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Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: As a family law intern at Land of Lincoln Legal Aid, I support domestic violence survivors by drafting motions, assisting with intake, consulting with my supervising attorney on cases, and appearing in court to observe and emotionally support the people we represent. I have loved the rural nature of this position and representing people who truly would not have access to legal services if Land of Lincoln did not represent them. This position has also forced me to contend with my preconceived notions of public safety - I am more curious and open than ever to re-evaluating how we actually keep each other safe and what we can do to protect survivors/prevent abuse from ever occurring.

Update 2: At Land of Lincoln in these past few weeks since my last update, I have been continuing to build upon my legal writing, research, and client communication skills. A typical day in my life as an intern includes drafting a motion or two, driving (sometimes up to an hour one way) to a court appearance, calling a client to update them on their case, and meeting with case staff about next steps.

I've also been reflecting on my position and how we help (and fail) the clients we serve. Rural legal aid attorneys spend so much time simply traveling to their court appearances - time we could be spending helping other clients if hearings were more accessible. Similarly, our clients must also sometimes travel a great distance to their hearings if they happen to live on the other side of the county where they are filing. It's a difficult system for everyone involved, and those challenges that are particular to rural areas are why we need so many more excellent legal aid attorneys working in low-population places.

Update 3: These past few weeks have largely been consumed by developing skills that I laid the foundation for earlier this summer: drafting documents, supporting clients throughout our time representing them, and ensuring things run as smoothly as possible for everyone when we need to appear in court. And, truthfully, the past two weeks saw more losses than not: orders of protection being dismissed, clients choosing not to proceed with their legal inquiries, and several others.



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But this time has reminded me that I am there to support what a client chooses to do with their life and legal representation, not impose my idea of what the correct outcome of the situation is. The family law unit at Land of Lincoln exists to empower low-income survivors to take the legal action they feel is appropriate for their circumstances, and the attorneys and staff are just the vessels to facilitate those outcomes. When we experience a tough loss or a client chooses to go a different direction than we may have advised, I remember that we exist to preserve the agency of low-income survivors and to do everything we can for them, whatever that might look like.

Update 4: I wrapped up my internship at Land of Lincoln Legal Aid this past week. I am so proud of what I was able to achieve this summer - I worked with about three dozen domestic violence survivors on orders of protection, divorces, guardianship, parentage, and other miscellaneous related issues. Dozens of documents that I drafted were filed in court during my tenure with Land of Lincoln.

My clients were all low-income members of the central Illinois community. I am grateful to have been able to provide these services to people in rural areas, especially, where these services are almost never available.

Land of Lincoln is the only general legal aid provider in all of central and southern Illinois. My specific regional office has about 17 attorneys who cover housing, family, and consumer issues for fifteen counties. If we decline to represent a client, they almost certainly will have to appear without representation. That's why it's so important for interns to be able to serve in these areas, and Equal Justice America's support makes that possible for many.

Update 5: In reflecting on my time as an Equal Justice America fellow at Land of Lincoln Legal Aid this past summer, a few things stand out to me.

First, access to civil legal services in rural areas is incredibly important, and is often left out of the access to civil legal aid services conversation. Many urban areas have multiple organizations that can assist domestic violence survivors; where I worked, my small office was the only legal aid provider for survivors living in the fifteen surrounding counties. People who live in rural areas are often more vulnerable with less resources than their urban counterparts. In the future, we must make an effort to prioritize the voices and experiences of survivors in rural areas when deciding how to structure the availability of legal services.

Second, the legal system fails survivors in so many ways. The legal services we are able to provide, including orders of protection and stalking/no-contact orders, often serve as stopgap solutions that do not further the work of preventing violence from happening to others. This does not mean we as family law attorneys are doing a bad job - it means that the legal system is not currently set up as an avenue to true community safety. Civil legal aid providers and harm reduction workers should be working together to create scalable, sustainable



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solutions to support survivors and reduce the overall occurrence of domestic abuse. I am proud of the work I did, and I know that legal aid lawyers, as people with institutional power, can and must do more.

I learned a lot from the family law work I engaged in this summer. My responsibilities included drafting dozens of documents to be filed in court, preparing financial affidavits, attending court, communicating with clients about their cases, and a variety of other tasks. I loved these material aspects of my job. More than the nuts and bolts of the position, though, I learned about and focused on sharpening my client communication skills and interacting with the survivors I worked with with kindness, respect, and empathy. For many of our clients, we are the only people who will listen or the only people who they have to speak about their experiences with. Much of the work involves providing emotional support to clients, and it is a skill that law students and lawyers who want to engage in family law work must put sustained effort into. The most personal and vulnerable stories and experiences of our clients' lives are in our hands, and we must act like it.

I had a really incredible experience this summer, and I will take what I learned about trauma-informed lawyering and caring for survivors into every legal space I enter in the future. Although I may not end up in family law long-term, I am thankful for the clients who shared their lives with me and allowed me to participate in their legal process towards independence and safety. I will think about them for the rest of my life.