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Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I have been working in the Community Engagement Unit of Legal Aid of Southeast PA for almost a month now, and so far it's been a really valuable experience. I've learned a lot of substantive information about record clearing -- PA's Clean Slate laws, limited access, expungement pardons. I've received cases to manage in each of these areas, working on cases from their earliest stages (intake and initial advice), through petition drafting, and on to final agency compliance stages of cases that began long ago. In the process, I've become more familiar with the local court systems and their procedures in the region where I hope to practice. I've also learned a great deal about the collateral consequences of having a criminal record -- for client's ability to obtain jobs, find apartments, and build happy lives for themselves and the people they care for.

I also recently received my first client petitioning for a legal name change, and I'm looking forward to learning more about that process as we prepare and file that petition. I've really enjoyed the direct client work aspect of the internship -- calling and advising clients and helping them through the various stages of clearing their records. I'll be attending an outreach event at a community resource fair as well as a record-clearing clinic presented in conjunction with a local state representative. I'm looking forward to meeting clients in community contexts and seeing these outreach programs in action.

Lastly, I've really enjoyed working with the other attorneys (and interns) in our office. Besides possessing a wealth of legal knowledge, they are collaborative, patient, and kind, and they set a great example for lawyers-to-be like myself and the other interns. I look forward to continuing to learn from them both the tangible and intangible aspects of practicing in legal aid.

Update 2: Unsurprisingly, the summer is flying by, but I continue to learn a lot through my legal aid internship. I recently worked a drop-in expungement clinic presented at a local public library, presented on a Saturday afternoon in partnership with a state representative. This event was my favorite part of my internship so far. There was a line when I arrived, and we wrapped up with the last client well after the event's end time.



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For three hours, myself and several legal aid attorneys met with clients to review their criminal records and provide advice on the spot. Some of the people we met with were accepted as legal aid clients for record clearing cases; others were outside our service area or beyond our income guidelines but were provided free legal advice regarding their criminal records, referrals to other organizations that could serve them, and/or pro-se materials they could use to advocate on their own behalf. I really enjoyed working in the outreach/clinic model and hope that my future legal work includes this kind of work.

Since my last update, I've also worked a little bit more on pardons. One theme that feels constant in this work is how much people feel paralyzed by their criminal record. The collateral consequences are not just what opportunities people are rejected from because of their records – jobs, housing, opportunities – but also goals that are simply never pursued out of a fear of rejection or embarrassment. This consistent theme illustrates that the individual and collective consequences of carrying criminal records present as both concrete obstacles to integral parts of daily life as well as the invisible toll of paths not taken and aspirations deferred. A pardon or expungement not only removes an obstacle to someone's livelihood; it can also help restore a client's sense of possibility and belief in their future. I'm grateful to be assisting in this work with the support of an Equal Justice America Fellowship.

Update 3: As I enter the third quarter of my internship, I'm feeling more comfortable with the processes around filing Limited Access, Expungement, and Legal Name Change petitions and feeling more confident in advising clients around these issues. I'm really enjoying the work. One project I enjoyed working on was to assist with creating materials for an attorney training workshop designed to introduce pro bono attorneys to the legal name change process. One of my motivations for going to law school was an interest in making complicated processes easier to understand. Though these materials are intended mainly for other lawyers who will be pretty familiar with legal terms and processes in general, I've valued the opportunity research, package, and clearly present information about legal name changes, hopefully helping attorneys (and future interns) with the important and gratifying work of filing legal name changes.

Another aspect of my internship that I have been grateful to observe is the work that our lead attorneys do to make filing for our clients easier – lobbying local courts to waive certain court fees or to change certain filing steps that create barriers for our clients. It's a part of legal work that I had not previously appreciated. It's been instructive to observe the ways in which Legal Aid attorneys use their relationships with court administrations, especially considering that the organization serves a large geographical area that includes courts from several counties.

Update 4: I'm continuing to really enjoy and value my summer Legal Aid internship. I'm loving working with clients and moving their cases toward a resolution. As my case load has grown over the past few weeks, I've been drafting a lot of petitions and trying to move cases to points of completion before my summer ends. As I've worked on more cases, I've reflected on the fact that while the substantive law around criminal record clearing is



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relatively accessible and understandable, the ways in which it's applied on a client-to-client basis can become more complicated – records are frequently incomplete or missing information, sometimes making it more difficult to seal or expunge old cases, non-convictions, minor convictions, and generally provide relief from the stigma of criminal records. The fact that some records can appear on a background check used to secure work or housing, and yet be so difficult to track down to expunge is itself an argument for increased access to criminal record clearing. I would love to see PA continue to make reforms that allow people to clear their records and remove barriers to opportunity. These cases also point toward one of the great values of Legal Aid work: even in the instances where the law is straightforward to apply, it can still take a committed advocate, one who really believes in the mission of their work, to track down records, and pursue the most thorough outcomes for clients.

Update 5: I had a great experience at my legal aid internship this summer, where I worked on clearing criminal records and legal name changes

Throughout the summer, I advised a case load of approximately 25 clients seeking to minimize the impact of their criminal records through record sealing, expungement, and pardons, as well as working on legal name changes.

One experience that I really valued was the opportunity to assist clients with their personal statement component of a pardon application. Across hours spent interviewing clients and helping to put their stories to paper, I gained a very personal sense of the ways in which criminal records can affect so many people (up to one-third of Americans, from an estimate by the Sentencing Project.) The effects of criminal records are concrete – they present barriers to essential needs like employment and housing, as well as opportunities to attend a child's school field trips or volunteer in the local community. But their impact goes deeper than that; criminal records have a profound impact on the way people conceive of themselves: trapped, stigmatized, and subject to deep shame and negative judgement from society at large. Working on clients' personal statements is an opportunity to really delve deep in the missed opportunities and paralysis that a criminal record can bring to people's lives. The process of helping clients tell their stories could be emotional, but I felt fortunate for the opportunity to work on each one.

The relief that clients feel to finally put their record behind them is profound. But options for record clearing weren't available for everyone, and it was equally important to meet those moments with the respect and compassion they deserved, and to help clients create a plan for bettering their circumstances regardless of the legal services and remedies available to them.

Aside from the meaningful experience of working with clients on a day-to-day basis, this internship was a positive complement to my legal education. I learned a good amount of substantive law around record clearing, started to familiarize myself about the workings of local court systems in a region where I hope to live and work



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after graduation, and gained a more informed and nuanced understanding of the systemic inequalities that run through the criminal and civil legal systems. In these ways, this internship was an ideal context to do real work for clients while also laying the groundwork for future legal aid practice.

My experience this summer only increased my interest in working in Legal Aid in the future. I loved connecting with clients every day and problem solving with other attorneys to improve client's circumstances and increase access to opportunity. Working on criminal records, like perhaps other aspects of working in Legal Aid, is truly an opportunity to help clients be their best selves and pursue their goals. It's humbling work, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute in some small way.