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Summer '17

This summer I was a law clerk for Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) in Edison, NJ through the Deborah Portiz Fellowship, whose namesake was the first woman to serve as Attorney General for the State of New Jersey. I was one of four interns in this particular office; there were two law students and two Princeton undergraduates. LSNJ is one of 23 offices through New Jersey's 21 counties. This office had various departments, including consumer protection, which mostly challenges predatory pay-day loans that are illegal in the state; family law which handles child abuse, neglect and guardianship cases; employment law; foreclosure defense and housing, which handle landlord-tenant issues and foreclosure issues; health care and state benefits; tax law, which assists citizens having issues with the IRS; domestic violence, which provides assistance in securing protective orders; and immigration representation, including assistance in asylum and deportation cases; and prisoner rights advocacy. LSNJ also provides a statewide legal hotline that provides brief advice and referral over the telephone.

I participated all sectors of LSNJ, if not through direct client representation, then through writing and research for memos and briefs. Within the consumer protection department, I completed a summary of the Financial Choice Act before Congress and analyzed the effect it would have on New Jersey consumers and whether it would make it easier for consumers to be goaded into predatory short-term loans and credit card interest rates with little redress. In family law, I updated several materials for parents seeking to challenge determinations by child protective services regarding abuse in their homes. I was also able to help with the execution of Family Day, which is an event celebrating families that have been reunited with the help of Legal Services offices throughout the state. At that event, I primarily acted as a liaison for the families, doing everything from answering questions to watching their children during the principal presentation. Foreclosure defense mostly required researching foreclosure laws in the fifty states.

My substantive work with clients – or to a lesser degree, work with specific client files—came in the areas of employment law, tax, social security benefits and domestic violence. The employment law group had three cases before the Supreme Court for three separate but related clients who were released from their positions following absences due to health conditions that were aggravated by their jobs. The law provides them with the opportunity to collect unemployment benefits provided they follow certain steps in leaving their work due to health conditions. The law, however, is vague and certain unique circumstances for each case were used to repeatedly deny the clients financial assistance. My role was to review their files and the briefs already composed and research laws in other states that may provide lenient medical exceptions for unemployment benefits in cases similar to our clients.

In tax, I researched whether a client of ours would be required to disclose a settlement payment from her previous employer to the IRS and if doing so would be a violation of a confidentiality agreement that she signed with the company.

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Next, in one of my most substantive client contacts, I maintained contact with a client who was attempting to challenge her denial for welfare benefits due to her inability to prove her citizenship. Having been born in the backwoods of small town in the South via a midwife, she did not possess a birth certificate or even have an exact date of birth. The confusion over her birthdate was exacerbated by a previous incorrect social security card filing. I talked to this client numerous times over the summer, mostly allowing her to tell me her story many times as it was obviously causing her increasing degrees of depression; the talking and empathy process was clearly beneficial to her dealing with the situation. Also, being able to hear the facts many times informed the ways in which I attempted to find a way to prove her birth date.

Finally, I completed a memo for the domestic violence unit regarding how robbery can be used to show the domestic violence necessary to obtain a temporary restraining order, and more substantively, I worked with a client who came to the United States via a fiancée visa (K1 visa) and subsequently faced abuse by her husband. In the latter assignment, I reviewed the clients file and talked to the client about all the instances of abuse and who was a witness to it. At the Superior Court, while I was only observing her case, in the downtime a big part of my job was to keep her calm as she tended to constantly worry about the outcome of her case. As to be expected, she was also very broken up about how her life had escalated how it had. I learned from my supervising attorney that a significant part of the job is managing the clients feelings; the most effective advocate keeps a client in a position to also advocate for themselves.

My summer at LSNJ was very rewarding. Though this particular office participating in the Fellowship had needs besides constant client contact, the memos I completed, even if only tangentially related to a client, still went to our clients ultimate case and, moreover, toward advocacy for the New Jersey citizenry.