



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:

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Update 1: Just finished my second week working for the Public Benefits team at Legal Aid Chicago! It's already been so rewarding. I have been able to get hands-on experience at all different parts of the process, from conducting client intakes myself to writing memos to listening in on hearings regarding appeals.

Update 2: It's been nearly a month since I started working for the Public Benefits practice group, and specifically the Medical Legal Partnerships team, at Legal Aid Chicago. Over this past month I've jumped into a lot of new projects and have been able to connect with and assist clients experiencing levels of adversity that I have never experienced before. For example, I have been able to guide clients experiencing domestic violence in how to receive orders of protection, have extensively researched into Medicare Savings Programs for the elderly who need coverage for their Medicare premiums, and tomorrow I hope to have my first SOAR intake to assist a client experiencing homelessness. The Medical Legal Partnerships team gets client referrals directly from Chicago hospitals, which is why we focus on their public benefits needs as well as the other wide-ranging legal issues these clients may have. This has expanded my legal knowledge in ways far beyond what I anticipated.

Update 3: For my next EJA Fellow update, I want to discuss something a little more... deep, I guess? I've now seen firsthand how the public benefits system is designed to be inaccessible and is so overly means-tested that millions of people in poverty are ineligible because they aren't suffering quite enough to be deemed worth helping.

Most public benefits programs only accept people who are making at or below the federal poverty line, or set their cutoff at some small percentage above-- 135%, for example. The federal poverty line in 2022 is \$13,590 a year for a one person and \$23,030 a year for a family of 3. For context, I live in a "cheap" 2-bedroom apartment below market rate for our neighborhood and my boyfriend and I pay over \$13k a year just for rent, before any other living costs.

Another example: To receive SSI disability benefits, an individual cannot have over \$2,000 in assets. That includes savings in a bank account. So basically, disabled people are required to remain extremely poor to continue to receive any financial assistance at all.



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This isn't news to people in the field, and it wasn't all brand-new to me either. But it's difficult to have to ask clients dozens of financial questions only to find that they're just a couple hundred dollars above the cutoff point. Too poor to have any real stability in their life, too "well off" to receive any help.

Still, that makes me all the more dedicated to the work my team is doing. We direct people to other resources whenever we can, and strongly advocate for people to receive the benefits that they are entitled to have.

Update 4: For my next EJA Fellow update I would like to talk about one of the most interesting days of my internship, when I and the other intern shadowed an attorney who was doing client visits at Stroger Hospital.

In my last legal role, when we had to meet with clients they would come to our office, but mostly we communicated by phone. Then, when coronavirus hit, everything went virtual. A lot of the work Legal Aid Chicago does is still virtual, over phone or email, which is an amazing advancement for some communities, such as disabled people who have a difficult time leaving their homes or parents without childcare. But for people who have limited access to technology or are inexperienced with it, particularly seniors and the homeless, in-person visits are necessary to make sure they don't slip through the cracks.

It also sped up the process considerably, to the benefit of our client. The client we visited at Stroger was experiencing homelessness and did not have a phone. Doing our intake with him in-person and submitting an application for benefits took a little less than an hour. Trying to do that virtually with someone we have difficulty reaching could take weeks of failed attempts, calling relatives and shelters. I hope to do many more in-person visits with clients in my future career in legal aid.

Update 5: For my final EJA Fellow update I wanted to look back at the work I did over the past 10 weeks at Legal Aid Chicago. I assisted either directly or indirectly with 16 clients. For 4 of these clients my work on their case directly led to a positive outcome: Either being approved/reinstated for benefits, receiving backpay for past benefits they were entitled to, or having their SSI application expedited. For the rest, if they came to us through the Medical-Legal Partnership with legal concerns outside our area of expertise in public benefits, I researched their concerns, provided advice, and referred them to experts who could assist them.

It's kind of mind-blowing how much can be accomplished in just 10 weeks! This summer has been an incredible experience.

Link to my EJA fundraiser is below. Without receiving EJA funding for my summer, I could not have afforded this opportunity.