



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:

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Update 1: This summer, I am working for the Legal Aid Society of DC, primarily within their housing practice. Much of the work is eviction defense and prevention, with the goal of keeping tenants housed. My work for the summer is primarily to do legal research. I've worked on several research projects to find and analyze legal arguments for particular situations our clients face. Since Legal Aid is staffed by experienced and expert attorneys, most of my work has been related to new issues that have never come up before, which often means there is no law to guide the decision of a judge.

It's always important for tenants to have lawyers to help them, but particularly in cases with difficult or new issues of that type. Most tenants sadly don't know their rights: they don't know all of the restrictions and procedural protections that can block evictions if invoked by someone who knows they exist. For example, I researched the question of what happens when a landlord issues two notices to a tenant, since only one is required and the two would have different deadlines. Based on my research, I was able to develop an argument that the second notice should automatically withdraw the first, which would have the effect of keeping our client in their home.

Update 2: Last week I visited a client in their home. This client is facing a litany of housing code violations that make their living conditions unsafe, unhealthy, and untenable. I visited their home to talk to them about their problems, their goals for legal representation, and to document the housing conditions they were living in. Ultimately, over the course of an hour, I took 50 pictures including some truly horrific examples of housing code violations. The client's home is infested by rodents, has holes in the walls and gaps where the walls meet the floor, and has spotty access to electricity. The client has no access to a kitchen, no working air conditioner, and a bathroom with loose flooring, a leaking toilet, and a broken sink. The client's landlord does not do even the simplest of maintenance, has insulted and harassed the client, and has even withheld their mail.

The client is in a tough situation because they can't afford to go anywhere else; their inability to pay more expensive rents means that they are limited to apartments that are below the minimum legal livability standards. Without representation, this client would be completely stuck; now, they have options, including taking their landlord to court.

Update 3: Last week I drafted my first motion. A motion is essentially a court filing where you are asking the court to do something in the case. The motion I drafted was a motion to dismiss. A motion to dismiss is when one of the parties in a case argues that the case was brought into court improperly and should be dismissed without the court even considering the actual arguments of the merits. In this instance, the motion I argued was that the opposing party did not have standing to come to court; meaning that they weren't injured by our client



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and therefore are not allowed to come to court for a remedy. The motion was reasonably complicated because it was a nuanced and novel argument. Basically, the opposing party was seeking to evict our client even though they were not technically the owners of the property. In the District of Columbia, you have to be a “person aggrieved” in order to sue to evict someone, and we argued that this person did not qualify since they are technically not the owner of the property. While we think that the client is probably going to get evicted anyway, we are hoping that by winning a dismissal in this case the client will get some extra time to get organized and find a new place to move into.

Update 4: My summer internship with the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia was a great experience; I learned a lot from the research and work that I did but also from observing the attorneys and watching how they went about their work. Going into the summer, I had a good idea that I wanted to do direct legal services work for a legal non-profit, but I had never experienced what it might be like to work for such an organization. My experience this summer strengthened my instinct to work in this field and inspired me: I learned that I was capable of doing the work and that there was a huge and supportive community of like-minded attorneys.

While I had some concerns that housing law would be boring — just the same non-payment of rent eviction defense fact-pattern over and over again — I was quickly proven wrong. This summer, I primarily worked on researching and writing memos on complex topics of housing law. Both because I was given the complex questions that the experienced attorneys did not already know the answers to and because the work of a housing/eviction defense attorney is more varied than I had realized, those questions spanned a wide breadth of topics, including multiplicative notice, co-operative apartment members’ rights, foreclosure proceedings on non-traditional tenants, housing subsidy issues, housing conditions, and evidentiary issues. I worked on cases at nearly every stage in the lifespan of a housing matter: intake, initial research, trial preparation, motions practice, settlement, and appellate hearings.

I improved my research and writing skills significantly throughout the summer. Additionally, practice interviewing and communicating with clients and other attorneys was helpful. Most of all, however, I learned that there are many ways of doing this job effectively. Every different attorney I worked with or observed had a different personal style; some were very direct, others tended to be less confrontational, some focused on research and convincing legal writing while others leaned more on facts and strategic reasoning. I was fascinated to watch how attorneys approached their cases, chose their strategies, and then reflected and adjusted on an as-needed basis. It proved to me that the ability to learn quickly, to adapt to changing circumstances, and to think strategically in advance of difficult decisions were all crucial skills that I will need to master. I was also interested in the different ways attorneys thought about the law and understood their place in it; equally valid interpretations and viewpoints emerged from seemingly innocuous questions that I would ask.

While the hybrid and social distanced nature of the office environment made it more difficult to meet attorneys and network, I was also impressed by how supportive the office was. Each attorney would graciously and charitably offer their input and opinion on difficult questions; my questions were encouraged, and the attorneys seemed to build on each other’s’ questions and input to make the final product stronger. I appreciated knowing that not only is lawyering a set of skills and strategies that offer room for personal style and instinct, but that the effort was in some ways collaborative, allowing everyone to build on the other attorneys’ perspectives.