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Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Brooklyn Legal Services

Update 1: For my first summer internship during law school, I'm working in Brooklyn with Legal Services NYC as part of their LGBTQ/HIV Unit. Our team works to prevent evictions and preserve affordable housing for clients who are in the LGBTQ community and/or living with HIV/AIDS. I could not ask for a better introduction to housing and tenants' rights than working with a team focused on these specific communities.

I'm also very grateful for the assistance from Equal Justice America which has been a big help in making my journey all the way from The University of Texas School of Law possible!

Update 2: It's about the mid-point of my internship this semester, and I've become a lot more comfortable with understanding the housing world in New York City. Through my internship at Legal Services NYC in Brooklyn, I've been able to attend housing court with our attorneys and see how they negotiate client needs with landlord demands. I've also been able to assist in their motion practice by preparing answers in eviction proceedings and researching applicable defenses. I came into the summer with a loose goal of wanting more research and writing experience, and I've been able to do interesting work that has provided me with writing samples for use in the future.

The experience has made me consider taking part in the housing clinic at my law school and connecting the skills I am building here with work to assist low-income tenants in Austin. A career as a housing attorney is becoming more and more viable as I talk to my coworkers about their journey and the experiences they have working with their union.

Update 3: As I'm nearing the end of my internship with Legal Services NYC, I am continuing to support my attorneys through a discrimination complaint in the New York City Commission on Human Rights. This claim involves a transgender man who was violently threatened in low-income housing by another tenant. Our team brought a claim with the commission, and after the other side refused on a settlement offer, we are preparing to bring suit in New York state Supreme Court.



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Knowing my interest in direct client work, my attorneys were kind enough to set up an interview with the client so we could get more facts for the possible state Supreme Court case. I wrote the questions for the call and was able to use my previous experience in trauma-based fields to collect more details about the transphobic discrimination the client faced. The experience was a great marriage of the work I did before law school in a domestic violence shelter and the work I want to do as a practicing attorney.

In addition, I've continued to attend our intake hours at the local LGBTQ health clinic, Callen-Lorde, and have been able to do short research projects related to the questions clients have raised, including questions regarding tax law. These have been good practice in jumping into an area of the law where I don't have any experience and learning enough to provide a satisfactory answer.

As always, I'm grateful to Equal Justice America for their support this summer.

Update 4:

This past week I was asked to meet with a client 1-on-1 in order to get some information for a responsive motion about his eviction case. This client and I had emailed back and forth before, but this in-person meeting would happen while my supervisor was out of town.

However, the meeting did not go as planned, and the client was open about his frustration with how the case was going. He didn't understand why certain information needed to be collected and was upset that he hadn't been given the opportunity to share his story with a judge in court. Despite my efforts to explain the bigger picture of why I was asked to meet with him to get certain info, the client remained confused and unwilling to continue the conversation. I decided to end the meeting and let the two of us get recalibrated instead of rushing through the meeting.

At my old job when clients were upset, I was in a different position as I was not directly assisting with the motion practice and strategy of the case. Back then, I was more of a social worker who could offer support and listen to a client talk through their options. Here though, I was much more of a pseudo-attorney in this client's eyes, and his frustration with how the case was being handled was more closely linked with me. I had to fight off using the simplistic and patronizing excuse that the client should answer the questions I had asked because it's just what the court expected of us. Court proceedings and policies truly do not often make sense to people not in the legal profession, and my impulse was to just tell this client to trust us. However, trust is not a guarantee in the world of legal aid, and we as practitioners shouldn't expect that it's owed to us. After we ended the meeting, I called my supervisor who then called the client and reassured him of the larger goals of the client's case.

I'm glad I got a reminder of this lesson, and I'm thankful that Equal Justice America helped me to be here this summer to exercise direct client skills again.



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Update 5: My summer with Brooklyn Legal Services' HIV Unit was fantastic. I was drawn to New York, and to HIV-related legal work particularly, after reading Sarah Schulman's *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*. In fact, I mentioned the book in both my cover letter and interview. When I met the attorneys I would be working with, I felt that we had a good rapport. I'm happy to report that after 10 weeks, I still think that those attorneys are incredible people and advocates. I'm very lucky to have seen a glimpse of what work and what kind of lifestyle could await me in 5-10 years. I'll be sure to pay it forward whenever I am in a similar mentorship position.

In my past career in family violence law, it was hard to feel that our clients got a "win." Protective orders require police enforcement, custody orders can be broken – every remedy our legal team helped to provide required explaining a caveat or a gentle apology that our services didn't extend to where they needed. Eviction defense work, however, felt a lot more successful from my perspective. Even keeping a tenant in their apartment for an extra six or nine months felt like a colossal victory when the alternative was ejection from their home. Because of that feeling, this summer reminded me that public interest work is not all gloom and doom - that when we support our attorneys and legal professionals with adequate pay and team support, our low-income community members benefit from better legal aid.

I am reaffirmed that public interest is a viable career path for me. Breaking into a different field of work has helped me to build on the skills I already had and learn from any initial discomfort I had from learning about a new area of the law. I'm particularly happy to better understand the bridge between these two worlds, family law and housing. Housing is healthcare, and housing is safety. Now equipped with an introduction of what rights are available to tenants, I want to participate in the housing and domestic violence clinics at Texas Law.

Thank you to Equal Justice America for the incredible support this summer. Without it, I would not have been able to lean in as much into the work at my internship. I want to take the lessons I've learned this summer back with me to Texas Law, and advocate for better working conditions for public interest attorneys. We cannot accept that "all work and no pay" is a sustainable model for the professionals who are providing legal aid.