

Bridging Community and Policy: How Tomisha Hicks is Driving Systemic Change

This inaugural alumni feature from the CUNY SPH Foundation highlights the impact of targeted student support on career success.



Tomisha Hicks, MPH '23, is a public health professional whose journey—from aspiring physician to policy advocate—demonstrates how structured mentorship, hands-on experience, and professional networks can shape leaders who drive lasting systemic change.

As a Gil Addo Fellow, a prestigious opportunity funded by the CUNY SPH Foundation, Tomisha gained real-world experience supporting community-led public health initiatives through the Harlem Health Initiative (HHI). Today, she applies those skills as the Administrative Manager for Labor and Employment Law Programs at Cornell University, where she focuses on cannabis workforce development and economic justice.

Laying the Foundation: A Passion for Public Health

Tomisha's commitment to public health began early. Raised in the rural South, she saw how policy decisions, economic disparities, and structural inequities shaped health outcomes. She initially pursued medicine, but while shadowing physicians she had an eye-opening realization:

“There is only so much that can be achieved in a doctor's office. I saw my grandparents take their insulin, but it didn't matter if they couldn't afford the copay or find the foods their doctor recommended. That's when I knew I wanted to focus on the root causes, not just the symptoms.”

Determined to address health disparities through policy and advocacy, Tomisha shifted her focus to public health. As an undergraduate at the University of Alabama, she led on-campus initiatives on HIV/AIDS advocacy, maternal health, and sexual health access, reinforcing her belief that policy-driven solutions are essential for health equity.

From the Classroom to Community Impact

Tomisha's first experienced New York City through an undergraduate fellowship. She was drawn to its history, activism, and energy. After graduating, she returned as a math teacher in Brownsville, Brooklyn, one of the city's most underserved communities. There, she saw how housing instability, food insecurity, and healthcare barriers directly impacted her students' success.

“No matter how well I taught, their environment still got in the way. I realized that if I wanted to make a difference, I had to think bigger.”

Determined to bridge the gap between policy decisions and community needs, Tomisha enrolled at CUNY SPH, drawn to its mission of training public health leaders to advance health equity.

The Gil Ado Fellowship: Accelerating Impact

During her final year at CUNY SPH, Tomisha was selected for the Gil Ado Fellowship, a competitive program funded by the CUNY SPH Foundation that provides students with applied learning opportunities and leadership experience. As a Fellow with the Harlem Health Initiative (HHI), Tomisha worked directly on cannabis equity and community engagement, key issues following New York’s legalization of recreational marijuana.

“There was excitement about Black and brown entrepreneurship in the cannabis industry, but also frustration. Communities like Harlem felt left out of the conversation.”

As a Fellow, she worked with Harlem residents and local organizations, listening to their concerns and helping to develop sustainable advocacy and education programs. She also launched the Cannabis Equity Collaborative, a research initiative mapping dispensaries and surveying community perspectives.

Through this experience, Tomisha saw how community organizations often have great ideas but lack the infrastructure to sustain them. Her role was to help build that capacity, ensuring that communities most affected by policy shifts had a voice in shaping them.



Mentorship and Leadership in Public Health



A pivotal part of Tomisha’s Fellowship experience was her mentorship under Deborah Levine, LCSW, ACSW, Director of HHI.

“Deborah showed me how to translate theory into practice—how to navigate community dynamics, build trust, and still push for public health goals.”

This mentorship gave Tomisha the confidence to lead policy-focused projects and the skills to manage community-driven initiatives.

“Sometimes, you have to throw the book out and work on the community’s timeline. That’s something I carry into all my work.”

From Fellowship to Career: Driving Workforce Equity

The connections Tomisha built through HHI directly led to her current role at Cornell University, where she manages labor and employment law programs. She continues to work on cannabis workforce equity through the New York State Cannabis Workforce Initiative, ensuring that historically marginalized individuals can access career opportunities in the growing industry.

"The skills I developed at CUNY SPH and with HHI gave me a direct pathway into this role. It demonstrates the power of transferable skills and the importance of community-driven work."

Alumni Engagement and the Power of Investing in Students

As an alumna of both CUNY SPH and the Gil Addo Fellowship, Tomisha urges students to explore wide-ranging careers in public health—from policy and healthcare to workforce development and technology.

"The Gil Ado Fellowship didn't make me passionate about public health—I was always on this path. But it gave me the experiences, mentorship, and professional network to accelerate my growth and amplify my impact."

Her story is a testament to the power of investing in students.

"There are so many students like me—driven, committed, ready to do the work. We just need the right opportunities. That's how we build the next generation of public health leaders."

