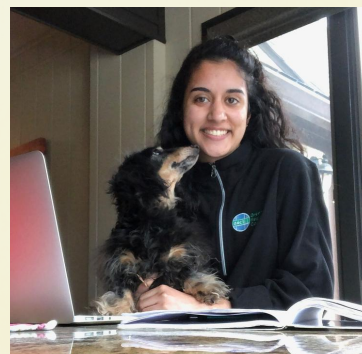
Sure! Because of my past academic and professional experiences with pollinators and my own interest and appreciation of bees, I talked early on with the Mayor about switching city-owned gardens into native pollinator plantings and starting an initiative to make Waukegan's "sustainability character" about pollinators and the Mayor seemed very enthusiastic. Since, I have been working to set up a portion of the sustainability program to be focused on pollinators, working on applying to grants for this work, switching over gardens, and including interpretative signage to help educate the public regarding the associated benefits. We are hoping to do a social media campaign with resources from the Field Museum, specifically connecting monarch butterflies with immigrants within the U.S. and I think connecting these two narratives will resonate well with residents in Waukegan as we have a large immigrant population. Lastly, I have been working with ComEd to restore land under the transmission lines to native plantings. I see it as three parts: community education (interpretive signage/social media), urban beautification and ecosystem services (stormwater management and climate change resiliency), and habitat conservation.



COVID Conversations: Maya D.

How did you first get interested in pollinators and bees?

I have always liked bugs, and I majored in ecology and did summer internships and research related to bees. I like little critters.



So, you were the kid that was playing with little bugs outside? You don't get scared?

Yes, I was that kid. And I fear gross little ones, like the ones with lots of legs. Yet, I appreciate all bugs from a distance and am particular about the ones I will touch.

What do you miss most from your service pre-pandemic?

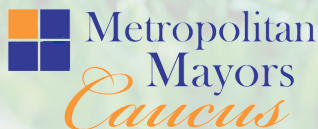
I really miss taking the train because I really like trains and the view of the lake is pretty. I also miss people in the office. They were talkative and funny, and I miss the friendly banter we would have.

Do you have any words of hope or motivation that have been helping you along?

In terms of what I'm doing in Waukegan, I see it, and felt this even before the pandemic, as a way to make communities more resilient and mitigate things like this from happening again. Even though indirect, this work is still important. I feel motivated because I really want to make a community like Waukegan resilient in the face of something like a global pandemic or something related to climate change. I have to keep doing this because I see it as really important to the lives of the community and the residents and that keeps me motivated.



Click here for more information on how you can get involved with the GRCorps.



@GRCorps



We caught up with the GRCorps members in late June when the state was beginning to reopen to see how things had changed.

What does going back to work look like for you or what will it look like?

It's a little unclear – the City of Waukegan is still figuring out a longer-term plan, kind of like the rest of the region. We have been following the Governor's guidelines and phased reopening strategies closely, as well as created our own which corroborate public health guidelines. Per our plan, in the past week or so, people have started going into the Mayor's Office at lower capacity and shortened weeks. The reality is, a lot of my work can be done from home, but it is enhanced and more comprehensive when I am able to talk to people at work about what I'm doing. I think it'll be a while – if ever, in my time – before we are able to get back to an office dynamic which facilitates that kind of discussion and work. If cases continue to be stable and/or are in decline, I will likely begin going back to work as well, at limited capacity and only a couple days a week. City Hall won't allow the public in it for a while still, but for employees to enter we have to sign in and get our temperatures checked. We'll have to wear face masks. We'll see how it goes! What's most important to the City is that everyone stays healthy so we can continue working to the best of our ability.

Did you notice the symbols in the margins of the newsletter?

Each symbol represents a category in the Greenest Region Compact and is placed around actions that depict a GRCorps member working on that category.



Climate



Economic Development



Energy



Land



Leadership



Mobility



Municipal Operations



Sustainable Communities



Waste



Water