

IPA Case Study – Department of Housing and Urban Development

Leveraging innovative ideas for new place-based initiatives and approaches in the Obama administration

When Salin Geevarghese began serving under an Intergovernmental Personnel Act placement at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he had already spent almost 15 years working to understand and implement the policy and program interventions that give vulnerable children and families—and the places they live—the capacity and resources needed to thrive.

At the time, Geevarghese was a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, where he helped lead a new program unit focused on responsible neighborhood redevelopment and regional equity. Then, at the beginning of the economic recession in December 2008, he was asked to serve on a HUD-focused transition committee for the new Obama administration tasked with formulating innovative ideas to reimagine the agency. Soon thereafter, White House and HUD leaders asked Geevarghese to serve as an IPA at the department, believing that he possessed the skills and capacities to work both within HUD and across different federal agencies.

As an IPA, Geevarghese was part of the leadership team supporting a collaboration between HUD, the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency called the Partnership for Sustainable Communities.

As part of this work, he helped launch and staff a new HUD office, the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, and worked with leaders within the agency and across the administration to create the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a six-year program that represented the largest federal investment in comprehensive, integrated planning across agencies in 40 years. The program awarded 143 grants and conducted planning efforts that impacted 40% of the U.S. population.¹

These investments were designed to work in alignment with other grants and interventions across the federal system in a transformational attempt to foster an “all of government,” aspirational approach to local problem solving.

Throughout his tenure, Geevarghese worked directly with members of the White House, senior leaders in other agencies and in the HUD secretary’s office, state and local government leaders, domestic and international stakeholder leaders from nonprofits, private sector trade associations and industry groups,

¹ Fairchild, Denise and Patrick Revord. “Planning Livable Communities: Findings from HUD’s Regional Planning and Community Challenge Grant Programs.” *Cityscape: Planning Livable Communities*. Office of Policy Development and Research, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Vol 19 No. 3. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscpe/vol19num3/guest1.pdf>



and philanthropic leaders interested in place-based policy solutions to social, community and economic challenges.

He acknowledged that the work could be “intense,” but emphasized that there was a sense of “urgency” to get things done and take advantage of “a window to make change.” “We had to match the scope and scale of solutions to the scope and scale of the challenges we were facing,” he said.

Geevarghese’s contributions were made possible by a reimbursable IPA agreement between HUD and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Geevarghese ultimately converted from an IPA to a senior political appointee, serving over seven years in the Obama administration—first as senior advisor, then as acting director of the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, and ultimately as deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Policy Development and Research.

Geevarghese’s application also helped certify the Annie E. Casey Foundation as an eligible organization to send IPAs, thus opening the doors for dozens of other Casey Foundation employees to serve as placements as well.

The perspectives he brought to the federal space as an expert and thought leader on the outside prompted HUD to innovate in other ways, including allowing foundation program officers to serve on review panels—a change that has made the agency’s grant-making process more impactful and outcomes-driven.

For Geevarghese, the IPA exchange “was an unbelievable opportunity for the son of an immigrant to serve the country and to represent, both domestically and internationally, the U.S. government at the highest level.”

It was also a “transformational chance to understand how federal capacity, policy and investment can both erect barriers to change and be mobilized to solve problems with local leaders.”

“Most experts and advocates aspire for the federal government to perform at higher levels without knowing exactly how it functions,” he said. “The IPA exchange gave me an insider’s take, and it’s been enormously valuable in my work now—over 10 years later.”