



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I have been at Inner City Law Center for four weeks now and my experience has been incredible. I'm part of the Homeless Veterans team that assists veterans obtain benefits to compensate them for disabilities they have as a result of their military service. Everyone on the team has been very welcoming and willing to train me on the work they do. So far, I've sat in on a couple of intakes and have prepared two statements for clients seeking benefits for physical and mental injuries. I've been spending a good amount of time combing through hundreds of pages of military records looking for information that can be included in clients' claims to provide additional proof of injuries they've incurred in service.

I've also had the chance to attend hearings at the VA in the Federal Building in Westwood. I've sat in on a hearing under the Board of Veterans' Appeals and a hearing under the Regional Office. Both hearings really put into perspective the difficulty of presenting a case in front of the VA and the need for veterans to have legal representation at these hearings, especially since the system can be complicated to navigate.

For the coming week, I will be working on a brief to help a client obtain a discharge upgrade which will hopefully help them access GI Bill benefits so they can get their education paid for. I am excited to continue doing this work and learning new ways to better assist our clients.

Update 2: I only have about a month left at ICLC and it's crazy how fast time has gone.

Since the last update, I've completed a brief for a secondary compensation claim and a brief for a discharge upgrade claim. I hope to have both filed within the next week. I've also been meeting with clients to complete stressor statements where clients explain the events in service that caused their physical/mental injuries and how they continue to be affected today. While I've done statements like this before in the immigration context, I've had to re-learn how to write these statements based on what the VA prefers to hear. So it's been a challenge



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learning to balance what clients feel are their most pressing issues vs what the VA will actually pay attention to and compensate them for. Most clients just want their story to be heard and it can be hard at times telling them that not all of their story will be included. Overall, even though it is difficult, we are glad to provide these services as many clients who apply to the VA without representation often get denied for not knowing the ins and outs of the system. I'm enjoying my time at ICLC and I'm excited to see how the next few weeks will go.

Update 3: With only two weeks left in my externship, I am trying to finish as much as I can before leaving. It's been nice putting into use what I've learned so far in law school and getting to connect with clients again, especially with a client community that I've never worked with before.

I can't believe how fast the time has gone. I have finalized my briefs for a discharge upgrade and a secondary depression claim. I wish I could stay longer to represent these clients in their hearings for these claims but unfortunately, I won't see any of my briefs or filings approved before I leave.

For the time I have left, I will be working with clients on preparing their sworn statements for initial service-connected benefits claims. Both clients have claims for mental health issues that arose in service and continue to affect them to this day. One client was previously denied as the VA mailed him notices letting him know his claim required further evidence, however, he was homeless at the time and he was denied for not responding. Unfortunately, it is extremely common to see these kinds of cases as the VA does not do a good job at being lenient with homeless applicants. Our client last applied 10 years ago and is only just now finding himself stable enough to start this claim again. The bright side is that if he is approved, he will be able to receive retroactive service-connected benefits, that go back to the date from when he first applied. I'm grateful to be able to help our client finally have his claim heard.

Update 4: Officially finished my externship this past week. It was a busy but bittersweet week finishing briefs and statements and meeting with clients for one last time.

In this last week I was able to work on a CUE claim, where we argue that the VA made a clear and unmistakable claim in deciding a client's case. Our client previously applied for benefits in 2011 and was denied based on the VA's misapplication of the law. Their error left our client without any monetary relief or healthcare during a difficult time in his life, leading to him being homeless for years. If this claim is approved, the VA will have to give our client monthly case benefits and hopefully give him retroactive payments for the money he should have been getting 11 years ago.

This summer was eye opening as I never imagined this kind of work was an option in public interest. It definitely gave me a new perspective on the kind of work I want to do as well as a different point of view on how to assist clients going through homelessness. I'm grateful to have been part of this work at Inner City Law Center and hope to be a part of the organization after law school.



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Update 5: I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Inner City Law Center this summer working with homeless veterans. I was able to explore a different realm of law and public interest that I previously did not consider or even knew was a potential career option. I was able to work in a different part of the city and get to know a different community. I enjoyed working with clients again and connecting with them through their stories. Although working with veterans and navigating the processes of the VA was completely new to me, it did have some parallels with immigration work I did in the past.

Unfortunately, the issues that clients face with immigration institutions are very similar to those that clients face with the VA. There are unusually long wait times for cases to be decided that have only gotten worse due to COVID and there is a great deal of disorganization. The VA has slowly been privatizing a lot of their services which has hurt clients. I was able to attend a hearing with one of my supervisors where a client had to provide testimony about his injuries in service and how they continued to affect his daily life. This was the client's second time providing this testimony as the VA had previously lost the recording of his first testimony and required him to do it again. The VA used to transcribe these recordings and upload them to clients' files in a matter of days. However, this process has been privatized and an outside organization is now in charge of this. Recordings often get lost requiring clients to have to tell their stories over again and even when the recordings are not lost, it takes up to 3 months for the transcribing to be done. It is frustrating for clients to have to tell their stories which clearly re-traumatizes them only to have to do it again due to institutional issues. Additionally, the VA touts itself as a non-adversarial system but in the hearings I have attended, it can get quite confrontational as some of the adjudicators try to argue with attorneys and deny clients for ridiculous reasons. Most of the hearings conducted can be attended by the clients on their own as the VA says it is not necessary to have an attorney present but in the interactions I have witnessed, it is evident that without an attorney, clients will most likely have an even harder time being successful. However, it does make it clear that more advocacy and awareness is needed to address these issues. Many of our veterans are facing serious issues such as homelessness, and lack of access to health care and mental health services. Many of these issues can be alleviated through veterans accessing the VA benefits they deserve. I have found myself with a renewed sense of passion towards direct services in the public interest sector by doing this work. I hope to be able to work with Inner City Law Center after graduating law school to continue this work and even advocate for reform of veteran's law.