

# The Gerontology Institute Blog

University of Massachusetts Boston

## Valued Partnership

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***Internship benefits housing provider and doctoral student while supporting older adult residents***

When a Boston-based affordable housing developer wanted to survey their residents to better support their health-related needs, they paused. What did they know about approaching older adults to inquire about their personal healthcare?

“We’re developers and project managers, not social workers or healthcare providers,” says Amarillys Rodriguez, Development and Policy Project Manager for the Planning Office for Urban Affairs (POUA). “We needed to bridge this gap and have the kind of expertise on hand to help us better understand our residents.”



— Elisabeth Stam, gerontology doctoral student

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POUA reached out to created a graduate as distinguished Geronto while gaining useful w

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A social justice ministr located in Eastern Ma POUA wanted to learr support such as preve confidential survey to insurance coverage and healthcare provider relationships.

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“If we gather this information, we’ll be able to identify any patterns or clusters of particular issues to pay attention to and create on-site, health-targeted resident services,” says Rodriguez.

Elisabeth Stam, a first-year doctoral student studying Gerontology at UMass Boston, began her internship with POUA in the fall of 2020 continuing through the Spring 2021 semester. Among her responsibilities was helping to develop and structure the survey to describe respondents’ health needs. Having someone with an understanding of gerontology and knew how to word questions so residents felt comfortable to participate and respond, was key to a successful survey, notes Rodriguez.

“Elisabeth and the Gerontology Institute are really guiding us with their vast experience with this population,” she says. “It is also helpful to have an intern build the capacity of the office and take on this work while we continue [with our day-to-day responsibilities].”

Stam, a Licensed Certified Social Worker in Massachusetts, was already skilled at crafting and implementing surveys, interviewing clients, and analyzing results. Working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, she conducted one-on-one meetings with property managers and resident service coordinators at the housing units over Zoom. As these individuals would be instrumental in distributing and collecting the surveys, Stam walked them through the specifics of the survey and responded to questions.

“It’s always important to involve vital stakeholders throughout a survey initiative – from inception to conclusion,” says Stam. “By meeting with the property managers and resident service coordinators we were able to include them in the vision of the survey project from the onset.

“One crucial question a resident service coordinator asked was: ‘what is the overarching goal of this survey?’ We explained that our survey is a learning opportunity to hear directly from respondents about their health care needs so POUA would be able to better serve the community by gaining awareness, information, and understanding.”

Stam, who found the experience to be a wonderful supplement to her academic studies, worked with POUA staff and colleagues at the Gerontology Institute to edit and update the survey.

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“As a team, we collaborated to ensure that the survey is optimized to measure resident needs with the knowledge of our staff and residents.”

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The internship has been a great experience. The second gerontology student will return in the fall with a new perspective.

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“Our partnership with the Health and Housing Institute finished the baseline survey. Any organization would benefit from this experience, and creative ideas to the table.”

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Rodriguez says having a gerontology student assist them with this project has been invaluable.

“You’re building a relationship with an educational institution, you’re supporting the learning experience of a student and you’re learning a lot from the student in return,” says Rodriguez. “I think this kind of exchange only enriches how we think about resident services.”

Stam says including a doctoral student researcher through an internship program is a worthwhile investment for any organization.

“We’re trained to be interdisciplinary thinkers,” she says. “Gerontology students possess exceptional critical, analytical thinking along with excellent written and verbal communication skills. Gerontology PhD students are renaissance individuals, that can approach projects from multiple perspectives and are infused in contemporary research trends, which is a major asset to any organization looking to accomplish relevant, pioneering work in the field of aging for the present and into the future.”

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