



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Organization: Community Legal Services

Update 1: I'm pleased to be completing my second Equal Justice America Summer Fellowship! This summer, I'm interning with Community Legal Services, in their Health & Independence Unit. CLS works to combat poverty in the City of Philadelphia by providing free representation to low-income residents with civil legal needs, and by advocating for changes to the laws and procedures that create and perpetuate injustice.

After my first few weeks, the biggest thing that I'm grappling with is the means testing of public benefits, and the manner in which technical and involved application processes pose a barrier to those who meet the eligibility criteria to receive these benefits. Demonstrating eligibility for benefits programs can be a massive burden that requires a considerable deal of energy and savvy, and one's ability to navigate the system shouldn't be a prerequisite for getting the support that they need. In providing assistance to claimants whose experiences have been draining and difficult, I'm thinking about the ways in which public benefits programs can be administered more compassionately and without a harmful austerity mindset.

Update 2: Time for my second EJA Fellow Update on my internship with Community Legal Services! In addition to prepping to represent a family in an SSI hearing next week, I've been learning to help clients navigate Medicaid Long Term Care and the Estate Recovery process.

Update 3: Buckle up for my third EJA Fellow Update of the summer! Yesterday I represented a client in my first SSI hearing. Basically, when a person applies for SSI benefits on the basis of their disability, and is denied by the Social Security Administration, they have a due process right to have their case heard by an administrative law judge for SSA. The hearing went well, and I feel optimistic that this client will be approved for the SSI income that he's entitled to.

Between last summer and this one, I've now represented benefits claimants in both state and federal administrative hearings. I feel fortunate to have had these experiences while in school, and I know they'll prepare me to hit the ground running once I land in my first role as a fully-fledged attorney.



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Update 4: As July turns to August, my summer gig with Community Legal Services is winding down. I've really valued the opportunity to learn from and connect with like-minded legal professionals, get some great client experience, and work with a number of benefits programs.

Yesterday, I completed intakes, which is the process of interviewing and gathering information from potential clients who come to us with a legal issue. Along with figuring out what kind of issue the individual is facing and whether we are equipped to address it, the intake process requires determining whether the individual qualifies for our services (primarily based on residency and income factors), and whether there are any conflicts of interest that would preclude us from representing them. We try to take as many clients as we can, and so intakes set us up to begin representation and start working on the cases that are eligible for our services.

Update 5: As the summer wraps up, it's time for me to post my final EJA Fellow Update. My internship with Community Legal Services is complete, and now it is time to take the experience and apply what I've learned to my 3L year and, soon enough, my career as an attorney.

In my role with CLS, I worked with low-income clients on a variety of legal needs, including SSI disability and resource eligibility, SSDI eligibility, and various facets of Medicaid such as Estate Recovery and Community Health Care. It's been really useful to spend more time working with these programs, not only in order to assist clients with their specific legal needs but also to become broadly well-versed in the landscape of safety net programs that exist for impoverished folks. While these programs are tricky for applicants and generally inadequate for alleviating poverty, they do provide much-needed support for a lot of people, so it's necessary to strike a balance between ensuring that people can access this support while advocating for these programs to be more comprehensive and less restrictive.

In addition to learning about the specific legal issues with which I worked, I spent time working on skills that will likely be more valuable, such as client communication and interviewing, writing letters and briefs, and oral advocacy in an adjudicative setting. These are the types of things that define a lawyer's work and are career-long points for development. I'd like to think that I made some progress in these realms.

As I turn my attention to 3L year and continue doing both individual and systemic advocacy in settings such as Temple's Social Justice Lawyering Clinic, I will look to apply what I have learned this past summer. The experience will also serve me well as I take on the fellowship process and endeavor to find meaningful postgraduate work. I'm grateful to CLS for the opportunity to intern this summer, and also to Equal Justice America for the financial support.

If you're able, please consider donating to Equal Justice America. Their support makes it financially realistic for dozens of law students across the country to pursue work that aligns with their values and advances the common good.