
Reaching Beyond the STPF Fellowship

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Yes, current fellows, you can do other things outside of your primary fellowship assignment!

The past year as an AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow has been more rewarding than I've ever expected. My fellowship at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research has provided me with numerous opportunities to use my scientific training to develop and coordinate scientific research programs to improve health, and I'm continuously learning new skills. And like most fellows, I came in with an open mind to use my scientific expertise to benefit society across a broad range of sectors, so why stop at the NIH?

Enter STPF alum Nishal Mohan. I met Nishal at the STPF Career Summit hosted in January 2021 about career opportunities after the fellowship. He founded a nonprofit organization in my current city of San Diego, CA, and I jumped at the opportunity to speak with him. Nishal used the skills he gained during his STPF fellowship at the National Science Foundation from 2013-2015 to launch his own nonprofit, [mohuman \(https://mohuman.org/\)](https://mohuman.org/), which is committed to building community movements that focus on a human-first approach for technology. mohuman provides digitally underserved communities access to a stack of co-developed digital services including high quality, free to low-cost internet service for economic empowerment.

With our shared passion to help society through science, Nishal and I saw an opportunity for me to contribute my experience in behavioral health and my governmental knowledge from the past year of the fellowship to mohuman's mission to serve my local community through a volunteer position. I was especially excited to volunteer with mohuman since I had always been curious about what it was like to work for a nonprofit organization, and this was an opportunity to learn the ins and outs firsthand. As a fellow at the NIH, my interests in health also aligned with mohuman's need for a digital health strategy.

However, following conversations with colleagues, I was discouraged by the apparent limitations restricting my involvement with another organization as a federal employee. A senior mentor, however, told me, "Just go straight to the source and call up the NIH Ethics Office!" After a few conversations with the Ethics Office and my supervisor, we established that mohuman's mission was within the scope of the fellowship goals and consistent with the goals of NIH, reviewed the details of the volunteer opportunity -- created criteria for my roles and capabilities -- and agreed upon regular check-in times. I could now formally claim my volunteer contributions as a part of my NIH official duty and officially became mohuman's "Federal Liaison."

As a Federal Liaison to mohuman, each week I spend a couple hours engaging with city leaders and offer my skillset gained through the STPF fellowship to build solutions with the community. Through participation in the Digital Resilience Coalition, leaders of community-based organizations in San Diego vocalize their stressors and community needs, and academic leaders contribute their knowledge on best practices. My colleagues at mohuman and I incorporate this feedback into our strategy to address needs quickly and effectively.

To help build up mohuman's digital health strategy, I performed a deep literature review, including news stories about recent advances during the COVID-19 pandemic and legislation regarding changes in telehealth regulations. I also spoke with community leaders and academic researchers. Currently, I am helping to create a needs assessment of community members in San Diego's most digitally underserved neighborhoods. In addition, I have been helping to refine mohuman's community messaging, researching community health services to include in mohuman's digital service platform, and attending meetings with local leaders to stay informed about the needs of San Diego's most digitally underserved.

By offering just a few hours a week of my time, I've learned the ins and outs of working in a nonprofit, allowing me to experience two of my career interests at the same time so that I can make a more informed decision about my future career choices.

Moreover, my office at NIH benefits from the knowledge that I've gained from this experience, and my interactions with other agencies and advocacy groups are more well-informed, allowing me to better cater to their needs.

I encourage all fellows to pursue volunteer experiences with different types of organizations during their fellowship. I encourage the STPF program to promote this engagement, especially with STPF alumni, as it further strengthens the program and fellowship network. Despite any initially perceived limitations or barriers, there often are options to allow you to reach beyond the fellowship.

Image: [William Fortunato \(https://www.pexels.com/@william-fortunato\)](https://www.pexels.com/@william-fortunato) via pexels.com

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