



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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Update 1: I am excited to be interning this summer at [Community Legal Services](#) with funding from [Equal Justice America](#)! I am working in CLS's Family Advocacy Unit, defending families who are facing potential separation through the child welfare system. The child welfare system disproportionately imparts trauma on families of color and low-income families, and I believe that high quality legal representation which aims to keep families together is a start in addressing these injustices.

Update 2: In my work so far in the Family Advocacy Unit at Community Legal Services, I have completed trainings and research that show the devastating effects that the child welfare system has on families, particularly families of color and low-income families. 53% of Black children will be subjected to a child welfare investigation before they turn 18. During this investigation, children might be strip-searched and questioned at school, despite the fact that a majority of accusations of child abuse and neglect are unfounded. Compounding the issue, data shows that Black families receive less financial aid, housing, and child care support than white families receive once their children are placed in foster care.

These statistics will only become more devastating in the context of a post-Roe world, where lack of access to abortion will disproportionately affect the same populations that are disproportionately surveilled and traumatized by the child welfare system.

Update 3: Community Legal Services has started a podcast called "How Is That Legal?" which begins with a 3-episode series about the child welfare system. I've listened to all three episodes, and they're a fantastic window into how the child welfare system works in this country. The first episode features Professor Dorothy Roberts, and it's a fantastic listen for anyone wondering how an abolitionist framework might apply in the context of child welfare. There are interesting parallels between the child welfare system and policing, and this episode of the podcast gives a really great overview of those connections. The second episode features the CLS Family Advocacy Unit's Peer Parent Advocate, April Lee, a parent who has experienced involvement in the child welfare system. She gives such amazing insight into the system from a parent's perspective. I highly recommend giving the podcast a listen if you're interested in exploring the injustices in our child welfare system: <https://lnkd.in/eD8asC99>

Update 4: As I finish up my summer internship with Community Legal Services, I wanted to share some facts about Pennsylvania's Child Welfare system that I've learned over the past 9 weeks:



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While parents in Pennsylvania are appointed counsel once a petition for abuse or neglect is filed against them, parents are not entitled to appointment of counsel throughout the DHS investigation leading up to the filing.

Once a parent's parental rights are involuntarily terminated, they are a legal stranger to their child. They have no rights to visitation or to file for custody if they overcome the circumstances that led to their child being removed from their care in the future.

Per federal law, the state must initiate a termination of parental rights procedure for any child who has been in foster care for 15 out of the last 22 months. That's just a little over a year.

Even if a judge in dependency court determines that accusations of child abuse against a parent are unfounded, that parent still must file for administrative appeal to have their name removed from the ChildLine Child Abuse Registry if DHS determined that the report against that parent indicated child abuse. If a parent misses the deadline to file for an appeal because they did not know they had the option to do so or did not understand how to do so, they are foreclosed from seeking an appeal. Inclusion on the ChildLine Registry can preclude a parent from even indirect work involving children for the rest of their life — even if a judge determines that the accusation is unfounded.

Update 5: My summer at Community Legal Services working in the Family Advocacy Unit has been such a wonderful experience, and I am excited to announce that I'll be joining the team full-time next fall as a Staff Attorney!

This summer, I had the opportunity to fully immerse myself in Pennsylvania dependency law and see firsthand the injustices our child welfare system perpetuates. Every day, parents are denied the opportunity to be parents. This impact is felt disproportionately by Black and brown families. Over the past few months, I was able to work closely alongside many clients whose love and concern for their children was clear. Some of these clients were attending court-ordered parenting classes designed for parents of infants as a condition of regaining custody of their teenaged children. Some of these clients were separated from their children for months while they waited for their name to move up on a housing waitlist. Several times throughout the summer, I received a research assignment and thought, "There has to be law to support a happy outcome here," only to find nothing in our body of law to support these families.

I am thrilled that I will be able to return next fall to continue working alongside our clients and the dedicated staff in the Family Advocacy Unit who are working every day to create better outcomes for our clients and their families.