

# A Grassroots Approach to Equitable Algorithmic Governance for Underserved Communities Using the Paragon Model

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Many city and county governments lack the resources necessary to address inequities associated with technological access to essential government services, particularly in communities with high immigrant and migrant populations where language remains a central barrier to government assistance. In light of this gap, we introduce the Paragon Policy Fellowship, a nationwide initiative that integrates technically-proficient, civically-engaged college students into policy projects with local government agencies to tackle issues associated with technology integration and algorithmic fairness within civic institutions.

We explain how a successful case study from the fellowship, derived from the Paragon Organizational Model, serves as a proof-of-concept for addressing algorithmic justice and accessibility issues at the local level. This case study, completed in partnership with the City of St. Louis, empowered individuals from civic and technical backgrounds to collaboratively devise AI procurement and implementation policies centering DEI in language access. In such cases where city officials lack expertise on immigrant barriers to government services, contributions from community members with immigrant backgrounds is essential to the design and implementation process of government services. We propose the project-based Paragon Fellowship as an adaptable civic engagement model to successfully engage local youth with policymakers in city and state government capacity-building surrounding access to critical government services.

## **The Paragon Model**

The Paragon Model operates on three pillars to support successful collaboration between governments and youth constituencies:

- (1) **Empowering local government through a community-driven approach:** The Paragon team matches local students from diverse academic backgrounds with their local governments for four months to conduct in-depth research and produce a policy brief advising on a technology policy issue specific to the local community, enabling governments to address AI issues they lack the capacity to address on their own.
- (2) **Increasing and maintaining diversity within the AI governance space:** Equitable, comprehensive, and anti-discriminatory civic solutions necessitate diverse perspectives and backgrounds: 75% of Paragon fellows are from underrepresented backgrounds, 41% are first-generation students, and 34% are Pell Grant-eligible. Throughout the fellowship, fellows have access to policy directors with extensive government work experience, speaker events featuring AI policy experts, and office hours providing mentorship.
- (3) **Building a grassroots-first network for digital cooperation, literacy, and advancement with potential for global scalability:** To foster cross-cultural communication, Paragon created an

online community to empower discourse, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing across diverse AI governance-focused issues.

### **Paragon Case Study: AI as a Tool for Language Access**

This abstract highlights a project completed by Paragon fellows in Spring of 2024 to increase language access and thereby access to opportunity and government services for historically underserved and marginalized communities in St. Louis, Missouri. As globalization facilitates immigration, language access becomes essential for the democratization of essential government services such as emergency broadcasts, welfare programs, and safety protocols. St. Louis, Missouri is one such city experiencing an influx of immigrant residents, with extensive increases in Asian and Hispanic populations. The city's existing Office of New Americans currently faces difficulties with promptly addressing the needs of its growing, increasingly diverse constituency. Advancements in artificial intelligence provide one of the most salient ways to bolster and expedite their critical work as staff can utilize Large Language Models (LLMs) to translate legal documents.

Over four months, Paragon St. Louis fellows engaged with stakeholders and city government officials to understand the fundamentals of technology governance and procurement in St. Louis, processes associated with its Office of New Americans (ONA), and critical policy infrastructure as it relates to AI-powered language services and potential for expansion. Upon conducting a literature review of LLMs for language translation, examining national standards for responsible usage, and fine-tuning an open source model as a proof-of-concept, the fellows established a feasible, research-backed implementation plan for St. Louis to integrate AI into their language services. Throughout the project, the fellows' prioritization of three critical areas — (1) transparency, (2) accountability, and (3) bias mitigation — ensured that new algorithms and mechanizations proposed to the city were equitable and safe for historically underserved communities.

Existing governance and public resource distribution strategies lack emphasis on community-centered solutions that account for the diverse populations they serve. It is widely known that technological solutions may improve access and mitigate inequities at scale. However, their effective design and implementation relies on thorough, technically-sound research that local governments often lack the capacity to conduct. Accordingly, the Paragon Model serves as a bridge for this research-to-practice gap, effectively pairing local expertise with governments to promote equitable access of algorithmically-driven interventions within civic institutions.

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