

SoPA professor named one of three IDEAAL Fellows

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Tihara Sommers, PhD, is a Professor of Practice in the John Lewis Public Administration Program at the Tulane School of Professional Advancement.

Editor's note: This article appeared first on the applied learning fellowships website of the University of Washington.

[Tihara Richardson Sommers](#), Ph.D., MPA, MPP, can point to one case that changed the course of her career. She was working for the Florida Board of Nursing when Hurricane Irma hit in 2017 and her job brought her to the Hollywood Hills Nursing Home. “Basically they had an emergency preparedness plan in place that had never really been tested,” said Sommers, “so when the hurricane hit they decided to hunker down in the nursing home instead of evacuating while they were without power. Because they didn’t work out the plans, it got really, really hot in the facility

and it ended up that 12 people died in the incident.”

Temperatures were as high as 108 degrees Fahrenheit when first responders entered the nursing home. They reported that it felt like the inside of a car on a hot day. “And then the kicker,” said Sommers, “was that the nursing home was across the street from a hospital. So they could have evacuated those residents across the street.”

The investigation that I worked on basically penalized the lowest level of nurses which were the certified nursing assistants because they followed the plan that was written for them,” said Sommers. “That for me was a red flag because nurses aren’t the ones that make emergency preparedness plans for the facilities, but if things go wrong they’re usually the first ones we hold accountable.”

After the incident Sommers left Florida for Virginia where she pursued a Ph.D. in Public Administration and Policy at Old Dominion University. Her dissertation research focused on emergency preparedness in United States nursing homes.

In 2022, Sommers became a Professor of Practice in the John Lewis Public Administration Program at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her current work focuses on evacuation plans for long-term care facilities in Hillsborough County, Florida and how they were implemented after hurricanes Helene and Milton hit there sequentially in 2024.

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“Not only am I an academic, but I’m also here to make an impact in the community that I’m in.”

Tihara Sommers