

Dear Equal Justice America,

I am deeply grateful for the funding that you have provided me with this summer. With your assistance, I was able to work at Brooklyn Defender Services, Family Defense Practice where I supported attorneys who are working to protecting families who are facing disruptive and traumatic child welfare involvement. I have found this work to be hugely fulfilling, challenging, and important.

Brooklyn Defender Services, Family Defense Practice provides representation to indigent parents in child welfare proceedings in Brooklyn. The child welfare system in New York City – and across the country – disproportionately and discriminatorily polices families of color and low-income communities. The child welfare system has been described as a “Jane Crow” system where low-income women of color are punished for living in poverty or other behaviors that are never addressed in wealthier, white communities. While the Family Court system purports to be rehabilitative, in reality, it functions in extremely punitive measures. Brooklyn Defender Services, Family Defense Practices reduces the harm inflicted on these families by providing high quality, interdisciplinary representation to parents in child welfare proceedings. I was honored to be able to join them in these efforts this summer.

I had the opportunity to work with many clients this summer, in both English and Spanish. The most rewarding part of my work this summer was the instances where I was able to provide some comfort to parents who were enduring terribly challenging circumstances. I had the opportunity to work with a client to draft a motion for expanded visitation that resulted in her child being returned to her care. This was hugely rewarding as she had been required to leave her child in the care of another family member and was only able to see her 16-month old child twice weekly in order to accommodate the caregiver’s schedule. I also worked with several clients to request emergency hearings to allow them to return to their homes and live with their children.

I observed how painful family separation is for both parents and children, and how bewildering the court process can be. On one particularly painful instance, I observed a 13-year-old child, through his attorney, begging the Administration for Children’s Services to allow him to remain home with his mother during the pendency of the hearings. ACS did not consent, however, and he was separate from his mother while he was crying in the courthouse. I learned from a supervising attorney that ACS had allowed the child to return home after the weekend. To me, this is a powerful example of how ACS gratuitously inflicts trauma on children and families and is not responsive to the needs of the families it purports to protect.

This summer’s work has confirmed my desire to work in the field of family defense. I think that attorneys who do this work in a thoughtful, deliberate, and interdisciplinary manner can transform the quality of representation that parents receive in child welfare proceedings and ensure that parents are treated more fairly. I am so grateful to Equal Justice America for their support in these endeavors.

Sincerely,

Carmen Tellez  
New York University School of Law