



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: The Door's Legal Services Center

Update 1: Today marks the end of my first two weeks at The Door's Legal Services Center. The Door is an amazing organization that serves around 8,000 young people in New York City each year, providing job training, educational support, health care, counseling, access to necessities like food, clothing, etc. and, of course, legal services. Most of the legal staff at The Door help young people with immigration law, but my work this summer will focus on civil legal matters that young people are facing. This can range from housing concerns, questions about receiving government benefits, family law issues, employment law, etc.

The first two weeks have largely consisted of trainings, including discussions with The Door's social work team and observation of immigration court. I have also been able to meet some of the young people at The Door, and have been conducting research about child support payments, processing name changes, allocating power of attorney, and child custody cases. I already can tell that my legal research and writing skills will be greatly benefitted from my time at The Door. Most of all though I am so happy to be in a position where I can interact with individuals, build relationships, and see the application of all I've learned my first year in law school.

Update 2: It's been another 2.5 weeks at The Door! Last week I was able to conduct my first solo client interview, which was great. Most of our client work is still virtual because of COVID (and also for the convenience of the young people we work with), so the time I have gotten to interact face-to-masked-face with members of The Door has been especially welcome. The past few days I have been working on a research project regarding the factors considered by the court when making a "best-interest" determination in a child custody hearing and have been drafting a letter to support a student's status as independent for the purposes of college financial aid.

Something I noticed these past weeks is that many of the individuals we work with need more immediate assistance than the legal system can provide. This means that filing a claim, taking their case to court, etc. would not resolve their issue within the time frame necessary. As a result, much of the work I've been assigned involves resolving client's cases through extralegal means: working through bureaucratic or other institutional structures, settling disputes between individuals without the intervention of the court. Often this has meant knowing what sorts of claims clients could bring to court and using this possibility as a way to achieve leverage for the young adults we serve.



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Last, pictured below is the view from The Door's float in the NYC 2022 Pride parade. I was able to volunteer in the parade, and it was so fun to connect with other queer folks from The Door and to spread the word about our organization

Update 3: Last week marked the halfway point in my summer internship at The Door! Time has passed so quickly, which makes me even more excited to complete law school and to start working full-time in civil legal services.

Since my last update I have been researching a question about nursing licenses for a client, learning the ins-and-outs of HP actions (claims brought by tenants to ensure that the owner of their property makes appropriate repairs), and preparing to help a client correct their gender and name on their birth certificate.

I have continued working on the project I last wrote about: supporting a student trying to get independent student status for the purposes of college financial aid. I have loved being able to build a sustained relationship with this individual and can see how our rapport and trust has built over time. With this client I feel invested, both professionally and personally, in getting them the best outcome. I am reminded of the ways in which legal work so often deemphasizes empathetic communication and sustained relationships. Even within many legal services organizations, because the demand for legal aid is so great, the ability to meet client's holistic needs and understand the entirety of their legal situation is limited (since many organizations must work quickly to resolve a client's particular legal need, so that they can serve as many individuals as possible). I feel grateful to work at an organization that has the capacity to allow for relationship-building with clients.

Update 4: The past two weeks at The Door have flown by, and it has been great to see some of the projects I've been working on begin to wrap up. Last week, a young person and I mailed off their application to correct the name and gender on their birth certificate. Two other students were able to submit letters from The Door supporting their status as independent students for the purpose of college financial aid (especially important for students that are estranged from their parents and cannot depend on them for financial support).

There is always new work though, and I have been learning about the implied warrant of habitability of rental properties as background for a client's needs, have reached out to various organizations to do research on workplace sexual harassment claims, and have been reading about the effects that student debt collection has on individuals' credit scores.

I have so appreciated the range of legal issues that I've been exposed to so far at The Door. Despite the incredible variety of questions that have crossed our desk, one commonality has been the difficulty of operating in a legal system that does not privilege the voices of young people. The variation in legal rights individuals have based on their age is understandable, but at the same time, it assumes that adults and parents are capable of looking out for the best interests of young people. The way the system currently functions, there are not enough paths for young people to exert their autonomy in legal settings.



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Update 5: I concluded my internship at The Door about three weeks ago, so it's time for me to share my final EJA Fellow Update. I wanted to share two stories of cases I worked on this summer, both of which revealed the fundamental challenges that young adults face in the legal system.

Two young adults came to The Door asking for help with their housing vouchers. They each had successfully gotten their own housing voucher and were looking to move into a new apartment. But since their parent was still claiming them as a dependent in other public housing, their independent vouchers were not valid. In both circumstances, the individual had not lived with their guardian for over a year and had left home due to abusive conditions. The Housing Authority told both individuals that the only way to get off their parents' lease, and thus get their own voucher working, was to contact their parent.

Another young adult was trying to get off their parent's healthcare plan. The young adult is trans and had not been in contact with their transphobic family for over a year. Despite having their own insurance through their employer, they were still listed on their parents' plan, which allowed the parents to see where and when they were receiving medical care. After hours on the phone, the individual was told that the only way to remove themselves from the policy was to be removed by their father.

In both these circumstances, to get the result they wanted and needed, these young adults were effectively being told they needed to sacrifice their safety and negotiate with their estranged guardians.

The resolution in both these cases came from outside the context of the courtroom. Regarding the vouchers, my supervisor was able to get in contact with a housing lawyer at Legal Aid who was able to explain the situation to the Housing Authority and advocate for the young adults' removal from their parents' leases. Regarding the health insurance, after a three-hour long call, we learned that the company's policy in fact DID allow the young adult to remove themselves from their parent's policy.

These stories illustrate some of my major take-aways from this summer: 1) the legal system forces individuals to re-share and re-expose themselves to the very traumas they are trying to distance themselves from, 2) resources—including time, money, professional networks, familiarity with bureaucratic processes—often determine outcomes before reaching the courtroom, and 3) it is inherently challenging to create legal rules that should apply to the whole population. In general, I understand why adults are granted privileges over their children, but what of circumstances like this, when we are dealing with young adults whose safety depends on limiting parental rights?

I leave this summer feeling grateful to have worked with so many clients willing to advocate for themselves, and feeling driven to see our legal system reshaped to better serve those it is meant to protect